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**Gold Teeth, Indian Dresses, Chinese Lycra and ‘Russian’ Hair:
Embodied Diplomacy and the Assemblages of Dress in Tajikistan**

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Abstract

This article examines the assemblages of dress in Tajikistan as a showground of everyday diplomacy, and seeks to stimulate recognition of the alternatives sites of diplomacy that play an active and dynamic role in mediating political relations between diverse nation-states, the brand-images of nations and the communities with which they intersect. I suggest that the term ‘embodied diplomacy’ is useful to convey the processes through which Tajikistan’s people negotiate the government-led dress-codes and navigate the social pressures about public gendered-images in relationship to local notions of the physical body, senescence and modesty. The incorporation of so-called foreign items to Tajikistan people’s apparels trigger the situations in which the assemblages of particular bodies and items of dress most clearly emerge as diplomatic sites. Such everyday situations, often arising in the realms of family life, reveal Tajikistan residents as diplomats insofar as they reflect on their roles as the country’s representatives at the same time as they deploy their skills of communication, persuasion, and mediation to negotiate between compulsory dress-codes, incoming fashion trends, family expectations and personal aesthetics. In so doing, they shape diverse subjectivities informed by geopolitical processes, local notions of honour and loyalty towards Tajikistan, and complex understandings of being Muslim that are important within Tajikistan, the Central Asian region and beyond.

Keywords

Embodied diplomacy, dress, fashion, clothing, Tajikistan, nationalism, gender

‘We talk a lot about poverty reduction. Teachers are complaining about low salaries but they have gold teeth. How can the representatives of international organisations believe that we are poor if the mouth of a teacher is full of gold? It is not our culture and not our tradition. Imagine how difficult it is for students to look at the gold mouth of a teacher for ten years. Once I met a Tajik in Switzerland...How did I know that he was a Tajik? Because he had shiny [gold] mouth. It was shameful. He thought it was beautiful. People in the world are laughing at us. It shows lack of culture.’¹

Tajikistan’s President Emmomali Rahmon gave this statement in 2006 on the occasion of making public his decision to ban state employees from having gold prosthetic teeth (*dandoni tiloi*). Such dentures, popular until recently among many sections of Tajikistan’s society, represented, for President Rahmon, the tendency of modern day Tajiks to display a ‘lack of culture’.² The gold teeth, the President argued, ‘mis-represented’ Tajikistan to foreign publics, and this stood in the way of his attempts to attract much-needed foreign investment and aid. Since the late 1990s, the general aims of Tajikistan’s foreign policy have largely been the promotion of a ‘positive perception of Tajikistan abroad’ using ‘all available controls’ (Zarifi 2009:6). The way in which Tajikistan is perceived internationally is indeed not a small issue for Tajikistan: a country with a multivectorial and economic-oriented foreign policy that hinges strongly on humanitarian aid (Kunchins et.al. 2015).³ In 2016 for example Switzerland reportedly invested 15 million US dollars each year in the form of support for development programmes in Tajikistan (Swiss Cooperation Office 2006). As a result, the government prohibition of gold teeth points toward the emphasis that the country’s

¹ Reported by Sarkorova (2006) in BBC Russian.

² Gold-teeth were very popular among certain sectors of the population in the Soviet Union especially in the regions of Central Asia and the Caucasus (c.f. Vatulescu 2010).

³ Between 1996 and 1998 humanitarian aid to Tajikistan constituted approximately 58% of Tajikistan’s GDP (Nakaya 2009). Today, one of the main vectors of Tajikistan’s diplomacy is attracting foreign investment to local infrastructure, mining and energy projects (Kunchins et.al. 2015).

government places on the need for Tajik citizens to demonstrate a positive image of Tajikistan's culture abroad.

Subsequent to the prohibition, the popularity of gold teeth in Tajikistan indeed declined. For example, Khola Zarnigor, a Dushanbe-based seamstress who has travelled on a number of occasions to Iran for medical treatment, told me in 2010 that she replaced her gold teeth for white-porcelain teeth. She remarked, however, that she had not made the change as a direct result of the presidential decrees. Khola Zarnigor told me, rather, that having arrived in Teheran she felt embarrassed when talking to Iranian women because she noticed that none of the Muslim women with whom she interacted in the city had gold teeth. Most of all, she said, she wanted to look 'modern' and 'Muslim' in the manner that her 'sisters' in Teheran appeared. Bobo Bobojor, a man who was formerly a factory-worker, and, now in his 70s, lives in a village near Kulob, went one step further: he had his gold teeth extracted, and told me that he preferred to remain toothless (*bedandon*). Bobo Bobojor, told me that all kind of prosthetics constitute an alteration to one's body and are therefore a sin (*gunoh*) according to Islamic teachings. These cases illustrate some of the ways in which the government project of banning gold teeth on its citizens has conflicting and unintended effects: while my informants emphasise their attempts to use their bodies in a manner that helps them to become devout Muslims who are also representatives of the Tajik nation, the government, by contrast, seeks to fashion them simply as the incarnation of a national, modern and secular Tajikistan. In this article I examine how this type of instances concerning the assemblages of dress and bodies are important sites of diplomacy, or the processes to which I refer to as 'embodied diplomacy'.

First, 'embodied diplomacy' refers to the multifaceted ways in which the brand-image of Tajikistan promoted by the government becomes ingrained in the bodies of Tajikistan's citizens. Tajikistan's brand-image is the articulation of specific elements of national identity

that have been selected, commodified and commercialised by state officials in order to represent an essentialised cultural, political, territorial and ethnic vision of the nation-state. Some of the most important elements of Tajikistan's brand-image represent a combination of 'tradition' and 'modernity', and a commitment to secularism in the face of what are depicted as dangerously destabilising forms of Islamisation. Reflected in existing dress-codes, Tajikistan's brand-image is a fundamental component of national policy that aims to attract foreign investment, and to address internal issues ranging from economic crisis to government legitimization, as well as a contestation of what is considered a 'shameful' from the recent Soviet past (cf. Anholt 2007; Aronczyk 2013; Kaneva 2012).

As Tajikistan's President's speech in which he expresses his despise for gold teeth demonstrates, the idea of embodied diplomacy is entangled in an intimate way with brand-image, and is carried out by Tajikistan's officials via the issue of laws concerning dress-codes. By 2016, these laws had stipulated that female students and state employees must wear either the colorful Tajik national dress (*kurtai tojiki*) or Western-style suits with or without either *namol* or *ruymol* (partial headscarf) or *toqi* (embroided national hat). If in previous years black gowns imported from Dubai were popular among certain sectors of Tajikistan's female population who were willing to embrace 'modern', 'urban' and 'Islamic' lifestyles (Stephan-Emmrich and Mirzoev 2016), by 2016 the use of such gowns and full-veils that cover the face (*faranji*) had been banned by the government. Those women who wear a veil called *satr* or *hijob* (that became popular in the 2000s with the development of diverse forms of Islamic reform) have been the target of police action in the country's cities and towns from 2015. For men, all types of 'Muslim clothes' (*libosi musulmoni*), and long-beards are now forbidden:⁴ men are expected to wear either Western-style clothes or suits. Girls attending

⁴ 'Muslim clothes' include the *shalvar kameez* imported from Pakistan or Afghanistan, and the *galabeyas* from the 'Arab world'. These clothes were especially popular between 2009 and 2010 among men who wished to publicly demonstrate their rising interest in Islam. As Stephan-Emmrich and Mirzoev (2016, 13) also suggest,

school are banned from wearing headscarves, and are encouraged to wear a knee-length skirt rather than trousers. Hence, the idea of embodied diplomacy conveys the ways in which people's bodies and their everyday dress are sites where, and through which, specific forms of national politics and everyday diplomacy take place.

The last set of processes that the term embodied diplomacy brings attention to are the forms of negotiation, alteration and contestation that people's bodies and dress-styles bring about to Tajikistan's official brand-image not least because of the ways in which men and women deploy diplomatic skills – for example of communication, mediation and persuasion - in order to incorporate their own aesthetic preferences into the government created model. Many of Tajikistan's residents with whom I spoke between 2009 and 2015 during the course of fieldwork in the southern town of Kulob and in the capital city Dushanbe told me that they acted in a way that conformed with existing dress-codes, and argued that the reason they followed such dress resulted from their loyalty to their nation (*vatan*), as well as their desire for national unity (*vahdat*) and for a positive image of Tajikistan and its people circulating in the world.⁵ However, in the processes of assembling their dress-styles, I came to recognise the ways in which Tajiks also fashion themselves as persons whose individual and communal identities and subjectivities supersede the homogenised and essentialised elements that are deemed permissible within the frames of the official brand-image. Such contestation is not talked about by my interlocutors as dissent or political resistance. Nevertheless, the everyday practices through which they rework mandatory dress-codes often produce conflicting effects in the official brand-image envisioned as embracing Tajikistan's national identity and foreign policy ambitions by government officials.

'Islamic products' in Dushanbe also include other items that are marketed as being geographically and affectively connected to the 'sacred centres of Islam'.

⁵ The ethnographic data in this article was gathered in 16 months of fieldwork conducted in a neighborhood of Soviet-style apartment blocks in Kulob city, southern Tajikistan, as well as Dushanbe (2009-2015), and the city Yiwu in China (2016). The methodology included participant observation and open-ended interviews. The research was conducted in Tajik and Russian language, or a mixture of both as preferred by my interlocutors. In this article the words in Russian are signaled with the abbreviation 'Rus.'.

This article develops the notion of embodied diplomacy in an attempt to move beyond the analysis of ‘public’ or ‘grassroots diplomacy’, ideas that privilege discourse rather than embodiment, and also from ‘realist’ theories that regard diplomacy as equal to statecraft (e.g. Kissinger 1994). A wide body of literature challenges such narrow notions of diplomacy. Some authors promote a view of diplomacy as an encompassing set of practices that forms as a result of a simple encounter between individuals or polities, and that, in the context of the world today, might include the experiences of international processes by disparate people in everyday contexts, the initiatives of so-called civil society, and the activities of international non-governmental actors and everyday ambassadors (e.g. Darby 2016; Constantinou 2016; Dittmer and McConnell 2016; Nolan 2004; Sylvester 2001). I seek to contribute to this literature by deploying the notion of embodied diplomacy to bring attention to the embodied, experienced and enacted modes of diplomatic agency that allow communities to engage with and influence decisions about national and world-affairs (Marsden, Ibañez-Tirado, Henig this issue. See also Dittmer 2015b). In so doing, I aim to demonstrate that diplomacy and dress are intertwined *assemblages* that *connect* and assume a material form. Recognising such connection allows us to take seriously the micro-politics of dress and embodiment because it sheds light on the ‘role of materiality and affect in producing our geopolitical world.’ (Dittmer 2015b:605).

Assemblages: dress, bodies and diplomacy

In the article I take dress to be an ‘assemblage of body modifications and/or supplements’ (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992: 2); dress-code the obligatory clothes, body modifications and supplements decreed by Tajikistan’s government, and dress-style the fashions that people incorporate to their everyday apparel. Fashion, as Heath (1992) suggests, entails the displacement of out-of-style items of clothing for those that are constructed as being novel and trendsetting. Yet, fashion (Rus. *modda*) demands challenging negotiations in the

everyday lives of Tajikistan's residents: they must assemble their everyday dress in a context where government impositions are ensured through abrupt arrests by members of the security forces and the relentless statements of state-officials, as well as in the sphere of family life which is informed by patriarchal norms and local notions of gender, morality and modesty (cf. Osella and Osella 2007; Moors 2014). Hence, dress arises as a particularly noticeable site of diplomacy in the specific moments of disjuncture between the nationalist brand-image, and the assemblage of so-called foreign fashions.

The concept of 'assemblage' brings attention to the ways in which a 'heterogeneous collection of elements' (Collier and Ong 2003:423) relate to one another and produce an open-ended form. In their analysis of clothing, anthropologists Kuchler and Miller approach clothes and cloth in a way that stresses clothing's key attribute: its capacity to connect and form assemblages (see also Woodward 2005). An emphasis on connectivity and assemblage does not therefore privilege dress as the 'artificial' boundary which delimits between people's 'inner' states and feelings, and their 'outer' appearance and 'natural' body (Kuchler and Miller 2005).⁶ Instead, dress as an assemblage of multiple associations between Tajikistan's brand-image and the diverse clothing items, gendered and aging bodies and body modifications of Tajikistan's citizens, furnishes an understanding of the material reality of Tajikistan's national and foreign policy. It is in this quality that dress parallels diplomacy as an assemblage, as I now explain in greater detail.

In his study of the nineteenth century British Foreign Office, Dittmer suggests that the open-ended and ever-changing nature of assemblages involving human and non-human entities 'troubles the usual scalar imagination of diplomacy and international relations, in which bigger entities are assumed to be more important.' (2015a:10) Dittmer argues that not only do

⁶ Numerous anthropologists have argued, unique, natural and pre-cultural bodies do not exist: 'the body' and its biological 'facts' are, indeed, a product of our ways of thinking about them (e.g. Lock 1993, Scheper-Hughes 2002).

state-actors and their rational choices shape policy and statecraft: objects, materials and affects are also implicated in the fashioning of political subjectivities. By paying attention to apparently insignificant objects (e.g. cables, wires and paper) and the historically-grounded relations they form, it is possible, he suggests, to conceive of ‘a range of diplomatic actors that may not qualify as states’, and having done so ‘it becomes possible to see multiple scales emerging simultaneously through the processes of diplomatic assemblage.’ (Dittmer 2015a). Through my consideration of Tajikistan’s populace I suggest that embodied diplomacy involves the assemblage and connection of a great diversity of gendered, senescent and physically different bodies, dress items, the materials in which they are made and the relations and moral evaluations these entail with existing dress-codes in Tajikistan, as well as discourses about the country’s place in the world. At the same time, my interlocutors recognise the relevance of their bodies as being living carriers of Tajikistan’s traditions and interests. They, however, also negotiate and contest the forms and meanings of Tajikistan’s brand-image that are crafted by their government through their everyday practices of choosing what to wear. In the following section, I explore the principles of Tajikistan’s nationalist discourse in order to elucidate the ways in which such narratives buttress Tajikistan’s dress-codes.

Tajik nation-brand and dress

Dress and fashion, and the images they convey are not politically neutral (Lemire 2010; Lindisfarne-Tapper and Ingham 1997). Accordingly, the significance of dress and the body to representations of ‘tradition’ has been present in political debates and practical attempts to shape particular national ethnicities and identities from the very beginning of the Russian colonial enterprise in Central Asia in the 19th century. Dress was also a significant element of Soviet rule in Central Asia (Boteva and Spector 2013, Hirsch 2005, Suyarkulova 2016). While a detailed historical analysis of dress in relationship to national identity is beyond the

scope of the ethnographic material presented in this article, it is important to highlight that the significance of dress-codes to the construction of ethnic and national identities is far from something that is novel or unique to independent Tajikistan. Cultural policies regarding dress have been central to the endeavours of many states that have achieved independence in the 20th century and sought to build and endorse ‘national cultures’ based on specific notions of tradition and modernity (e.g. Allman 2004 (ed.), Baker 2000, Parkins 2002, Tarlo 1996). In comparable terms, dress and above all female Tajik national dress, has remained at the core of Tajikistan’s government’s cultural policy for decades, especially since the advent of independence that followed the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

In Tajikistan the necessity of building and promoting national unity (*vahdati millî*) among its peoples in order to overcome the divisions caused by the civil war (1992-1997) has been much-emphasised in public discourse (Roche 2014). After the war, nationalism and statecraft has focused on an image of peaceful state-building, the uniqueness of Tajik identity, and the figure of the President as the country’s exceptional and supreme leader (Heathershaw 2009). According to Jonson (2006), the nationalist project goes beyond Tajikistan’s policies within its territorial borders. Jonson argues that the current government connects Tajikistan’s foreign policy to the country’s official history by stressing its previous historic status as the Samanid Empire. The figure of Ismail Somoni, the emir of Transoxania and Khorasan who belonged to this dynasty, has become the historical and ‘symbolic core’ around which the contemporary Tajik nation has been formed (Dodkhudoeva et.al. 2013:287). This narrative permits the government to locate Tajikistan regionally and internationally not as a ‘small’ actor, but as one that has inherited a ‘high culture’ and therefore plays an influential role in regional and world affairs whilst restoring itself to its former imperial magnitude (Jonson 2006, Dodkhudoeva et.al. 2013).

The principles underpinning strictly censored notions of national identity and dress-codes have also incorporated the production of official historical narratives that emphasise elements of the Aryan, Tajik, Persian and, to a carefully policed degree, Muslim character of the nation. The Muslim character of the Tajik nation is embedded in delimited understandings of Tajikistan's ethno-national identity in which 'Islamic culture' entails 'modernised', yet depoliticised, forms of cultural heritage or tradition that have been promoted and controlled by state-officials since the 1930s (e.g. Khalid 2007, Iloliev 2008). In recent years, policies concerning national identity and dress-code have attempted to distance Tajikistan from both its Soviet past and ongoing Russian influence, as well as from Islamic practices that are depicted by the government as being 'foreign' (*khori*ji), 'strange' (*begona*) and therefore 'extremist' (*ekstremisty*). Indeed, the national discourse cannot be detached from issues of global securitisation. Such discourses frequently depict Tajikistan and Central Asia more broadly, as being threatened by violent forms of Islamic radicalisation. Reports of Central Asians joining the Taleban in Afghanistan, or ISIS in both Afghanistan and the Middle East, are a common element of such discourses. According to Heathershaw and Montgomery (2014), however, Central Asia's governments have deployed such narratives to maintain their positions of economic and political privilege, curtail political opposition, and restrain those expressions of Muslim practices which they deem to be undesirable (see also Lemon 2015). Veiling practices and 'Muslim clothes' more generally, are classified in Tajikistan in such terms.

Given its recognised status as a powerful symbol of Muslim identity, scholars have paid much attention to the series of policies undertaken by the Soviet authorities to stop practices of veiling in Central Asia, as well as to the nature of contemporary experiences of veiling (especially in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) (e.g. Kamp 2008, McBrien 2009, Miles 2015, Northrop 2004). Far fewer attempts have been made, however, to understand the importance

of this item of clothing in relation to, on the one hand, the complicated elements of dress including a vast assortment of items ranging from veils to socks that are put together by both men and women in specific circumstances (eg. Meneley 2007, Moors 2003, Osella and Osella 2007, Stephan-Emmrich and Mirzoev 2016), and, on the other, to people's evaluations of how their bodies change over time. The next section aims to address this imbalance, and explores Tajikistan's national dress and the notions of tradition and modernity that it entails when considered in relationship to particular types of gendered and senescent bodies.⁷ I then continue my analysis with the introduction of Indian-inspired dresses and Chinese Lycra to the apparel of young women. From dress and textile, I move on to investigate the politics of hair that, I suggest, is another salient element of the body modifications constitutive of dress through which processes of embodied diplomacy are disclosed. In all of these cases, people's everyday engagement with diverse items constituting dress, as well as the ways in which they invest such items and incoming fashions with diverse moral values about Tajikistan's place in the world reveal how deep-rooted Tajikistan's diplomacy is in the bodies of its residents.

Gendered and Senescent Bodies: Tradition and Modernity

The great majority of women in Kulob agree that Tajik women must wear exclusively the Tajik national dress (*kurtai tojikī*) on a daily basis. In contrast, many women in Dushanbe combine the national dress with a style that is called 'modern' (Rus. *sovremeni*; Taj. *zamonavi*); that is, Western-style trousers and shirts or suits. *Kurtai tojiki* consists of a baggy gown that falls loosely to the ankles over loose trousers. The gown is pleated and attached to a semi-circular or angular collar which leaves the neck and part of the chest exposed. Most women don a *namol* or a headscarf which only partially covers their hair and is knotted at the back of the neck. The most common textiles used in making these dresses are cotton (*pakhta*)

⁷ Whilst age refers to the passing of time that can be measured, for example, in the number of years a person has lived, senescence refers to the ways in which the physical body changes through age, and to the experiences and evaluations of such transformations that might or might not correspond to chronological age (Bledsoe 2002).

and velvet (*pambal* or *bakhmal*), and are generally sewed by women themselves at home or tailored by local seamstresses. At first glance, it might appear that the dress-code for women in Tajikistan is homogeneous, especially in a provincial city such as Kulob where female forms of ‘modern’ clothing are almost entirely absent. However, although portrayed as a timeless, authentic and unchanging ‘tradition’ (*sunnat*), the Tajik dress is constantly being transformed through the incorporation of new fashions that take the form of textiles, colours, decorations and styles. Most, if not all, my female interlocutors told me that they try to update their *kurtai tojiki* every year according to the seasons (winter and summer), and following incoming fashion. In addition, such styles vary according to the specificities of the female bodies they adorn; elderly women, for example, wear a different and wider type of sleeve than younger women, and are also allowed by government officials to wear a long veil similar to hijab but which is generally white.

If women are central to official representations of the Tajik nation, authenticity and tradition, there is a male counterpart that is not only gendered, but also inflected by local understandings of masculinity, ageing and senescence. In contrast to the national Tajik dress for women, men are usually said to wear ‘modern’ clothes. Starting from their first year in school, boys wear Western-style suits, a tie stamped with Tajikistan’s national emblem, and black formal shoes; this is also what state employees wear to work. Alternatively, young men wear jeans, tracksuit bottoms, T-shirts and formal or athletic shoes after lessons or having returned home from work. In contrast, the male elders (*piru*) or ‘grandfathers’ (*boboho*) are expected, as are women, to wear ‘traditional’ outfits. As is the case for elderly women (*kampir*) or ‘grandmothers’ (*moma*) (who don a special type of veil after having reached a certain age when they are considered to be elderly), ‘grandfathers’ distinguish themselves from younger men by making critical changes to their everyday dress. In most parts of Tajikistan, ‘grandfathers’ continue to wear the Western-style shirts and chino trousers they

had previously worn in their youth, but they often exchange their shoes for *kalush* (a special type of boots composed of thick leather- socks (*jurob*) and a pointy black shoe. The elderly tuck their trousers into the *kalush* and wear a *joma* or a hand-made padded coat. In addition, most ‘grandfathers’ leave their beards to grow long.

In this equation, the bodies and clothes of male youngsters and adults before reaching the ‘age’ of ‘grandfathers’ represent Tajikistan’s ideals of modernity, contemporaneity and progress. The fact that this dress-style is ‘foreign’ does not entail a negative meaning because the ‘outside’ in this case is appraised as the domain of science, technology and progress that needs to be emulated by Tajik men in working age (cf. Chatterjee 1993). In contrast, elderly men and Tajik women of all ages are held to represent ‘tradition’, and thus there is great emphasis on them wearing the Tajik national dress in its more ‘pure’ form. Although apparently in opposition to one another, the images of men and women do not represent a polarity between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, but in fact accommodate each other (Chatterjee 1993). When inflected with local understandings of ageing and senescence these images become an essential component of the construction of Tajik nationalism and the country’s official brand-image. But what happens when men and women incorporate new-fangled fashions that are considered according to the purveyors of the official brand-image to be ‘foreign’?

‘You Are A Tajik... Not an Indian Actress’

Seamstresses in Dushanbe and Kulob told me that during some seasons they copy certain motifs from Arabic, Iranian, Indian, Pakistani and Afghan clothes and adapt them to local aesthetics. Tajik women in their 50s reported to me that Indian-inspired dresses had been fashionable in the late 70s and the early 80s when the Soviet Union increased cultural and academic cooperation with India, and Indian films were often shown in local cinemas. In

summer 2010, 'Indian' dresses again became a favourite type of clothing for many Tajik young women. These dresses could be purchased in Dushanbe's markets, to which they were mostly imported by Afghan traders (Marsden 2016), and consisted of what in India is called *kameez*, *chudari* or *punjabi* (Osella and Osella 2007). Although most Kulobi women to whom I spoke found them 'beautiful' (*khushruî*), they also said that the outfits were too expensive and inadequate to suit the requirements of local conventions of modesty (*hoksori*). In contrast to the baggy, ankle-length national dress, they judged these Indian dresses to be excessively short (below the knee) and tight (*tang*). Countless men and women in Kulob despised this new 'Indian' fashion because they considered the gowns to be prone to revealing women's silhouettes, and to be 'open' (*kushoda*) because they 'expose' women's calves to public sight - notwithstanding that the gowns were worn above trousers made of the same fabric. Most importantly, a number of the opponents of this fashion argued, these dresses were 'foreign' (*khoriî*).

Some women in Kulob started to sew their own versions of the fashionable 'Indian' dresses by taking inspiration from the imported garments whilst adapting them to what they considered as being suitable to wear in Kulob city. But even this measure was not enough to silence the critics of such Indian clothing. For example, Surayo, one of my neighbours, aged 15, received three meters of fabric and 10 somonis from her mother to acquire a new cotton dress for the season. Surayo ordered an Indian-inspired dress from a Kulobi seamstress in the bazaar. The result was a gown that fell somewhere in the middle ground between the tight and short imported *kameez* and the long and baggy Tajik dress. The girl arrived home wearing it with pride, just to be received by her mother and brothers scolding her:

'You stupid girl! [*dukhtari akhmaq*] What were you thinking? This dress is too tight and the collar too open!'

Embarrassed by the scene and afraid of further reprimands, Surayo claimed that it was the seamstress to be blamed - she had made a mistake when taking the measurements and sewed the gown too short and tight. Her brothers were especially angry because they remarked to her that the dress meant that her 'plump buttocks' (*kuni farbe*) could be openly perceived by onlookers, and that, as a result, men (including their own neighbors – they emphasised) would harass her with sexual remarks in the street. 'You are a Tajik, a Kulobi girl! You are not an Indian actress', one of Surayo's brothers said while laughing at her and imitating the movements of a Bollywood dance. Surayo's mother and brothers not only were worried about the tightness or Indian features of the dress, but also concerned about how it revealed the girl's body – which, they pointed out, was no longer a 'child's body'. Surayo told me afterwards that she felt sad and angry, and after so much criticism and mockery from her mother and brothers, she had lost any remaining desire to wear the dress in public. This was a different story from one of her classmates, she explained to me, whose body was so skinny and 'flat' (*pachaq*), that with the tightest of dresses, men would not look at or harass her: her parents allowed her to wear whatever she chose.

This example highlights the importance of differences that exist within each 'apparently natural gender category': 'different individuals who are ascribed membership of one gender category are by no means anatomically identical' (Lindisfarne-Tapper and Ingham 1997:19). The Indian-inspired dress seems to have been acceptable on Surayo's friend 'flat' (skinny) body, but not on Surayo's corpulent figure. It is in the interstices of this disjuncture that embodied diplomacy is revealed as an assemblage of dress, gendered, senescent and disparate bodies in the following ways. In her analysis of the dress-codes that young Kyrgyz women are expected to wear in Russia, Suyarkulova (2016) suggests that it is especially women in reproductive age who are perceived as those who *give birth* to the nation and thus are bearers of the nation's honour. In the same way, Surayo's young, eye-catching and potentially

reproductive body incarnates the pride and honour of Tajikistan, and therefore is turned into the nation's (*vatan*) representative. Surayo, however, challenges Tajikistan's brand-image when she attempts to incorporate an 'open' Indian-inspired dress into her wardrobe. This action is interpreted by her family as problematic because Surayo has the potential of provoking men's attention in the streets. Such harassment is not only potentially dangerous as it questions the reputation of Surayo, her family and the whole nation she incarnates, but also possibly risks the girl's physical integrity outside her home. Verbal harassment in Kulob can be accompanied by unwanted physical touch, an action that, according to Surayo's brothers, can trigger warfare (*jang*) between the harassing men and Surayo's male relatives. By putting Surayo off wearing the Indian-inspired dress, her brothers are avoiding conflict and ensuring peaceful relations with their neighbours and peers in the wider community. In such a patriarchal context, husbands, fathers and, brothers are in charge of monitoring and controlling the movements and dress-styles, and therefore, the reputation of the 'diplomat' into which Surayo has unwillingly been turned (see also Morris this volume).

Finally, when Surayo argues that it is the seamstress to be blamed for the design, she is deploying her skills of mediation in order to defend her reputation, and of coercion in order to convince her family about her preferred dress-style. Indeed, although she was unsuccessful at wearing the Indian-inspired dress in a provincial town such as Kulob, Surayo's parents allowed her to wear the outfit when she visited her relatives in the capital city, Dushanbe. During the visit, Surayo told me, her aunts admired her fashionable new dress, and positively commented that indeed, she looked 'like a Bollywood star'.

Five years after these events, I met Surayo again in Dushanbe and asked her about her Indian dress. Now 20 years old, Surayo was enrolled in a BA in Food Industry at a polytechnic institute. The Indian-inspired dresses, she told me with amusement, were now 'out of fashion'. What was important for her, she said, was to obtain a scholarship that would allow

her to continue her studies in India. ‘The Indian Embassy’ Surayo told me, ‘offers scholarships to Tajik students every year and some of my fellows have gone there. Can you imagine if they saw me with my old Indian dress?’⁸ We both laughed at her remark before commenting on how profoundly the fashion for Indian clothing, mockery she had received by her brothers, support from her aunts, and her own determination to be independent in the face of familial opposition years before had affected her ways of thinking about the world. Nevertheless, Surayo concluded, if she went to India with a scholarship, she would wear a Tajik traditional dress. After all, she said, she was a Tajik girl (*dukhtari Tojik*): despite everything, Surayo continued to regard herself as the incarnation of the Tajik nation.

As I now explore not only style but also material has become a site of embodied diplomacy in Tajikistan during the course of my fieldwork. The textiles used in the making of Tajik clothing are also the subject of official and family evaluations concerning Tajikistan’s place in the world especially in relationships to Tajikistan’s fraught yet increasingly significant relations with its powerful neighbour: China.

Chinese Lycra versus Tajik Cotton

As part of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) China has enlarged its presence in Tajikistan through trade, investment and assistance in the development of infrastructure (including projected railway lines, and a gas-pipe that is expected to use Tajikistan as a transit territory from neighbouring energy-rich countries) (Kunchins et.al. 2015). This growing cooperation is commented upon by Tajikistan’s residents with reference to the increasing volume of imports of Chinese goods to Tajikistan’s markets, and the growing number of Chinese workers and professionals in the country.

⁸ Cooperation in matters of education is an important topic in the relations between Tajikistan and India. In 2015, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations offered 30 scholarships, and the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation 100 scholarships to Tajik students.

In 2006, Tajikistan's government launched a campaign against Lycra-textiles, the majority of which had been imported from China.⁹ Dresses made of Lycra, women in Kulob told me, became trendy (Rus. *modnyy*) in those years, but many women in Tajikistan were rapidly deterred from purchasing this elastic textile. On the one hand, they argued that the fabric was unsuitable for the hot temperatures in summer (in the low valleys can reach above forty degrees). This position was reinforced by government officials who, in their speeches in national TV, advertised Lycra as being the cause of skin problems such as irritation, dryness and even the development of ulcers. On the other hand, women argued that Lycra-dresses were very tight (*tang*) and revealed women's silhouettes. On the whole, Lycra-textiles contravened Tajikistan's proud history as a producer of high-quality cotton and cotton-made textiles, and brought vivid attention to the increasing dependency of on synthetic textiles made in China, and Chinese imports in general.

In 2009, Nasiba, a friend of mine from Kulob city who at the time was 17 years old, wore a Lycra-dress for me in her room. In a joking tone, she told me: 'I cannot go out from home wearing this. I look ugly. I became *tangem* Chinese' (*tangem khitoy shidam*). *Tangem* was the name given to a small, cheap and fragile style of mini-bus imported from China to Tajikistan that was banned by the government of Dushanbe in 2011 because of its unreliability. At times, *tangem* is a word used in Kulob region that refers to other goods made in China in a derogatory manner. *Tangem*-Chinese often indexes the low quality of such products especially when compared with textile of apparently higher quality made in Turkey or India. Regardless of the fact that many families in Kulob has scarce access to cash and many women described themselves as 'poor' (*kambagal*), Lycra-dresses came to be seen as

⁹ My ongoing research on Tajik traders in the city of Yiwu, China (2016), reveal that most textile exported by these traders to Tajikistan directly from China or via Dubai is originally purchased in Keqiao, a city near Yiwu (see also Cheuk in this volume).

unsophisticated by such women because of their association with other Chinese low-quality goods.

The government of Tajikistan attempts indeed to determine the Tajik ‘national dresses’ that women are expected to a very high level of detail. Black is an undesired colour as it is considered an imitation of the gowns worn by some women in Arab countries and Iran. Hence, through his speeches in national TV, the President of Tajikistan often invites women to tailor their national dress in the bright and multi-coloured cotton-textiles made within the country. Cotton is so important to the brand-image of Tajikistan that the national emblem of the country contains cotton and wheat surrounded by banners of the national flag. Unfortunately, the textiles produced in Tajikistan are considered by the many women and seamstresses I knew as being expensive and scarce in comparison to imports from China. In the light of the impossibility of competing with the lower prices of Chinese textiles, many textile factories in Tajikistan have been forced to shut down –something that seamstresses in Dushanbe often sadly remarked to me. Paradoxically, I was often encouraged by them to go to the *Khitoy Bozor* (the Chinese Market located near Dushanbe’s downtown) and *Bozori Kurvon*: according to most women, it was possible to find the most fashionable textiles in these markets and at an affordable price.

The brief incorporation of ‘foreign’ and ‘harmful’ Lycra to Tajikistan’s traditional dress visibly disclose the bodies of Tajikistan’s women as the sites of embodied diplomacy. The national dress and the textiles and colours in which such dresses are made exemplify Tajikistan’s brand-image. Women in Lycra dresses, however, incarnated the undesirable dependency of Tajikistan’s economy on low-grade yet unexpansive Chinese-made goods, and the diminished state of the cotton and cotton-textile industry in Tajikistan. Having explored the importance of gender, senescence and other physical specificities of bodies, as well as the

material and colours in which dresses are made, I now analyse the relevance of the politics of hair to embodied diplomacy's dynamics in Tajikistan.

'Why do you want to be Russian?' - Blond dyed-hair

Together with teeth, dresses and textiles, hair is an aspect of the assemblage of dress that is of importance to my interlocutors in Kulob and Dushanbe, and that also informs the ways in which diplomacy is embodied in Tajikistan's populace. In April 2007, Tajikistan's government issued a decree banning Tajikistan's state-workers from growing their beards long. Such laws were reinforced in 2011 when the government extended the decree to all men in the country including those who are jobless and who had previously not been affected by the prohibition. Less reported in international news, and often under-explored by scholars, are the salient issues concerning women's hair.¹⁰ Women's practices of hair dying are a particularly interesting dimension of their everyday lives through which to examine embodied diplomacy because they reveal Muslim subjectivities, local understandings of Tajikistan's place in the world, and the complicated relations between Tajikistan and Russia. As is the case with other items of their daily dress and textiles, hair-dyes intersect with the ways in which Tajikistan's people interpret their national identity and their role as Tajikistan's representatives.

The conversations I had with women in Kulob about hair-dyes, and cosmetics more broadly, revolved around the popularity and aesthetic dimensions of such products, or the condemnation of these goods as damaging one's health as they have been industrially produced with chemicals. Some women went even further to comment to me that God (*Khudo*) did not permit people to alter the human body with cosmetics or hair-dyes insofar as

¹⁰ Anthropologists have analysed hair under symbolic frameworks (e.g. Byrd 2002, Delaney 1994, Leach 1958, Obeyesekere 1981).

the body (*jism*) was granted to them by God in a ‘clean’ (*toza*) and pure (*pokiz*) state.¹¹ Generally, however, most women agreed that the black-dye called *usma*, commonly used to dye hair or to shape a monobrow, was a permissible cosmetic because it was extracted from a plant (*alaf*) that, according to my interlocutors, ‘only grows in Tajik soil’.¹² Therefore, *usma* was considered ‘natural’ (*tabii*), and the black colour it produced was evaluated as being embedded in notions authenticity.

Not only the ‘natural’ or ‘artificial’ qualities of the products used as hair-dyes mattered, but the exact nature of the colour they produced was also a topic of discussion. Synthetic blond tints, especially applied to women’s hair, had a particularly negative connotation. For example, a friend of mine, Sumiya, was 18 years old in 2010 when I lived near her house in Kulob city. Sumiya and Maniya, her best friend from university, dyed their hair blond, and this was very noticeable because they used to wear *namol* – the headscarf that only covered their head partially. Although Maniya had encountered her parent’s criticism and scorn, she was allowed to keep her dyed hair blond. However, Sumiya had to confront her elder brothers’ accusations of immorality. She told me that her brothers had called her a ‘Russian prostitute’ (Rus. *Russkaya postitutka*). Both Sumiya and Maniya also received reprimands by one of their teachers at university, and also by a state-official who saw them in the local library. ‘Why do you want to be Russian?’, Sumiya reported to me as these people asking them.

The offensive representation of Sumiya and Maniya as ‘Russian prostitutes’ relates to a new re-interpretation in Tajikistan of Soviet rule as having been a continuation of Russian colonialism – a line of analysis that I heard frequently among youth in Kulob. Furthermore,

¹¹ The permissibility or otherwise of dyeing or cutting hair has been a source of controversy for Islamic scholars. See: Juynboll (1986).

¹² *Usma* is a herbal dye obtained from the indigo plant [Lat. *Indigofera tinctoria*], and it is associated with beauty in many parts of the Persian world. See: Soudavar Farmanfarmaian (2000).

two Tajik male informants, themselves seasonal workers in Moscow, explained to me that speaking in such a way to women might be a way in which young men aired their frustrations about the racist insults and aggression that some Tajik workers face in Russia. At the same time, not all people in Kulob regarded Russians as ‘colonisers’: elderly men who lived during the Soviet period frequently refer to such Russians as ‘ours’ (Rus. *nashi*) and highlight the positive role that Russian troops play still in the region, by assisting the Tajik army in patrolling the border with Afghanistan.

The criticism uttered by people in Kulob city concerning blond-hair dyes is certainly also related to the presence of Russian military personnel, often accompanied by their families, in the permanent base located at in the city that, together with the Russian military headquarters in Dushanbe and Qurghon-Teppa, are the base of between 5000 and 7000 troops of the Russian Federation (numbers from Kunchins et.al 2015). These military personnel and their families are frequently seen buying food-stuff in Kulob local markets. However, there have been several reports of quarrels between Kulob residents and such Russian men and women in the city, and therefore, Kulob residents are encouraged not to approach the Russian troops even if these are off duty in the city. In contrast to the everyday sociality that characterises relations with the few ethnic Russians who were born or have grown up in Kulob, and who continue to live in the city, an incident involving the Russians from the ‘base’ can provoke a diplomatic conflict between Tajikistan and Russia thereby tantalising Tajikistan’s diplomatic relations with its principal partner. Both Kulob residents and Tajiks working in Russia recognise the importance of the diplomatic relations between Tajikistan and the Russian Federation, and therefore, their responsibility as representatives of Tajikistan, and mediators of the everyday tense sociality between Kulobi locals and the military Russian personnel. One of my Kulobi friends whom I met near Moscow in 2014 told me ‘if there is a warfare between Tajikistan and Russia, we all will be kick out (Rus. *vygnat*)’ from here’. Indeed, of

the 7 million inhabitants of Tajikistan, about 1 million work in Russia, and their remittances constitute between 40 to 50% of Tajikistan's GDP.

After being harassed by relatives and people in the street with accusations of attempting 'to look Russian', Sumiya was requested by her father to turn her hair back to its original black colour. Unwilling to do this, Sumiya creatively mediated a position between family expectations of respectability, national laws about dress, local tensions resulting from the presence of Russian troops in her home town, and the transnational flows of aesthetics and fashion: she boiled large quantities of *usma* and washed her hair with the blackened water. Unsurprisingly, this method was ineffective at changing her hair colour dark, but at least, Sumiya told me, her father and brothers stopped bothering her. 'We do not want to appear Russian' Sumiya told me, 'We wanted our hair blond simply because we find blond hair beautiful and trendy'. Sumiya and Maniya told me that they dyed their hair blond on the same day because by looking similar they wanted to emphasise their friendship (*dusti*) with one another. Indeed, friendship, care, and empathy for one another was often shown by women in Kulob by tailoring and wearing one's national dress in the same textile-pattern and colour as one's most beloved friend or relative - as Maniya and Sumiya also did at times. Hence, if Sumiya and Maniya were scolded for their 'immorality' or their 'Russian-like' appearance with their dyed blond-hair, the girls decided to pass through such criticism and problems together -as true friends must do. In such a case, their uniformity highlighted affection to one another rather than alliance with Russia. In Sumiya's and Maniya's case, however, the affection for one another entered in competition with the loyalty that they were expected to demonstrate towards their nation (*vatan*) because by 'looking Russian' they challenged the expected principles of Tajikistan's brand-image.

Conclusion

In 2011, Tajikistan's state officials passed a decree that makes it obligatory for Tajik pilgrims to wear a blue-sky uniform during their *Hajj* to Mecca and Medina. This uniform, they argued, helps Tajiks to recognise each other among the millions of pilgrims and thus to avoid going astray. Not only the blue-sky color of this outfit is noticeable, but the Tajik national flag is also embroidered on every item of the clothing - including the veil with which women cover their heads. According to Laylo, a Tajik female *hojji* in her late 40s whom I interviewed in 2015, this uniform contravenes the white *ihram* clothing that is worn by most Muslims during their pilgrimage. *Hojjia* Laylo, however, agreed that during her pilgrimage in 2013, the blue uniform facilitated Tajik pilgrims to be recognised and thus to be helped when they got lost in the crowd. Not knowing the Arabic language, *Hojjia* Laylo reported to me, most Tajik pilgrims sought conviviality with their Iranian and Afghan Muslim fellows who also speak Persian languages, and some of whom, she said, run the hotels, coaches and market-stalls to which Tajik pilgrims prefer to go during Hajj. On the one hand, *Hojjia* Laylo said, the uniform with the Tajik national flag put pressure on the pilgrims to behave themselves appropriately as they were not only becoming *hojjis* but also representatives of a 'great nation' among other 'Tajik people' –such as Dari-speaking Afghans and Farsi-speaking Iranians. On the other hand, she concluded, many Tajik pilgrims including herself did not comply with the order to wear the uniform some days after their arrival to Saudi Arabia: it was embarrassing (*sharm doshtan*) not to don the white *ihram* clothes, and a disappointment not to buy new outfits in the local markets. This example, and the others examined in this article show how the compulsory incarnation of the Tajik nation prescribed by specific dress-codes does not happen without being questioned and altered by the same people who it turns into diplomatic representatives of Tajikistan. In questioning and altering Tajikistan's brand-image, people craft for themselves diplomatic worlds that draw upon their

knowledge about the lives of their fellow Muslims elsewhere, and their own imaginaries of Tajikistan's place in the world.

Through an examination of dress and Tajikistan nationalist discourses, this article has sought to stimulate a growing recognition of the alternatives sites of diplomacy that play an active and dynamic role in mediating political relations between diverse nation-states, the brand-images of nations and the communities with which they intersect. My case-studies contribute to the increasing, yet distinct, bodies of literature that have explored dress and diplomacy as forms of assemblages. Assemblages, I argued, allow an examination of diverse items of dress in relationship to specific elements of Tajikistan's foreign policy and bilateral relations that reveal processes of embodied diplomacy. Embodied diplomacy, I suggested, conveys the multi-layered processes through which Tajikistan's residents incarnate Tajikistan's brand-image, and are turned into diplomats during the course of everyday sociality. The ethnography presented in the article has sought to show how the diplomatic principles of the Tajik nation-state are visible in people's everyday forms of *assembling* together the diverse items that *connect* and therefore shape their gendered and aging (senescent) bodies, their ever-changing aesthetics concerning dress-styles as well as people's fluctuating understandings of what it is to be Tajik and Muslim.

Through the exploration of the politics of dress in Tajikistan, I have also demonstrated the ways in which such assemblages are a showground of diplomatic affairs. I have suggested that embodied diplomacy involves the processes through which Tajikistan's people negotiate the compulsory dress-codes and navigate the social pressures about public gendered-images in relationship to local notions of honour, morality, loyalty and respectability. Despite existing dress-codes, Tajikistan residents are able to incorporate innovation, fashion and 'foreign' elements in their national dress. The incorporation of so-called foreign items to people's apparels trigger the moments or situations in which the assemblages of bodies and

dress most clearly emerge as diplomatic sites. Such everyday situations, often arising in the realms of family life, reveal Tajikistan residents as diplomats insofar as they reflect on their roles as the country's representatives at the same time as they deploy their skills of communication, persuasion, and mediation to negotiate between compulsory dress-codes, incoming fashion trends, family expectations and personal aesthetics. In so doing, they shape diverse subjectivities informed by local notions of honour and loyalty towards Tajikistan, and complex understandings of being Muslim that are important within Tajikistan, the Central Asian region and beyond.

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