

## Intimacy and touch: closeness, separation and family life in Kulob, southern Tajikistan

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*Abstract*

This article examines the emotional, embodied and sensuous aspects of intimacy within and between two families from Kulob, southern Tajikistan as it is embedded in imminent or/and impending conflict. It focuses on touch and its importance to the fashioning of family life that is also informed by government policies and Muslim subjectivities. The ethnography highlights bodily sensations such as shaking chills, and visceral episodes such as vomiting, fainting, or sensuously-dreaming because they materialise the narrative, experience and performativity of the qualities of touch. The article advances the notion that touch pertains not only to both physical immediacy and intimate closeness, but also to processes of physical separation and estrangement between two or more intimates.

**Key words:** intimacy, touch, senses, dreaming, emotion, kinship, Muslim family, Tajikistan

*I was lying on the floor looking at the ceiling. Tahmeena softly caressed my head and we sat next to one another. Then she took my headscarf off. My hair was plaited. Tahmeena pulled on my very long plait of hair until she extended it all the way to the next room, and then to the kitchen. But then my hair did not extend anymore and bunches of hair began to fall off my head. I felt pain. I told Tahmeena not to pull my hair anymore. She stopped. Oh God, give me endurance! I woke up with a terrible headache and stomach-ache, and prayed [namuz khondam].<sup>1</sup>*

In August 2015, Kholai Malika, a woman in her sixties from Kulob city, southern Tajikistan, narrated to me this dream. She then explained that she had been 'seeing in her dreams' (*khob didan*) Tahmeena, her deceased daughter-in-law (*kelin*) who had been the wife of her son Jamsheed. In 2012 Tahmeena was diagnosed with hepatitis C (apparently contracted in a local hospital) and in 2014 she died at the age of 32. Three daughters, aged 4, 8 and 12, survived her. Kholai Malika told me that although she was 'getting used' to Mansura, Jamsheed's new wife, she suffered (*azob kashid*) as a result of Tahmeena's death mainly because she missed her. At times, Kholai Malika went on to explain, her sadness was so intense after her dreams that, in addition to feeling stomach-ache (*girondag*), she needed to go to the lavatory and vomit (*partof*).

In the sensuous-dream cited above, Kholai Malika feels Tahmeena caressing her head.<sup>2</sup> Even when this interaction occurs in a dream between a family member who had recently died, and one who survives her touch constitutes a significant act of care. This gentle touch, however, rapidly turns into a painful experience to the point that Kholai Malika wakes up with a headache as if Tahmeena actually

had torn out hairs from her scalp. She then remembers this episode by also experiencing shaking chills (*larza*) and pain (*dard*) in her stomach (*shikam*) and heart (*dil*). These sensations, Kholai Malika expected, could be dealt with by praying and supplicating to God to give her endurance (*tokat*).

Similarly to Privatski's study on Kazakhstan (2011) and to Rasanayagam's work on Uzbekistan (2006), for my informants, sensuous-dreams had aspects of actuality, and such dreams 'mattered' because they had an impact in the dreamer's material world (Edgar 2011, Mittermaier 2011). As these scholars suggest, encounters with spirits and ancestors through visions and dreaming are related to processes of healing and the fashioning of Muslim subjectivities. In addition to dreaming, during 16 months of fieldwork with families in southern Tajikistan between 2009 and 2015, I have also noticed that 'touch' (*lazam kardan*) in the forms of caressing, stroking, kissing, embracing, smacking and beating was of major importance to the everyday making of diverse forms of intimacy, family life and ways of being Muslim. In order to analyse these aspects, I focus on the embodied, sensuous and affective aspects of intimacy within and between two extended families which were previously associated through the marriage of Jamsheed and Tahmeena. Tahmeena's family lived in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe, and Jamsheed's in Kulob – a city of about 70 000 inhabitants and located 203 kilometres south of Dushanbe. Tahmeena's death prompted, on the one hand, Jamsheed's marriage to another woman, Mansura, who was herself a widow with a six-year old daughter. On the other, Jamsheed's marriage to Mansura caused the dissolution of previous association and kinship relations between Jamsheed and Tahmeena's mother. Taking these families as case studies, I ask what a focus on sensuous forms of closeness and estrangement brings to the understanding of relationships constituting family life, informed by state policies, religious discourses and ways of being Muslim in southern Tajikistan.

### *Touch, emotion and affect*

Touch has attracted scholarly attention in literature that analyses the senses as historically and culturally grounded (Stoller 1989, Howes 2003, Laplantine 2015). Cross-cultural research on tactility has built upon criticisms to over-riding concerns with vision and semiotics (Taussig 1991), and explored key methodological concerns about how to study touch (Classen 2005). Some ethnographic investigations have focused on the significance of touch to practices of diagnosis and healing (Blake 2011, Rasmussen 2006, Peloguin 2005). Others have tangentially dealt with aspects of touch by theorising the relationship between desirable physical pain and religious and political reform (Shilling and Mellor 2010; Deeb 2005). What these works elucidate is that touch can appeal to contradictory intentions, interpretations and experiences ranging from the romantic and erotic, the empathetic and affective, the virtuous and political or the disciplining and vicious amongst many other possibilities.

Considering touch as a relational practice, in their study of village life in Kenya, Geissler and Prince (2010:13) argue that ‘touch’ is the ‘the primary modality of making relations’ and this practice of relatedness is of comparable significance to the sharing of food and other substances (see also Williams 1966, Carsten 2004, von Poser 2013). Existing works on family and kinship relations in Muslims contexts, however, have mainly focused on the importance of notions of closeness or *qaraba* to kinship (Eickleman 1977; cf. Clarke 2007); on the centrality of *sharia*’ law to the making and breaking of family relationships (Hirsch 1998; Esposito 1982; Mir-Hosseini 1993; Singerman 2005), and on wider issues of morality and parenting (Franceschelli and O’Brien 2014). With the exemption of Suad’s edited volume on the Arab family (1999), there is a tendency for such literature to centre their attention on the legal aspects of the married (or divorced) couple. Another strand of the literature has theorised family practices (Morgan 1996) and family-hood (Becher 2008), or those aspects of relations concerning the expectations, obligations and gender roles of marriage, kinship and parenthood. More recently, Muslim family life in India, and among mobile Afghan traders has increasingly been used as a construct to explore how wider political, geopolitical and economic concerns have affected shifting forms of intimacy (Das 2010; Mody 2008; Osella C 2012; Marsden and Ibañez-Tirado 2015). In the realm of family sociality within Muslim settings, touch has remained under-explored even though nearness and/or physical contact underscore communal sharing in circumstances of affection and harmony as well as in situations of impending conflict.

In his work on the practices of relatedness in Rajasthan, India, Singh (2011) advances the concept of ‘agonistic intimacy’ to explain intimacy as moral relatedness between potentially hostile neighbours, and that has more subtleties than those limited by the binaries of friends/foes. In a similar vein, yet emphasising the ‘attunement of bodies to other bodies through touch’, Spencer (2013:232) suggests that among martial arts practitioners it is through body contact that ‘social bonds are formed’ (see also Watanabe 2014). These works suggest that intimacy is connected to the materiality of bodies in contact in contexts of latent conflict, rather than to sentiments understood as internal to the worlds of individuals. Similarly, for my interlocutors in southern Tajikistan, touch is a significant realm of the emotional, performative and sensuous aspects of family relations that buttress the fashioning of diverse forms of intimacy. For them, intimacy is ‘agonistic’ in the sense that is seen as underlined by the interplay of love, care and affection as well as reproach, animosity and awaiting conflict. At the same time, love, affection and animosity are not only ‘feelings’ or ‘emotions’ (*ehsos*) experienced, and then narrated, by my interlocutors. *Ehsos* are also understood as carefully enacted forms of sociality encouraged by family members through touch, for example in the forms of an embrace, a smack or a massage. At times, it is not touch that is emphasised, but the lack or withdrawal of physical contact. Moreover the feelings and emotions that come with sensorial

experiences, either tactile or otherwise, occasionally become available to my informants as fleshy feelings such as shaking chills, and what I call here 'visceral episodes' (cf. Paasonen 2011). Such visceral episodes, as Kholai Malika explained to me, are originated in one's guts and heart and come in the form of vomiting, stomach-ache, fainting and sensuous-dreaming.

In anthropology, whilst some works highlight that it is through our emotions that we, as researchers, can fathom the emotional worlds of our informants (Rosaldo 1984), others disagree and instead appeal to the analysis of the narratives in which sentiment is embedded (Abu-Lughod 1986, Marsden 2007, Beatty 2014). For the purposes of this article, emotions are theoretically conceived as complex ecological phenomena insofar as the processes of cognition are fully integrated with bodily reactions and experienced in the interplay of the individual, society and the environment (Milton 2002). Hence, in addition to the semiotic and narrative realm of emotions, I integrate more abstract and unconscious intensities brought about by my interlocutors as sensuous-dreams, fleshy feelings and visceral episodes. I build upon Paasonen's (2011) concept of 'resonance' that refers to the moments of being attuned with certain frequencies so one can be moved or touched by specific circumstances and experiences – in her case-study is online porn. Resonance, Paasonen suggests, 'is carnal by definition', and 'encompasses the emotional and cognitive as well as the sensory and affective' (2011:16,17). Similarly yet more specifically focused on tactility, Sedwick (2003) suggests that certain aspects of experience and reality are not opposed to their propositional or verbal form. For Sedwick, touch becomes 'touching feeling' with its 'double meaning, tactile plus emotional' aspects already involved (see also Derrida 2005; Sparrow 2015). Rather, than a one-dimensional relation of cause and effect, all these aspects of sensorial experiences, emotions and affects cohere as particular forms of intimacy (Ahmed 2014); in my case study, they are closely related to diverse forms of touch.

Touch, I argue, is of particular relevance in the processes of bonding family arrangements informed by Muslim subjectivities in southern Tajikistan, for example, in the actual sociality between a new step-mother and her step-daughters, or in the 'resonances' of emotions and fleshy feelings through sensuous-dreaming in which tactile experiences and visceral episodes play a major role. Borrowing from the notion of 'agonistic intimacy' (Singh 2011), I also argue that touch pertains not only to the quality of both physical immediacy and intimate closeness, but also to the processes of physical separation and estrangement between two or more intimates. Although a (former)mother-in-law and her (former)son-in-law are referred to as not being 'relatives' (*kheshu tabor*) after the latter remarried, or even though a mother-in-law ceases her kinship relation with her daughter-in-law because she had recently died, by no means such separations signal an abrupt end or the complete lack of intimacy. Instead, the resentful and contradictory feelings of love and betrayal frequently brought

about together with fleshy feelings and visceral intensities emphasise ongoing forms of intimacy to the constitution of family life. In the fashioning of family sociality both government policies and moments in which Islam and being Muslim is voiced as important to people's lives play a major role.

*Tajikistan's family: governmental policies, religious discourse and the 'path of Islam'*

Works on mobility, migration and transnational life in Muslim contexts have shown the close link between government policies, family life and intimacy especially in relationship to laws regulating marriage, reproduction, sexuality and citizenship (e.g. Dresch 2005, Madavi 2014). Indeed, these are reflected in Tajikistan's government policies because the concept of 'family' (*oila, avlod*) continues to be regarded as the foundation on which the well-being of society lays (Harris 2004, Rahmonova-Schwarz 2012, Nourzhanovand and Bleuer 2013, Roche 2014, Cleuziou 2015). Preoccupied about increasing numbers of family ruptures, President Emomali Rahmon declared 2015 'The Year of the Family'. Rahmon sponsored the broadcast of TV programmes and the publication of articles in magazines and newspapers, as well as the circulation of leaflets, posters and banners. According to the government, the ideal of 'Tajikistan's family' (*oilai Tojikiston*) is a 'modern' entity based on 'traditional values' of unity, harmony and respect, and the highest moral behaviour (*raftori ahloky*) of family members (Olimov 2002). The campaign of the 'Year of the Family' also wanted to raise consciousness among the country's population about the problems affecting families more specifically the high rates of divorce, domestic violence, polygamy, and the 'culture of extended families' (*avlod, khonabod*). Such problems were cited as results of two factors: firstly, the arranged marriages between close relatives (*kheshu taboru nazdik*) which cause 'genetic diseases' and 'malformation in their children';<sup>3</sup> and, secondly, the frequent animosity and rivalry in polygynous families, or in monogamous families that, nevertheless, incorporate a married couple, their adult sons with their wives and offspring, as well as the couple's unmarried daughters – all living under the same roof.

My interlocutors in Kulob and Dushanbe discussed the issues of the campaign and most of them agreed that the government's preoccupations coincided with their family concerns. They also demonstrated increasing interest in incorporating what they referred to as 'the path of Islam' (*rohi Islom*) to shaping their family arrangements and intimate relations. *Rohi Islom*, also referred to in this article as 'ways of being Muslim', is an over-arching notion that involves forms of relating to knowledge about Islam and experiences and practices of being Muslim that become significant in certain aspects and moments of my informants' lives, all the while operating in a rapidly changing national context.

In the mid-2000s the Tajik government began to promote and incorporate Islam to narratives of the identity, history and culture of the Tajik nation at the same

time that government officials imposed tighter surveillance on the institutions dealing with religious affairs (Epkenhans 2016). Those years were also characterised by a growing interest amongst Tajikistan's citizens in exploring diverse forms of being Muslim. These included the illegal association (and thus often detention) of a small number of citizens to groups of Islamic reform operating in the country such as Tablighi Jamaat and Hizbu-Tahrir (Schmitz 2015). More typically, these transformations manifested in day-to-day life such as people's retreating from drinking alcohol, attending mosques on Fridays, listening to speeches by local mullahs in CDs and DVDs, reading Quran, celebrating 'Islamic' weddings, and wearing veils and other 'Muslim clothes' (Marsden 2012, Ibañez-Tirado 2016, Roche 2014, Stephan-Emmrich and Mirzoev 2016, Mostowlansky 2017). From 2010 and with the justification of defending the country from dangerous forms of Islamic extremism (Heathershaw and Montgomery 2014), government officials shut down several local mosques. They also banned well-known mullahs from preaching, forbid the selling of CDs and DVDs with religious content, criticised the use of veils and 'black clothes' from 'Arabistan' and engaged in a campaign of publicly shaving the beards of men to name but a few notorious policies.

The remaining authorised Muslim scholars continue to be allowed to publicly discuss themes about family life. They address family issues in terms that parallel the secular government's aims of pursuing traditional values and moral behaviour for the 'correct formation' (*tashakkulyobi*) of families. Although the government's narrative presents itself as secular and refers to 'Tajikistan's family' while Muslim authorities make frequent reference to the 'Muslim family' (*oilai musulmoni*) both discourses overlap and reinforce one another especially concerning the role that women, in their qualities of wives, mothers, daughters and daughters-in-law, must play in sustaining harmonious and morally-informed family relations (cf. Kandiyoti 1994). It is in this context that contentious discussions among my interlocutors in southern Tajikistan involved topics about how to sustain a well-functioning, harmonious and morally-informed family that was both Tajik and Muslim. Whilst seeking the 'path of Islam' individuals in Tajikistan combined diverse and often contradictory ideas and practices that they accommodated to their own experiences, to fluctuating discourses by religious authorities and government policies, and to collective notions of Muslim personhood (cf. Rasanayagam 2006).

Islam and being Muslim thus become 'articulated' (Marsden and Retsikas 2013) in certain aspects of Tajikistan's people's lives such as rituals, dress and public performance but not expressed in political debate. From 2010 when many of these public expressions of being Muslim also turned out to be increasingly problematic for the government, the realms of family life have continued to be a safe haven where people invoke ways of being Muslim - even if they are ambivalent and fragmented (Schielke 2012). In what follows, I explore these

aspects that connect government policies, Muslim subjectivities and fleshy feelings. I highlight that intimacy in family sociality is constantly shaped by everyday practice, and by the sensuous, embodied and affective aspects of closeness and separation among family members.

### *The families*

Jamsheed's family was based in Kulob city where Tahmeena also lived with her in-laws until her death in 2014. Tahmeena's paternal family had moved from Kulob to Dushanbe in 2007 arguing that Tahmeena's brothers had better chances of a well-paid job in the capital. The members of both families identified themselves as Sunni Muslim, and both families were similar to many others in Kulob or of Kulobis living in Dushanbe: they lived with irregular incomes, recurrent debts and other economic problems arising from their low salaries or periodic unemployment. Their flats, in Kulob and Dushanbe respectively, were located in Soviet-style apartment blocks, and they referred to those relatives living in such flats as 'family' or *oila*. The core of permanent dwellers in Jamsheed's and Tahmeena's paternal families were the eldest couple (Jamsheed's parents and Tahmeena's mother respectively) and their adult children (both married men with their wives and unmarried daughters), and the married sons' children. Tahmeena's father, and some of the adult children in both families lived on and off in Russia working and sending back remittances. Other family members, including the unmarried daughters, moved for extended periods to study in Dushanbe or to visit relatives in villages near Kulob city. Because of these patterns of mobility, approximately 14 people lived in Jamsheed's 4-bedroom flat in Kulob, and 9 in Tahmeena's mother's flat in Dushanbe.

### *Mansura: separation and touch*

Jamsheed was still mourning his deceased wife when he met Mansura, a woman in her 30s from Kulob city whose husband had also died four years before – that is in 2010. Mansura and Jamsheed were briefly introduced to one another by one of Jamsheed's relatives in a social gathering four months after Tahmeena's death. For several months, they established contact via mobile phone, exchanged photographs and began to 'like' each other (*nags didan*). At the time, Jamsheed was working as a handy-man for relatives and friends and desperately trying to find a secure job and a steady source of income. Encouraged by his parents, he also wanted to find a potential wife to look after (*nigohubin*) his young daughters. Finally, Jamsheed and Mansura got married one year after Jamsheed's previous wife, Tahmeena, had died. They held a modest ceremony *nikoh* under the jurisdiction of a local mullah, and Mansura moved to Jamsheed's parents' house. Mansura told me that she married Jamsheed because she loved him (*dust dosht*). In addition, she said, being a widow (*beva*) is undesirable for Muslim women and their children. Mansura had a daughter who was six years old, but who was not allowed to move to Jamsheed's over-crowded flat.

According to Jamsheed, he and his parents, in consultation with Mansura, had agreed to leave Mansura's daughter with her grandparents in a village near Kulob. Mansura tried to keep in contact with her own daughter via mobile phone. Astonished by the sudden absence of her mother, the girl often called Mansura asking her to go back home. In those early days after her marriage to Jamsheed, Mansura began to have sensuous-dreams associated to the separation from her daughter.

In her dreams, Mansura saw her daughter playing with mud and walking on the bedsheets with the muddy shoes on. She had received such bedsheets as a wedding present. That night, Mansura woke up with shaking chills and told me that she had found her sheets wet and soiled. She then proceeded to wash them squatting in the bathroom in the middle of the night. Similar sensuous-dreams persisted in the following nights, and every time Mansura ended up in the bathroom washing her bedding whilst suffering shaking chills. Mansura explained to me:

'I do miss her [her daughter] and get sad thinking of how much she misses me. My heart burns [*dilsus*] when I see my daughter's photo each time the telephone rings. I know she wants to talk to me and sometimes I am busy or asleep and cannot take her call'.

Mansura's fleshy feelings that she described as *dilsus* were especially acute when her daughter rang or appeared in her dreams. In such scenarios, the images of the girl were not simply symbolic and representational visions mediated via her sensuous-dreams or mobile phone calls. They were embodied, sensorial and affective experiences that touched Mansura and her surroundings including her bedsheets, and this tactile experiences resonated as material, affective and visceral sensations that involved those also living in the house. When receiving a text with images or when experiencing sensuous-dreams, depending on the circumstances of the content, context and relation, Mansura and my interlocutors in Kulob described fleshy feelings such as stomach-ache caused by fear (*tars*) or world-weariness (*ziq*), heart-pain (described as 'burning heart' *dilsus*) caused by misfortune (*gham*) or gratifying tickling of the body caused by affection and aesthetic pleasure (*ghalghalaq*) – to name but a few. At times, these carnal and visceral sensations, especially the unpleasant ones, could be so intense that people vomited, fainted (*behush*) or fell asleep for days as quite regularly happened to some of my informants when receiving bad news about the death of relatives and friends. In Mansura's case, her sensuous-dreams and fleshy feelings had significance in the fashioning of contradictory forms of family sociality and intimacy.

Mansura explained to me that the separation from her daughter was a result of her decision to marry Jamsheed, yet she craved embracing and cuddling her little girl. She went on to say that the mobile phone helped her and her daughter

overcome the sudden distance that separated them from one another. However, the photo of her daughter flashing with each of the girl's calls produced Mansura contradictory resonances. On the one hand, Mansura felt 'tickles of happiness' (*ghalghalak*) about the forthcoming conversation; on the other, she frequently referred to sensations of pain in her heart and stomach with the realisation that she could not touch and hold her beloved daughter with whom she had spent most of her time since her former husband had died. In contrast to the interaction with her little daughter that highlighted a lack of touch, Mansura was expected by Jamsheed and his parents to rapidly build a new and intimate relationship with Jamsheed's daughters and to do so through the correct deployment of physical contact. As the next section elucidates, touch was framed as imperative for the well-being of the new family. In this context, religious commitment and ways of being a good Muslim with respect to diverse forms of touch were invoked. Pursuing harmonious and respectable family sociality was regarded as good deeds that Mansura had to undertake. Her efforts were expected to bring religious merits (*savob*) to her, and blessings (*barakat*) to her new family.

*The step-mother: touch, blessings and good deeds*

Jamsheed and his mother, Kholai Malika, told me that he had remarried, as many other men do in Kulob, in part searching for a woman to give love, care, affection and discipline to his daughters especially because the girls were so young and had suffered so much witnessing their mother's long and painful illness that culminated in her death. Accordingly, Mansura did not hesitate to demonstrate her commitment towards Jamsheed and his daughters with constant cuddles (*lolo kardan*) and kisses (*machak kardan*) especially to Dilbar, the youngest of the three girls who was only four years old. Jamsheed aunts and his two married sisters, who visited the house frequently, usually stimulated the girls to get closer to Mansura. They told the girls remarks similar to the following one, voiced by Kholai Amina, Jamsheed's aunt (his mother's sister):

'Eh girl! Go and kiss Mansura (*machak ku*) and call her *ocha* [mum].'

At times, this type of encouragement to pursue intimacy through touch was put in terms of it being a religious commitment. For some members of the family, touch was not only about the bonding of Jamsheed's new family, but also, about laying the foundations of a correct Muslim family (*oilay musulmoni*). During a female social gathering (*tashkili*) organised in order to introduce Mansura to her new female relatives, that is, to Jamsheed's sisters and aunts, Kholai Amina told me that it was *harom* to physically touch an unknown person in public transport, but caressing from parents to children or among sisters, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law was desirable.<sup>4</sup> Kholai Amina went on:

'Our Prophet (*payambar*), piece be upon him, was asked once if Muslims were allowed to kiss and embrace their children. Our Prophet responded that he

himself played and embraced his children and that this was the right thing to do. If a Muslim kisses his or her children, especially when they are little, *barakat* (blessings) will fall upon the family. Each kiss to a son or daughter is taken by God as merits (*savob*) in the Day of Judgement (*ruzi qiomat*).'

For Kholai Amina, inviting the girls to be physically closer to Mansura would help them to establish a harmonious intimate relation. According to her, this was very important because the relations between a step-mother (*moindar*) and her step-daughters often turn out to be a 'problem' (*mushkila*). In contrast to the love and care given by a mother, which Kholai Amina explained is unconditional, the care of the *moindar* is less persistent and can turn bitter (*talkh*) if there are many quarrels and arguments in the household. Kholai Amina concluded that if Mansura kissed and hugged the girls she carried out good deeds that would be rewarded by God. By doing this, Mansura could demonstrate to be a pious woman (*namozkhonda*), a good wife and the support of a correct Muslim family. Mansura agreed with Kholai Amina's statements.

Although such remarks point toward the significance of gender and Muslim subjectivities in the realm of family life in southern Tajikistan, not all women in this family paid much importance to touch as religious commitment. In the same social gathering where Kholai Amina cited the sayings of Prophet Muhammad, other women in the room said that they found her assertions to be exaggeratedly influenced by religious statements. Nevertheless, these women continued the conversations about the practicalities and challenges that step-mothers (*moindar*) face in relationship to their step-children. The foreseeing of difficulties between the *moindar* and her step-daughters, or the 'agonistic intimacy', became a matter of debate as an imminent conflict that, at the same time, coexists with different 'modes of relatedness and shared religious moral aspirations' (Singh 2011:431). For Mansura, agonistic intimacy fluctuated between on the one hand, her role as a mother and the painful separation from her daughter; and on the other, her position of step-mother of three girls who, at this point, were still seen by Mansura as strangers (*begona*). If Mansura and the other women in the gathering took into account the rewards that the step-mother receives from God for treating her step-daughters with affection, they also recognised that affection needed to be fostered and cultivated in the day-to-day family sociality through diverse and often contradictory forms of touch. Mansura and her step-daughters were expected to reach a balance between caress that promotes affection, and other forms of touch considered to be disciplining. Such forms of tactility operated in close connection to other modes of relatedness that also involved the girls' grandmother and uncles, as I analyse next.

### *Touch to avoid wildness*

After having spent only one week in her new house Mansura seemed to be already familiar with her step-daughters and her new mother-in-law. Mansura and

the other family members continued encouraging caressing: she used to take the three girls to her room and lay down with them on the bed stroking their hair. I was also invited to participate and to lay down with them in the company of my three year old son. On one of such occasions, Mansura explained to me:

‘They need a mother who looks after them and who will cuddle them (*lolo kardan*). If these girls are not cuddled, they will become wild (Rus. *dikie*). Look, today I bathed them and washed their hair....if the girls’ hair is not washed and combed, they will look wild and behave wild. It is through all these things that they get used to the new mother. Eventually they love (*dust medoran*) the new mother. Then they will ‘listen’ (comply with) the new mother.’

This ideal of closeness, however, was not a straightforward process especially in a context of agonistic intimacy. Nargis, the girl aged 12, for example, frequently refused Mansura’s embrace and continued to call her, in an unsympathetic tone, *zani dada* (father’s wife) rather than *ocha* (mum) – as she was encouraged to do. Other struggles were frequent: one day Dilbar, the girl aged four, had a temper tantrum because she was not allowed by her grandmother to play outside the flat with her older sisters. When Dilbar smashed a plate in the kitchen, Mansura was told by Kholai Malika not to scold the girl. Kholai Malika later told me that if Mansura had scolded or smacked Dilbar (a common practice in Kulob from mothers towards their children when they misbehave) then Dilbar could build resentment rather than affection towards Mansura. Yet, Dilbar had ran to the courtyard and fell in a muddy puddle where she kicked and cried until one of the neighbours came to tell Kholai Malika what had happened. Jamsheed’s brother, Rustam, who also lived in the house with his wife and a baby-girl, was called by Kholai Malika to pick up Dilbar from the puddle who refused to stop crying even if her sisters had arrived to help her. Rustam embraced muddy Dilbar very tightly and the girl cried and kicked for a moment until she gave up and embraced her paternal uncle (*amak*) from his neck. Both returned to the flat and Mansura proceeded to wash Dilbar and to change her dirty clothes. Mansura then came to the kitchen and stroked Dillbar’s clean hair until the girl fell asleep.

I sat with them and Rustam to drink tea and talk. Rustam told me, again, that his nieces needed much caressing to help them overcome their suffering and ‘wild’ behaviour. At this stage, the role of uncles in cuddling, playing and clutching with their little nieces was of great importance for family sociality. Occasionally, diverse family members included the girls’ uncles expressed these ongoing and complicated commitments of care as a rather straightforward formula that differentiated between being a ‘good’ (*khub*) or a ‘bad’ (*bad*) Muslim. The emphasis was often put on the actions and morality of women. Rustam told me that if Mansura was a good step-mother, she would receive *savob* or religious rewards, and if she was a mean step-mother who usually beat her step-daughters she would have to answer God for such disgraceful behaviour during the Day of Judgement. In the future, however, family members were foreseeing

that the 'wild' girls could be disciplined through more violent, yet relatively accepted form of touch such as smacks by Mansura if necessary. The day-to-day work of shaping family sociality involved not only Mansura, but all of those living in the flat including Rustam and his wife. Mansura, for instance, was seeking to become closer to Rustam's wife, Kholai Malika and Jamsheed's sisters. Mansura used to offer the women foot-massage or plucking their eyebrows. Healing massage and brushing, plucking or stroking hair among women were other ways of bonding and becoming intimate and affectionate. Hence, caring tactility was considered a pre-requisite for love and affection to emerge and for the new family to get closer. Additionally, affection was necessary for further obedience and discipline to be imposed.

Touch is considered to be an imperative aspect of family sociality is openly talked about in emotional, religious and more practical terms involving a progressive and cautiously intended assimilation among family members. If this was the case with the bonding of Mansura's new family, different processes were at stake in the estrangement between Jamsheed's and her deceased wife's family. In what follows I highlight that hostility and resentment are also intrinsic parts of more harmonious episodes of intimacy, and that distance and separation are salient aspects of the qualities of touch.

#### *Space, distance and estrangement as intimacy*

In her work on Japanese families, Tahhan (2014) analyses the relations between parents and their children under the age of five that offer possibilities of closeness and intimacy through touch, for example, during co-bathing or co-sleeping. When children begin to attend school, they start to be socialised into adulthood in ways that highlight the necessity of not touching others including family members. Thus, the focus on intimacy and care in family life shifts from touch and closeness towards physical distance. According to Tahhan, the feelings occupying the physical space between Japanese parents and their children becomes more relevant to developing diverse forms of intimacy. Borrowing from Tahhan her emphasis on the physical space of separation between two or more members in a relation that, nevertheless, can be affected by intense forms of intimacy, I turn to analyse the separation between mother-in-law (Kholai Dilnora) and son-in-law (Jamsheed).

Before Tahmeena's death, her mother, Kholai Dilnora, used to spend days on end in Jamsheed's house in Kulob city in order to look after her own daughter. Previous to that, Tahmeena had lived at her mother's house in Dushanbe for nearly a year. But when she learnt that her illness was terminal, she decided to spend her last months of life in her in-laws' house in Kulob city. Tahmeena suffered intense pains, and could barely sleep, eat and walk – let alone look after her three small daughters. This is why Kholai Dilnora, Tahmeena's mother, used to arrive from Dushanbe and help Tahmeena's in-laws with her terminal-care.

Jamsheed's mother, Kholai Malika, and Tahmeena's mother, Kholai Dilnora were familiar with one another, but in other circumstances, they would not be part of the same household or cohabit for considerable periods of time. Similarly to most brides in southern Tajikistan, when Tahmeena got married to Jamsheed, she became a *kelin* or daughter-in-law in Jamsheed's house. As such, she was supposed to be under the full control, responsibility and care of Jamsheed's parents. Tahmeena's condition and the fact that her mother lived in Dushanbe (and had to travel between 3 and 6 hours to Kulob, and stay some nights in each visit) combined with Jamsheed's low-income and the poor health of Kholai Malika, played an important role in the decision that both families made to allow Kholai Dilnora to spend long periods of time in Jamsheed's house. On the one hand, Kholai Dilnora (mother-in-law) and Jamsheed (son-in-law) became more emotionally attached to one another, as they put it to me one day, suffering the misfortune (*gham*) of Tahmeena's fate. On the other, the emotional, practical and financial support that Tahmeena's mother offered was not only a source of support, but also of tension between both families.

The complex intimacy between mother-in-law and son-in-law continued growing after Tahmeena's death. In southern Tajikistan, funerary and mourning rituals involve a one-year period in which the closest relatives of the deceased offer a weakly meal (*non*) for neighbours and acquaintances after the Friday sermon has been delivered at the local mosque (cf. Abashin 2006). Hence, Kholai Dilnora and Jamsheed met almost every week after the Friday *non*. Remembering Tahmeena in each other's company, Jamsheed told me once, helped them to come to terms with their loss. At the same time, the mourning rituals put extreme economic pressure on Jamsheed's and Tahmeena's paternal families, and discussions among them about money to pay for the *non* and for the debts that resulted from Tahmeena's medical treatment became more and more frequent. Jamsheed's family then began to emphasise the end of the association between the two families: when I asked Kholai Dilnora and others if Jamsheed was still her *kheshu tabor* (relative, kin), I received similar responses such as Jamsheed's father explanation:

'Tahmeena's relatives are not anymore our relatives. If Tahmeena was Jamsheed's cousin or a blood-relative (*kheshu taboru nazdik*) we would be related as *kheshu tabor*. But we are not blood-relatives. Eventually she [Kholai Dilnora] must stop coming here to our house.'

One day, soon after the last *non*, Jamsheed suddenly informed Kholai Dilnora about his forthcoming marriage to Mansura. These news, Jamsheed's mother told me, broke Kholai Dilnora's heart to the point that the elderly woman fainted on the spot and did not fully gain consciousness for three days. In her three-day sleep, Kholai Dilnora shouted many times the name of her deceased daughter, Tahmeena, and also saw her in her dreams beating with a stick the feet of her former father-in-law, Jamsheed's father. Kholai Dilnora also told me afterwards

that during such awful days when she had fallen ill (*kasa*) and slept in Jamsheed's house she often woke up to find her feet very cold as Tahmeena had pulled her socks off. Once Kholai Dilnora recovered and was put in a taxi towards Dushanbe by Jamsheed, Jamsheed's mother also began to be affected by sensuous-dreams where Tahmeena, her former and beloved daughter-in-law, appeared. In those dreams, as I revealed at the beginning of this article, Kholai Malika physically felt Tahmeena's caressing and smacking, kissing and beating. Both Kholai Malika and Kholai Dilnora eventually told me that Tahmeena was angry (*ganda shid*) because Jamsheed had decided to marry Mansura. Although they understood that, according to the 'path of Islam', a widower has the right of marrying again soon after the funerary rituals, Jamsheed had whispered to Tahmeena's ear, hours before her death, never to marry again. Making such a promise to his dying wife, and soon afterwards breaking it, was seen as dishonest.

The separation that resulted from Jamsheed's marriage to Mansura did not bring to an end the intimacy built between (former) mother-in-law and her son-in-law. Although they were not *kheshu tabor* (relatives) anymore, or perhaps because of it, the space separating Kholai Dilnora and Jamsheed was being affected by mutual feelings of affection, animosity and, very importantly, betrayal. Jamsheed reported to me that he felt upset and diminished because Kholai Dilnora did not give him her blessing to marry Mansura even when he had been a committed husband who cared and looked after Tahmeena until her death, and fulfilled Tahmeena's death rituals accordingly. Then Jamsheed emphasised that Kholai Dilnora was a 'good woman' and that he felt a combination of pity (*dilsus*) and affection for her (*nags didan*). For her part, Kholai Dilnora told me that Jamsheed had been a good *domod* (son-in-law), and that she felt affection for him too to the point that she still called him *bachai man* (my son). Then her praise for Jamsheed turned bitter and she did not hesitate in calling him a 'bastard' (*padarinawlat*) for having given Tahmeena a hard life characterised by poverty and hard-work. Kholai Dilnora went even further to allege that if Jamsheed and his family had fulfilled their responsibilities as proper in-laws towards Tahmeena, they would not have requested so much money and help from her and her family since Tahmeena fell ill. Even more, Kholai Dilnora argued whilst sobbing, some of the cash, dry-fruit and flour that she had brought for Tahmeena's last *non* had also been used for Jamsheed's and Mansura's wedding as this had been celebrated less than a week afterwards. Although this accusation was not proved, Kholai Dilnora argued that Jamsheed would need to answer during the Day of Judgment for this despicable action. During these intense days of mutual accusations, Kholai Dilnora used to cry often and for long periods of time. Afterwards she usually needed to vomit because, she said, the tears had clogged her heart and stomach.

Beyond mutual accusations of duplicity and betrayal, the separation between Jamsheed's and Tahmeena's families point out towards the degree to which intimacy is entangled with processes of closeness and affection as well as estrangement and bitterness. The space of separation between mother-in-law and son-in-law signal not only one-sided enmity but also the intense feelings of affection previously developed for one another, and that, because of diverse circumstances including claims over unpaid debts or unfulfilled promises, had been alienated. Affection and animosity as important aspects of agonistic intimacy are not simply internal and individual emotions. Rather, the spaces of physical separation between mother-in-law and son-in-law are filled with enactments of pain, loss and suffering where the narration of physical pain in one's body, and sensuous-dreams where Tahmeena acts and performs diverse forms of touch that swing between care and punishment are salient. These are accompanied by powerful emotions that are mutual to visceral intensities and episodes of aching, vomiting and fainting. Whilst this separation may sign the end of a previous kinship relation, the fleshy feelings and the affected space between Kholai Dilnora and Jamsheed is the realm where intimacy and family life is also re-shaped in agonistic forms. Such forms are also evaluated by family members according to different registers of being Muslim.

### *Conclusions*

Touch and the intrinsic qualities of physical separation are noticeable aspects of family life that, so far, have been overlooked by existing literature on intimacy, kinship and family sociality in Muslim contexts. Such works have prioritise the analysis of patriarchy, the legal dimensions of kinship (especially marriage and divorce), and the relationship between husbands and wives. My ethnography moves away from a focus on romantic love or the sexual and reproductive aspects of intimacy, and sheds light on the importance of touch in bonding a step-mother with her step-daughters or in further separating a former mother-in-law from her former son-in-law. I argued that a cross-generational examination of different directionalities and intensities in which family relations are shaped is related to the concept of agonistic intimacy. Impending conflicts, resentment and reproach among intimates within families indicate paradoxical yet ongoing forms of intimacy rather than an abrupt end of relations between former *khesu tabor* or relatives.

For my interlocutors, diverse forms of touch offer the possibilities of shaping intimacy and a morally-informed family life in relationship to generalised notions about the ideal Tajik and Muslim family. The everyday fashioning of family sociality is informed by government discourses and policies that, to a great extent, are paralleled by the authorised religious authorities: they posit family structure and the morality of its members, especially women, as the fundament on which society and the whole nation rest. Absent in these discourses, however, are the ways in which touch and other sensorial experiences are recognised by

families in Tajikistan as central to both the hard work of achieving family harmony and, at times, to the searching of fashioning one-self and others as 'good' Muslims. Finally, I scrutinised the importance of fleshy feelings, sensuous-dreams and visceral episodes creating 'resonance' with processes of bonding and un-bonding family members. In southern Tajikistan, bodily sensations such as shaking chills or tickles of joy, and visceral episodes such as vomiting, fainting and sensuously-dreaming materialise the narrative, experience and performativity of the qualities of touch, and point out at the communal acknowledgement and recognition among intimates in the everyday making of family life.

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<sup>1</sup> Local terms are in Tajik language. Those preceded by 'Rus.' were uttered in Russian. I follow the anthropological convention and changed the names of my interlocutors.

<sup>2</sup> What I refer here as 'sensuous-dreams' are dreams that, according to the narrators, are accompanied by physical sensations – frequently of pain that continue after waking up.

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of the stigmatisation and medicalisation of cousin marriage see Shaw and Raz (2015). For a discussion of the political importance of extended families see Suad (1999).

<sup>4</sup> Most people in Tajikistan I have spoken to refer as either inappropriate (*bad*) or a sin (*gunoh*) the unintentional touching of men and women who are unrelated. However, Tajikistan's people do not abide to strict gender-segregation practices.