

## ‘We sit and wait’: migration, mobility and temporality in Guliston, southern Tajikistan

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### **Abstract:**

This article analyses how people in Guliston, southern Tajikistan, conceive of 'waiting' both for labour-migrants to return from Russia, and to realise the projects that these migrants and their families envision. In Guliston people talk about two contradictory forms of waiting: on the one hand they associate waiting with sitting and doing nothing. On the other, they equally emphasise the active roles they play to keep their village full of vitality while they wait for their migrant-relatives to return. Stressing the interdependencies between temporality and mobility, and the experiences of time and place by those who stay in their villages and those who migrate, this article argues that people in Guliston practice 'waiting' as active and creative processes that figure prominently in their production of specific forms of sociality and community, and their village as a dynamic place at the centre of a circulation of caregiving.

**Key words:** waiting, temporality, mobility, migration, village, caregiving, patron-client relations, Tajikistan

### **Introduction**

In a field in Guliston, a small village located in the lowlands of the Ali Hamadonii district in southern Tajikistan, Sulfiya, a woman in her mid-thirties, carried a pile of dung cake and cotton branches to her outdoor kitchen and smiled in my direction. Sulfiya and her three daughters, who were not older than ten years old, had been digging the fields, and pulling the roots and stalks of the dry cotton bushes out of the earth. The girls sat in a corner of the outdoor kitchen with their mother, pulled splinters from their cracked hands and drank a cup of tea. The girls told me that they were 'sitting' and 'waiting' for their father and uncles to return home from Russia. Rubbing her sore hands with cotton oil, Sulfiya told me that she

was happy that day because her husband, Ravshan, would be back in few days. She explained to me:

‘He has not been in the village for the last four years. When he left the last time to work in Moscow, Rustam, our youngest son, was only three years old. Look now, the boy even goes to school and does not remember his father.’

Sulfiya’s family’s story, of people who stay in their villages waiting for remittances or migrant workers to return, has become a very familiar trope in relationship to images of labor-migration in the world today. Based on anthropological research conducted among Sulfiya’s extended family and comparable families in southern Tajikistan, I center my attention on ‘waiting’.<sup>1</sup> In southern Tajikistan, people use two verbs indistinctively to denote ‘waiting’: the Tajik *intizor shudan*, and a mixed form with the Russian *zhdat’* (to wait) and the Tajik *kardan* (to do). Both are similar to the English ‘waiting for’ or ‘waiting to’ and refer to a subject who is expectant to act or to some particular event to happen while time goes by. The time of waiting for something to occur or somebody to act evokes an interval of suspension, and, in southern Tajikistan, this suspension is frequently associated with ‘sitting’ and/or ‘doing nothing’. As Sulfiya’s daughters put it to me after their long day of work in the cotton fields, they were waiting for their father while basically ‘doing nothing’. Beyond the narrative aspect of waiting and doing nothing, Sulfiya’s daughters and Guliston’s villagers more generally were usually busy.

The focus of this article is on *waiting for/to* as a form of temporality that, although apparently passive, entails active practices that mediate Guliston residents’ experiences of time and space. Concerning time, ‘waiting constitutes an active attempt to realize a collectively imagined future’ (Kwon 2015), and, in Guliston, this future is signaled by its inhabitant’s engagement in day-to-day work and conviviality, as well as in their expectations of finding sustainable sources of income in Tajikistan in order to stop the cycle of labour-migration

mainly of male relatives.<sup>2</sup> Thus I suggest that waiting figures prominently in Guliston's people's production of their village as a lively and dynamic space at the centre of circulation of care.

The continuous flows of caregiving allow disjointed families, separated mainly by migration, to keep a sense of co-presence through the exchange of objects (Baldassar and Merla, 2014), and, I also suggest, favours. In Guliston care is given to, and expected from family members, neighbors and acquaintances in practices underpinned by local notions of affection and emotion (*ehsos*), respectability (*ihitiram*) and reciprocity. Reciprocity is signaled by the prerequisite of helping (*yorda dodan*) or serving (*khizmat kardan*) others when in need, and the expectation of eventually receiving care from them too. Equally, caregiving occurs in the realm of patron-client relations where 'uncles' or patrons (Rus. *dyadya*) in a position to 'help' are expected to do favours to others through the exchange of goods, money or favours of a different kind (c.f. Ledeneva 1998). As Makovicky and Henig (2017:2) suggest in relation to post-Socialist contexts, favours and doing favours are a '*mode of acting*' and not simply a 'masked' economic transaction or an 'expression of goodwill'. Such modes of acting are usually 'mediated by the rhetoric of friendship and mutuality, making them less 'an economy' and more a system of sociality and moral aesthetic of action.' (Makovicky and Henig 2017:3). My interlocutors in Guliston conceived themselves as being embedded in multiple and unescapable networks of favours (*kor*); and, as one my informants put it to me, 'today you need a favour, tomorrow you do a favour'.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of the hierarchies and politics of doing and requesting favours, the flows of these modes of acting, and the embedded goods and money that come with them are entangled in the circulation of care in Gulistan - even if this circulation is often fragmented and unrequited. As Coe (2013) suggests, caregiving can be uncertain, uneven, hierarchical, and at times, also unreciprocated; in this context such forms of caregiving are implicated in the politics of waiting.

Obtaining a well-paid job back home is necessary to stop the cycle of labour-migration and thus to put an end to certain aspects of waiting; yet such goals are mediated within evolving networks of patrons and clients. On the one hand, while waiting for migrant-relatives to return to Tajikistan, Guliston's people attempt to cultivate suitable relations with relatives and acquaintances who might assist them to fulfil their expectations of finding a well-paid job. On the other hand, these forms of clientelism underpinned by the uncertain and volatile nature of caregiving are important forces implicated in obstructing people's plans and projects of resettling and thus, they end up producing further forms of waiting.

In what follows, I provide a more specific context of out-migration in Tajikistan. Afterwards, I examine waiting in relationship to relevant theories of mobility and temporality in order to frame waiting in Guliston beyond schemes that prioritise structure over agency. Finally, I proceed to the analysis of ethnographic examples concerning waiting for migrant-relatives to arrive to Kulob international airport, and the case-study of Navruz, one of the returnees.

### **Mobility and Temporality in Tajikistan: beyond the 'left-behind'**

Few countries in the world today generate a higher proportion of their gross domestic product (GDP) from remittances than Tajikistan. In 2015, it was reported that foreign remittance transfers to Tajikistan constituted between 40 to 50% of the country's GDP in the last decade. From the total of seven million inhabitants of Tajikistan, Russia's Federal Migration Service (2015) calculated that nearly one million live as migrant workers in Russia (c.f. Thibault 2016). Such data underscores the significance of migration to the everyday lives of both Tajikistan's people who migrate for work and those who stay.

The great majority of Tajikistan's labour-migrants are men, and in contrast to other contexts where women expect to migrate themselves to reunite with their husbands living abroad (e.g. Elliot, 2016), my interlocutors in Guliston did not aim to pursue such a family life in Russia.

The nature of this male-centred outmigration is one of the reasons why in policy reports there is a representation of Tajikistan's rural areas as semi-empty villages inhabited mainly by neglected women, elders and children who are prone to suffer depression because they wait and long for their relatives abroad and their remittances (e.g. Catrinescu *et. al.*, 2011; Chiovenda, 2013). Similarly, the families of Tajikistan's migrant workers who stay in rural areas are usually labelled as the 'left-behind' (e.g. Bennet and Falkingham 2013). Not only in Central Asia, but beyond, the category of 'labour-migrants' tends to highlight mobility, productivity and economic activity while the labels for those who do not migrate point to the opposite pole. In his work on migration in China, Biao (2007) noticed that those who are said to be 'left-behind' are frequently depicted in relationship to imaginings of immobility, dependency and passivity. In this equation we have the inaccurate combination of temporal waiting understood as psychological longing; the spatial association of such longing or doing nothing specifically with rural areas; and the sociological assumption that those who wait in a state of immobility are the 'poor'.

The categories employed to designate people who do not migrate have effects in the production of images of the places inhabited by labour-migrants' families. Bissell (2007:281) notes that much investigation on the relationship between mobility and immobility 'is often premised on a primacy of the mobile as the more desirable relation in the world.' (See also Verdery, 1996; Sheller, 2014). Similarly, there is an association of 'mobility' with modernity, and 'fixidity' with tradition, idleness and stillness (Abranches, 2013). Hence, the use of the word 'behind' connotes a temporal and spatial reference point that opposes the rural world of the migrants' home to the 'advanced' cities or 'modern' sites to which they travel for work (Archanbault, 2010; De Pina-Cabral 1987). 'Behind' also implies one-dimensional assumptions about how the possibilities of leading active lives and generating aspirations of individual and collective self-improvement are exclusively produced in places far-away from

the migrants' original home-towns. If the spatial dimensions of such villages and towns are associated to backwardness, abandonment and remoteness in relationship to outmigration and other forms of mobility/immobility, the temporalities of both those who stay and those who travel for work are equally linked to forms of tedium, passivity and disempowerment.

### **Waiting: theoretical approaches**

One of the main issues when theorising waiting as a specific form of temporality and that is regularly discussed in the existing literature on waiting is how to reconcile the interaction between agent and structure. This is especially the case when framing waiting within forms of modern and neoliberal times and those who wait as disempowered subjects that require action and disciplining. Numerous analyses have focused particularly on the lives and experiences of youngsters, for example in Egypt (Schielke, 2008), Ethiopia (Mains, 2012) and Georgia (Frederiksen, 2014) who do not migrate and who express feelings of boredom and frustration because of the unfulfilled dreams about social or spatial mobility and the monotony of their everyday life. Such forms of experience narrated by the youth in these contexts, these studies suggest, are embedded in wider frameworks of progress, modernity and linear time brought about by the emergence of capitalist and neoliberal subjectivities in which waiting is morally adjudicated to forms of unproductivity, idleness, and the inability to work – all undesirable aspects of life that must be tackled (e.g. Ozolina-Fitzgerald, 2016). In his book *On Waiting*, Schweizer (2008) argues that it is often notions of direction and intention that might turn waiting into forms of boredom or tedium, or, indeed, the sense of time-wasting. He suggests that this is especially the case when waiting is framed in terms of a 'culture of the instant' that is brought about by notions of modernity and accelerated social change (see also Musharbash, 2007). Viewed from such an angle, Schweizer suggests, waiting is associated with disempowerment and often ascribed to the poor, thereby reinforcing 'social and political demarcations' within societies (2008:7).

Following such a theoretical framework, Auyero (2012) studies the experiences of ‘the urban poor’ in Argentina who queue outside government offices to obtain services from the state, mainly in the form of ID cards and social benefits. Building on Bourdieu’s (1997) concept of habitus, and Foucault’s (1991) theories of governmentality, Auyero suggests that the urban poor ‘learn to wait and to *patiently comply with* the seemingly arbitrary, ambiguous, and always changing state requirements’ (2012:9). Waiting therefore disempowers the urban poor and fashions them as subjects who have to wait further: they become the ‘patients’ of the state. In the processes of shaping these forms of disciplining and subjection through compulsory waiting, the Argentinian ‘urban poor’ also become entangled in diverse forms of patronage in order to facilitate the solving of their cases.

Similarly to Auyero’s ‘urban poor’ (2012), my informants in Guliston often refer to themselves as ‘impoverished’ (*kambaghal*), and at times also as ‘poor’ (*bechora*, lit. ‘without means’). Located about 40 kilometers from the Tajik-Afghan border, Guliston is a village of approximately 3000 in the poorest republic of the former Soviet Union. Guliston residents, the majority of which are Muslim and either ethno-linguistically Tajik or mixed Uzbek-Tajik, are dedicated to herding, and the cultivation of vegetables for self-consumption and of cotton for sale either in local markets or, less frequently, to larger processing factories. Most of these factories however shut down during Tajikistan’s civil war (1992-1997).<sup>4</sup> Because of its location close to the Afghan border, Guliston residents inhabit a highly policed region: the area is portrayed as dangerous because of threats of Islamic extremism and drug-trafficking from Afghanistan to Central Asia (Lemon, 2015). As a result, these villagers are subjected to frequent check-points when travelling in and out the region even if they merely wish to move from their town to another. During my time in Guliston it was rare for town dwellers to protest against the policies of the government, which is overwhelmingly controlled by Tajikistan’s President and his relatives, or, at a more everyday level, to resist the activities of



the traffic-police officers (*gai*) and military personnel operating in the region's check-points and who often request bribes (*pora*) from drivers. Several of my friends and informants in Guliston had also experienced violence and hunger and the loss of close relatives during Tajikistan's civil war. Besides, the lives of Guliston's residents have also been deeply affected by the end of the socialist welfare state and its provision of stable jobs, pensions, and free education and health services.

Guliston's inhabitants are mainly elderly men and women, and women and their children who have at least one member of the family working in Russia. Additionally, there are men who having failed to keep a job in Russia have returned to the village. The reasons why these adult men in productive age resettle in Guliston vary. For example, the luckiest had been replaced by a younger member of the family in their capacity of breadwinners; others had become physically or mentally ill, or had suffered accidents or racist attacks while in Russia. Some others had problems concerning their legal status abroad. In short, as a 30 year-old man living in Guliston put it to me: 'some men like me cannot endure the suffering of living abroad'. Returning back home and resettling is also an enormous challenge for them because numerous men spend their hard-earned savings while attempting to find a good job or to start new businesses. Under such adverse circumstances, Guliston's people's lives are certainly embedded in registers of time underpinned by the state's and other institutions' exercise of power over people's subjectivities (e.g. Auyero, 2012; Bayart 2007). As Bear (2014) argues, however, while institutions indeed mediate divergent representations, techniques, and rhythms of time we must also take into account the great diversity of experiences of time and space coexisting within these overarching frameworks (see also Ibañez-Tirado, 2015a; Shulz, 2015). In such a light, it is conceivable to analyse waiting not only as a disempowering force, but also as active and productive forms of sociality and caregiving, or indeed, political action (Jeffrey 2010). Although my interlocutors in Guliston at times refer to themselves as simply

sitting and waiting, they frequently emphasise how busy they are with their daily work and with diverse forms of sociality in the village.

Anthropological works on Central Asia have highlighted the complex dynamics and types of sociality that inform the lives of people who do not migrate abroad. In this respect, Reeves (2011) has employed the term 'staying put' as a way of conveying both the agency of women who remain in the village of Sokh, Eastern Uzbekistan, and the fact that, to a considerable extent, the decision to stay is imposed upon them by their husbands or male relatives who decide to migrate for work. Furthermore, women and elders engage in day-to-day activities that sustain the village as a moral unit (Isabaeva 2011), invest it with notions of harmony and well-being (Féaux de la Croix 2016), and create a sense of family-hood against the backdrop of male out-migration (Cleuziou, 2017). Cleuziou (2017) also noticed among her informants in Dushanbe that the feelings of resentment that come with waiting for husbands to return, to call home or to send remittances are usually tackled through practices of all-female sociality. In the same way, Elliot's analysis on waiting, centred on Morocco, demonstrates that although women who stay in their villages wait to reunite with their husbands in Europe, their waiting is 'ripe with doings, purposes and activities' that involves rhythms of both frenetic action when women attempt to procure passports, visas and travel documents, and relative stasis when their attempts are halted (2016: 110). These analyses recognise the significance of the structures in which people who do not migrate are socialised, and, to a degree, also regimented and forced to further wait. At the same time, these works underline the importance of people's everyday activities in generating their own spatial and temporal frameworks in which 'staying-put' or waiting can be experienced and practiced as active endeavors. In Guliston, on the one hand, people are occupied by their search for constant conviviality and by their attempts to foster the right type of relations with 'uncles' or patrons to obtain the desired job and source of income. On the other, such forms of sociality are not

only seen as utilitarian, but also as important aspects of caregiving and of forming harmonious and intimate relations. Social gatherings, celebrations and meetings with relatives and friends are, as well, evaluated as important ways of tackling unwanted feelings of boredom, world-weariness and sadness (*zik*) vis-a-vis failed projects, poverty and hardship.

### **Waiting to obtaining a job in Guliston**

From 2014 increasing numbers of Tajik men have returned to Tajikistan because of the economic crisis in Russia which was caused partially due to the EU sanctions to Putin's government after the ongoing conflict with Ukraine over Crimea. This crisis has decreased the availability of jobs that Tajiks undertake, such as those in the construction industry, and has made the prices of basic foodstuff and rent in Russia very expensive in relation to the salaries of migrant-workers.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the Tajik currency has also exponentially decreased its value in relation to the Russian ruble. Because permanent settlement in Russia is not cited by the migrant-workers and their families as a sought-after future, numerous men returned to Guliston with savings in cash and the hope of starting a business or of obtaining a permanent state-job in Tajikistan's capital or a nearby city. In order to do so, they must be acquainted with an 'uncle' who facilitates their obtaining a job. For his or her assistance, the 'uncle' expects to receive in return another favour, goods and products that range from milk and potatoes to textiles and mobile phones, or usually money in cash (c.f. Niyozov and Shamatov 2006). I was told that to secure one of such positions, for example as a school teacher, the money offered range between US\$ 1000 to US\$2000 (depending on the qualifications achieved by the aspirant); US\$3000 to US\$4000 in the police forces (depending on the rank one aspires to); and up to US\$8000 as a beginner in the customs office. Such data is important if one takes into consideration that, at the time of my research, the average pension and monthly salary in Guliston ranged from US\$14.7 to US\$25.2 (Ibanez-Tirado 2015a), and

that waiting to save the money required to assure a job-position might take many years even if working abroad.

Because of this, some men who live in Guliston undertake badly-paid and intermittent jobs in local factories that process cotton, beer and bricks. Others remain unemployed or waiting to migrate to Russia. On the whole, there is pervasive lack of sustainable jobs. Those men who arrive from Russia with savings and have an entrepreneurial spirit invest in buying land to cultivate cotton, vegetables and fruits to be sold in local markets, to enter the so-called ‘cow business’ (fattening cows and selling them at a higher price in the region’s markets) or to rent a commercial place in urban areas to start internet cafes or ‘Limpopo’ – the generic name given to the new-fangled soft-play areas for children. Between 2009 and 2015, however, I have observed that most of my interlocutors in Guliston and more broadly, Tajikistan’s southern region, have failed to keep their businesses because soon after they start, they run out cash or lack the necessary protection of ‘influential’ relatives who might give them the necessary permits, utilities or tax-exemption to keep these businesses profitably running. Thus, the great majority of men who attempt to resettle back home are soon forced to continue working in Russia – and the cycle of labour-migration from which they say they aim to escape continues. Hence, their families in Guliston wait again for them to return, and the migrant-laborers themselves wait again to see their expectations of resettling come true.

Despite all these adverse circumstances, most of my informants in Guliston did not explicitly evoke narratives of waiting as being an inherently discomfoting and disempowering experience. This is not to say that they were unable to recognise or reflect upon their everyday problems and the forms of suffering these created. My interlocutors in Guliston have paradoxical and contradictory experiences of temporality. On the one hand they refer to themselves as ‘sitting and waiting’ (*meshinam va zhdad mekunem*) for remittances, for their migrant-relatives to return or for a good job to come about. On the other hand, Guliston’s

inhabitants equally depict themselves as energetic members of their society whose gatherings, parties, and family-visits keep their ‘beautiful’ village full of vitality, harmony and life while they wait for their migrant-relatives or the projects of these people to be realised. It is the disjuncture between these apparently contradictory experiences of time that waiting can be analysed as a productive realm through which village-life is invested with care even if migrant-relatives and their families also experience suffering, disappointment and failure of expected projects, as now I analyse.

### **Moma Faranges and Bobo Davlat: a family between Gulistan and Moscow**

In 2009 I became acquainted with bobo Davlat and Moma Faranges who, being children had arrived to the marshlands of what nowadays is Guliston in the late 1930s following the removal that the Soviet authorities had ordered of the inhabitants of villages located in the mountains. In his youth, bobo Davlat had worked as an engineer of agro-machines in a local *kolkhoz* whilst Moma Faranges gave birth to 12 children, and was in charge of the domestic work at home. By 2015, the couple, both in their 70s, had five of their ten adult children living and working in Russia. In 2010, when I visited them on a weekly basis, they had been waiting for four years for three of their sons to return to Guliston.

For years, the elderly couple’s sons used to call every week. On each occasion they explained that they could not travel to Guliston because they had just started a new job at a building site, or they had run out money to buy air tickets, or they had not finished processing their work permits that would allow them to return to Russia after a brief visit to Guliston. Every time I talked with Moma Faranges, her daughters and daughters-in-law in Guliston, they told me that they were just ‘sitting and waiting’ – as if their whole life was dedicated to wait and long for their migrant relatives. Yet, the verb ‘sitting’ (*shishtan*) in Tajik language can also indicate ‘domesticity’ or being at home (Whitsel 2009). Rather than remaining stagnant,

however, ‘sitting’ in Guliston involved daily domestic tasks such as cleaning, cooking and fetching water, as well as cultivating the fields of cotton or wheat and plots of vegetables, rearing children and meeting neighbours, relatives and acquaintances. Frequently, ‘sitting at home’ was also used to refer to the activities of housewives, and men or elderly people who were not formally employed, but who had remained active in the affairs of their village, neighbourhood or apartment block. Following this dynamic and open-ended connotations of ‘sitting’, ‘waiting’ is also locally understood as a practice through which villagers seek to cultivate continuous sociality with one another, to discuss and advance future family-projects and to plan life-times rituals such as weddings, circumcision ceremonies and other festivities such as the end of the Islamic month of fasting (*Eidi Ramazon*), or the Persian New Year (*Nowruz*).

Guliston’s inhabitants fostered specific types of social relations especially with the expectations of assuring that their migrant relatives, once arrived, would stay in Tajikistan through marriage, or/and a viable job or business enterprise – all secured not only with money, but also with and through the assistance of ‘uncles’. Moma Faranges, for example, while waiting for her sons to arrive from Moscow, was looking for a good plot of land that Navruz, one of her sons, could buy with his savings and start a new business – his own cotton crops or the so-called cow-business. Moma Faranges and her husband were also looking for a second-hand mini-van for the second returning son, Nodir, who apparently wanted to become a taxi-driver in the region rather than continue to work in Russia. The elderly couple also paid frequent visits to relatives and acquaintances in Dushanbe in order to facilitate the release of a certificate of higher education for Farid, another one of their migrant-sons who had commenced his studies in economics before working in Russia, but who had not succeeded to graduate. Farid wanted to become a police man and this undertaking required a university

degree and a substantial cash bribe to an acquaintance who had promised to facilitate Farid's job within the headquarters of the regional police.

These activities that kept Moma Faranges and Bobo Davlat busy point, first, to the ways in which 'absent' migrants fashioned a proxy-presence in their family's affairs in Guliston. Such proxy-presence assure their constant dwelling in their community of origin (Dalakoglou 2010). Their remittances were turned from cash into objects for the circulation of care such as certificates of higher education, plots of land, vehicles and foodstuff which, in turn, could afford the cultivation of social relations, the payment of bribes, the reciprocation of favours, the celebration of parties and social gatherings, and the planning of new-flanged projects. Although the display of the migrants' success abroad in brand new or refurbished houses was a sign of masculine achievement and commitment towards their families living in Guliston (e.g. Osella and Osella 2006), the remittances were also used to both allow families to pay their everyday expenses, and fashion future projects. All these activities of socialisation, mediation and often coercion embedded in patron-client relations were possible only thanks to the remittances that Moma Farange's sons sent from abroad. Equally, the possibilities of staying at home and stopping the cycle of labour migration for her sons were possible only thanks to the efforts of her and her husband in maintaining or forming new relations with the appropriate people who would be in the position to help them in their new ventures. The informality of the sites where actually important negotiations took place was, in part, the reason why at times Guliston's residents conceived themselves as doing 'nothing' or simply 'waiting' – as I will elucidate in the following section about waiting at Kulob International Airport. This type of informal encounters in commonplace and frequently public spaces reveal Guliston and similar surrounding rural settlements not to be dull and isolated villages, but rather what Baldassar and Merla (2014) conceive as centres for 'circulation of care'. In the next section, I analyse these aspects with the ethnographic example of Moma Faranges

and Bobo Davlat who waited in the waiting hall and car park of the local airport for the sons of to arrive from Moscow.

### **Waiting at Kulob International Airport**

One night, I went with Moma Faranges, Bobo Davlat and their relatives to pick up their three returning sons from Kulob airport – located 40 minutes-drive from Guliston.<sup>6</sup> The flight was supposed to arrive at 10:00 pm but because of an inexplicable delay, we waited without much information until 6:00 am the following day. During that time, we, together with many other families, hung around the waiting hall and the car park of the airport and talked about how excited and nervous they were about their relatives returning from Russia after years of receiving telephone calls, letters, parcels of gifts, photos and remittances.

Airports are, according to Augé (1995), predetermined spaces detached from surrounding localities by their similarity to other ‘non-places’ that entail a global identity in the homogeneity of shops, restaurants, toilets and check-in desks. Yet Kulob airport was far from being dissociated from the ordinariness of the sociality in this region. Nor was it, as Hylland Eriksen and Døving (1992) suggest, a ‘predictable’ setting where ‘the kinds of interaction taking place are identical from hour to hour, from day to day’, and where time ‘is a scarce commodity’. Although Kulob airport is relatively dilapidated and located in a rural area often described by numerous Dushanbe’s dwellers as being ‘remote’ or ‘in the middle of nowhere’, it is also a lived place, and it is perceived and created by its occasional rural dwellers ‘through their practices of sending and receiving objects across borders’ (Abranches 2013: 511). Despite of the distance separating them, families kept a proxy-presence and a sense of family-hood through the exchange of objects, favours and the cultivation of social relations as forms of caregiving.



Accordingly, the people waiting in this provincial airport took this time as a precious opportunity to further cultivate relations with relatives, friends and acquaintances arriving from nearby villages and towns. Kulob airport receives international flights from diverse cities in Russia, making it possible for people in the eastern Khatlon region, where Guliston is located, to welcome their relatives without having to make the three-hour journey to Tajikistan's capital city. In Dushanbe's airport, they told me, there are too many strangers, foreigners, soldiers, politicians and harassing policemen and 'KGB spies' (Tajikistan's secret police); as a result, waiting there is 'not interesting' because one cannot socialise easily with strangers or 'sit and wait' in 'peace' (*tinji*). My interlocutors preferred to go to Kulob airport (even if the roads from their villages to Kulob were in bad condition) saying that visiting this airport is like attending a large social gathering (*tashkili*) or party where many people know one another. That night, for example, while waiting for Bobo Davlat's sons in the airport's car park, and in a mixture of jolly and serious talk, the negotiations for arranging a marriage between one of the returnees and the daughter of one of Moma Faranges' relatives living in another of the region's village began. Bobo Davlat also took the opportunity to talk to a cousin who owed him money. Bobo Davlat told me that he had gone to his cousin's village several times trying to get his money back but the man had hidden in his house. That night, both men had unexpectedly met at the airport were both were waiting for their respective sons.

In this airport, waiting was seen as an opportunity to encourage socially engaged lives and for the exchange and circulations of care in the form of news, products, money, documents, gifts and favours. People in Guliston and Kulob city told me that most families who go to the airport to wait for their migrant-relatives also take the occasion as an opportunity to exchange local products with relatives and friends from other districts who they do not meet frequently. On that occasion, we took a sack of potatoes from bobo Davlat's plot and received from his

relatives a sack of apples from a village located in the mountains. In addition, there are people who go to the airport to receive from or send to their relatives working in Russia parcels, money, letters, and foodstuff which is usually carried by passengers as a favour or in exchange of a small fee. That night in the airport I observed baby-walkers, suit-cases, cash and cameras being delivered from Russia. On another occasion, I accompanied a friend to the airport who asked a passenger to deliver cans of home-made jam from their house's raspberry tree and bread freshly baked by their mother to her brothers living in Ekaterinburg, Russia. As my friend explained, the fact that these foodstuff had been prepared by their mother meant that a specific taste of the family-home would reach her brothers abroad, and this would ensure that they kept waiting for better times to come, and patiently enduring (*tokat owardan*) the harsh working conditions that often lead them to despair and world-weariness (*ziq*) when far from home. Indeed, during times of hardship, patience (*sabr*) and endurance (*tokat*) were highly valued as religious virtues that Guliston's people should aim to foster while waiting.

When Bobo Davlat and Moma Faranges' sons finally arrived on the flight from Moscow we had meanwhile participated in conversations with friends and relatives whom they had not met in years. Waiting at the airport had given Bobo Davlat the opportunity to claim back money from his cousin. I had also observed their informal conversations embedded in dynamics of patron-client relations, about the repayment of debts, the possibility of obtaining a job in the passport office for one of the returning sons, or the matching of one of the sons to a local girl. Such type of sociality and caregiving made possible the fashioning of Guliston as a dynamic and lively place that often was described by people as harmonious and beautiful. Equally, however, the complexities of day-to-day interactions embedded in patron-client relations were implicated in hampering the attempts that people make to find sustainable sources of income. In the next ethnographic example, about one of the returnees, I will show that patron-client relations can be a major source of vulnerability, and that this is of vital

importance because such relations can become a source of prolonged and unwelcome forms of waiting.

### *NAVRUZ*

‘I want to find a good girl to marry. I also want to build a house and give a good life to my wife and my children. I want to work nearby my village and stay in my homeland’, Navruz told me one day. Navruz, one of the sons of Bobo Davlat and Moma Faranges, left Tajikistan for Russia five years before our first encounter in 2009. Navruz assumed his father’s role as the family’s main bread-winner by travelling first to Dushanbe and then to Russia at the age of 17. It was also widely known in Guliston that Navruz had worked extremely hard in Moscow in order to help his eldest brother be released from jail by paying a bail of, they said, nearly USD\$10 000.<sup>7</sup> At the time of his first return home, Navruz was 23 years old and had arrived with some savings to be used to organise his wedding and start a business that would allow him to stay in Tajikistan. On that occasion, and in 2013 when I also visited him in a town near Moscow, he explicitly told me that he was tired of working and living in Russia and had, unsuccessfully, tried many times to resettle in Guliston.

One day in 2009, Navruz met an acquaintance (*shinos*) from the time he worked in Dushanbe’s markets as a teenager. The man, whom Navruz said he trusted, was an administrator working for a cotton company in the town of Danghara, known across the country as being the hometown of Tajikistan’s President Emomali Rahmon. Navruz’ acquaintance introduced him to some ‘relatives of the President’, who rented to him a small factory in a town near Guliston. By ‘relatives of the President’ they did not mean that, in reality, these men were kinfolks of Emomali Rahmon. In southern Tajikistan, influential people who act as ‘uncles’ in patron-client relations, especially those who hail from the district of Danghara and work in powerful positions in government offices, often refer to

themselves or are introduced by others in this way. Regardless of their genuine kinship relation with the President or otherwise, Navruz and his brothers perceived the factory owners as ‘big’ (*kalon*) and ‘powerful’ (*baquat*). The factory in question was a massive but largely abandoned estate in which machines, tractors and other vehicles for the cotton and cotton oil industry had been assembled during the Soviet period. The space Navruz obtained was a garage within this enormous estate. The garage contained a second-hand machine used to squash cotton seeds and make cotton oil for Navruz to sell in the markets. Once the oil had been extracted from the cotton seeds, the residual material was sold as cattle fodder.

At first sight, the deal seemed straightforward: Navruz had to buy the machines from his acquaintance but would not have to pay taxes for the first few months of his business. Once he started making a profit by selling oil and cattle fodder, he would share it with the owners of the factory and, because the owners were ‘relatives’ of ‘influential’ people, they would help Navruz to extend his networks of customers beyond Guliston and the nearby town of Farkhor. The cost of cotton seeds and all other expenses would be covered by Navruz himself. The young man was overjoyed with the deal and his new business that would involve managing, administrating and working in the factory. He took the cotton seeds from his father’s land and also bought several tons of seeds from relatives in the village.

After a little while, however, Navruz showed signs of irritation and tiredness. Despite the fact that the squashing machine only worked intermittently because the electricity supply was irregular, he used to spend the whole day in the factory. As in relationship to many other ordinary activities in Guliston, the temporal rhythms of Navruz’ job were underpinned by his waiting for electricity or water to be supplied by the regional government at specific times of the day – usually one hour in the morning, one hour at lunch time, and two hours in the night. ‘The cotton seeds are getting wet with all those holes in the roof and this rain. There is no electricity!’ he complained to me after one month of having opened the workshop. If he was

lucky enough to have electricity for a couple of hours, he obtained a dark smelly liquid from the cotton-seeds. I saw him producing 20 litres of the murky oil, which was consumed at home because nobody wanted to buy it as customers said it was not pure enough. Once when I visited his factory, a desperate Navruz told me: 'What can I do? I sit and wait'. After three months of having started to operate, the factory finally closed down.

After the factory's fiasco, Navruz was busy again trying to get engaged. The problem, however, was that he had spent most of his savings in the factory's machines and the cotton seeds, and had no money left to offer as bride-price. All he had left was the piece of land that he had, luckily, bought before starting the factory. '1500 dollars for this week, the bride's family requested, or they will get her engaged to her cousin. I am penniless!' Navruz explained to me desperately. He tried to gather money from friends and relatives whom he had helped previously both in Guliston and Moscow. Everybody replied that they had no cash; some of them even denied that they had ever taken money from Navruz. Having to postpone his engagement, the young man told me that he felt gloomy and betrayed by his acquaintances, and tired of the continuous sociality in search for favours from others that, at the end, had brought him 'nothing good'.

In a context where very few individuals trust banks and where the great majority of Guliston's people procure loans in cash from relatives and acquaintances, Navruz was forced again to seek forms of conviviality that involved a distant uncle who could help him. Days after and with many difficulties, Navruz and his family succeeded in gathering the money for the bride-price as a favour that Navruz' uncle did to him while expecting that in the future Navruz or his family would reciprocate the favour. More specifically, Navruz' uncle was waiting for one of his sons to travel to Russia for work. As Navruz was well-known for being caring and responsible, the uncle expected Navruz and his brothers would welcome his son on his arrival to Moscow, as well as the full repayment of the loan. Although the engagement

went ahead with the cash provided by the uncle, Navruz and the bride had to postpone their wedding celebration for two more years because they did not have enough money for the party. The lack of cash and a sustainable job imposed further waiting to the young-couple. One week after the engagement, Navruz and three of his brothers were bidding their farewells in Kulob airport again. The brothers had spent all their savings over three months in Guliston without having been able to secure a sustainable source of income, thus they were flying back to Moscow. Acknowledging the uncertainty of her sons' next return, Moma Faranges told me with tears in her eyes, 'Navruz will come back for his wedding in October. Oh God, give me endurance!...We sit and wait'. Navruz returned to Gulistan 18 months later only to get married before leaving again to Russia.

Navruz' tory points toward the paradoxes of waiting as a set of activities that entail both harmonious and antagonistic types of sociality with family and acquaintances embedded in a context where patron-client relations are necessary to make progress in the procurement of earnings. The same type of sociality that is cultivated in Guliston by Navruz and his family with the aim of ensuring him a sustainable job or a speedy wedding is also implicated in his return to Russia as a labour-migrant, especially because Navruz was unable to recover money from his former debtors, or, previously, to secure continuous electrical supply to the factory from the same so-called 'influential' individuals who rented the garage to him in the first place. Certainly, my interlocutors in Guliston recognised that they were aware of the persistent possibility of failure in all the initiatives that they undertook and forged throughout their day-to-day socialisation, including the cultivation of networks in patron-client relations, the payment of bribes, or the exchange of favours and goods. Sending remittances, planning for the future and joining new endeavours did not provide Navruz and his family with guarantees that their expectations would ever be realised. Instead, the fact that most of the time such enterprises did not succeed when they were planned to do so were connected to the

prolongation of cycles of labour migration and thus of unwelcomed periods of waiting for relatives to settle back home.

This dimension of the lives of Guliston's residents can be encompassed by Auyero's argument of waiting as a process *'in and through which political subordination is reproduced'* (2012:2). However, Navruz, as well as many of my other informants in southern Tajikistan, do not simply 'sit' passively and wait. On the contrary, they often stressed to me and to one another that they are compliantly waiting not because they are poor and disempowered. Rather, patience (*sobr*) and endurance (*tokat*) while waiting, and not complaining 'too much' about hardship and unfulfilled dreams, about the suffering produced by longing and by world-weariness, and by harsh economic and political conditions are virtues that they cultivate as part of their attempts to lead meaningful everyday lives (Ibañez-Tirado 2015b). As Qureshi (2013: 133) puts it in relation to her work with Pakistani women in the UK, these virtues 'were the desired state of bearing suffering'. In Guliston, this state of patiently waiting was regularly discussed in relation to piousness (*taqwa*) and to being a good Muslim (*namozkhonda*). Accordingly, people expected to receive religious rewards (*savob giriftan*) from their forbearance and perseverance. Hence, waiting played a crucial role in Guliston residents' notions of being human and Muslim, in their everyday relations within their families, in the production of their village as a vibrant space, and in their interconnection with those living abroad through acts of care.

## **Conclusion**

In Samuel Becket's play *Waiting for Godot* the main characters, Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for a man, Godot, in a setting where there is nothing to do, nothing happens and nothing is certain. Vladimir and Estragon are not even sure who Godot is, why they are waiting for him or whether they are waiting in the right place. At times, their waiting is interrupted by different characters, one of whom informs them that Godot will not come

today but tomorrow. The men keep waiting until the point when they decide not to wait any longer - but they do not move from their place either. In this deceptive absurdity, we see Vladimir and Estragon in their apparent nothingness performing trivial activities such as taking a boot on and off, or talking about turnips and carrots and suicide. Becket's play leaves us with the uncanny of wondering what is waiting and when waiting begins and ends. After all, waiting cannot be completed with the 'for' or 'to', and as Vladimir and Estragon remind us, such apparently empty time is brimming with doings.

Through an analysis of ethnographic cases from Guliston, I have explored waiting as a set of active and creative temporalities involving socially encouraged forms of conviviality aimed at fashioning the meaningful daily lives that Guliston's residents cherish and value regardless of diverse forms of subjection, suffering and hardship they also experience. These forms of sociality and caregiving include joyful and informal gatherings, as well as the cultivation of networks of favours and the expectation of reciprocity that are fundamental to the production of new family-tasks and ventures funded mainly with remittances. At the same time, I have showed that relations of reciprocity embedded in patron-client relations are recognised as one of the main sources of danger, uncertainty and at times, failure, and are closely implicated in forcing people to wait for their projects to come true.

The local notions and experiences of waiting cannot be disentangled from the specificities of the Tajik state characterised by overwhelming political and economic power in the hands of a small group of so-called influential people, or, on another level, from 'uncles' who can potentially help with or ruin one's projects. In this sense, the forms of waiting in both the airport and Navruz' factory are perceived as being imposed upon them. Waiting for migrant relatives at the airport was talked about as being produced by the lack of an effective welfare state and sustainable jobs. Equally, waiting for electricity to be supplied to Navruz' factory was regarded as being pressed upon him by the national government that, without consultation from or attention to the affected people, decides when and for how long to supply utilities especially in winter. The feelings of being forced to wait in diverse circumstances, and in apparently inconsequential places such as a house, a run-down garage or the carpark of the local airport are closely related to people's association of waiting with 'sitting' and 'doing nothing'. Simultaneously, Guliston's inhabitants usually put an emphasis on the active roles they played in fashioning new projects and endeavours. In addition, my interlocutors regularly appealed to patience and endurance not merely as dispositions of compliant subjection to the harsh conditions in which their lives develop, but as human and



religious virtues that were cultivated through keeping oneself busy with everyday interactions and the undertaken of new enterprises that might, or might not, come to fruition. Certainly, those who remained in Guliston were, at times, in the commanding position of encouraging and/or forcing their male relatives to return by facilitating their marriage to a local bride and/or by assisting them in securing sustainable sources of income.

Migration within nation-states or across international borders involves both diverse forms of fragmentation and the relentless production of daily life (Coe, 2013). I have argued that in order to understand waiting in Guliston, it is necessary to highlight the active attempts that people make on a day-to-day basis to cultivate socially engaged lives whilst envisaging future projects, even while processes of uncertainty and disruption resulting from migration or patron-client relations are also important aspects of their lives. Waiting thus can be seen as active endeavours that contribute to the production of Guliston as a dynamic place at the centre of circulation of care, and to shaping the rhythms of everyday life despite the dislocations produced by migration at other levels.

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<sup>1</sup> The main method to gather data for this article was anthropological participant observation and open-ended interviews conducted during 16 months (2009 -2015) in the Kulob region of southern Tajikistan for a broader research project on temporality and everyday life. The research was conducted in Tajik and Russian language.

<sup>2</sup> The notion of temporality involves social meanings that vary cross-culturally, and ‘that views time as a symbolic process continually being produced in everyday practices’ (Munn 1992: 116). Munn correctly argues that people are *in* a sociocultural time of multiple dimensions, for example, of sequence, duration, past-present-future relations, time-telling, moral evaluations of the passage of time, the time imposed by working rhythms or authoritarian regimes among many others which interact together to give shape to temporalities.

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<sup>3</sup> *Kor* is a generic word in Tajik that in Guliston is used as ‘work’, ‘deal’, ‘affair’ or in this particular context, ‘favour’ or ‘action’.

<sup>4</sup> From the 1950s to the 1990s a diverse range of factories operating nearby Guliston specialised in the manufacture of agro-machinery and tools, and in the processing of cotton, salt, beer and dairy products.

<sup>5</sup> In 2015 my informants from Guliston working in building sites in a town near Moscow told me that their salary was, on average, 1000 USD. Their expenses including rent, foodstuff, working permits and transport exceeded 500 USD. Kumo (2012) estimates that out-migrants from Tajikistan send home approximately 70% of their income earned abroad.

<sup>6</sup> Located approximately 60 kilometres from the Afghan border, the airport in Kulob is currently used for civil purposes with daily flights mainly from Moscow and Ekaterinburg. Historically, this small airport has played an important role in the broader region’s affairs that are linked to global geopolitics: in the 1980s Kulob airport was vital for the Soviet operations in Afghanistan. Agreements signed between Tajikistan and Russia made it impossible for ISAF troops to be stationed in this geostrategic airport for the international operations in Afghanistan in the 2000s.

<sup>7</sup> Ravshan, Navruz’s elder brother, spent 5 years in jail after having been charged with narco-traffic – a type of crime especially common in these border areas. Navruz’s family alleged that Ravshan was rather a political prisoner after he was found with anti-government propaganda – a charge that is also not atypical in Tajikistan. Ravshan was ‘pardoned’ 12 years before finishing his prison-term apparently after his father and brothers gathered an unknown sum of money that they paid in bribes to secure Ravshan’s freedom.