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Being Natural and Supernatural: Animals between Spiritual Sense-Making and Environmentalism from 19th to 21st Century Central Asia

Abstract

The history of pastoralist and agricultural societies in Central Asia is intimately interlinked with the non-human world: non-human animals shared their habitat with humans, domesticated animals were used as meat, fur, milk and fuel suppliers, drought animals, beasts of burden, mounts and wealth. Wild animals were cherished as heralds of upcoming seasonal weather change, hunted for meat, fur, prestige and the alleged medical-magical faculties of their body parts or feared for their destructive potential. The close cohabitation of humans and non-humans is reflected in a complex cosmological order. Without denying the fundamental religious importance of canonical texts in an Islamicate context, vernacular texts that belong to the so-called "small genres" were more important sources of information for large parts of Central Asian populations, and shaped the spiritual map for the majority of Central Asians and guided them in making sense of their natural and supernatural environment.

This article examines Central Asian conceptualisation of animals as shaped by these texts as a departure to the mundane and spiritual relationship between human and non-human animals in Muslim Central Asia and explores how these different conceptual registers reverberate in contemporary, global debates on animal rights, sustainability and environmental protection.

Keywords: Human-animal relations, Central Asia, semantic repertoires, cosmologies, global discourse on environmentalism

1. Introduction

In the agropastoral continuum of Muslim Central Asia[1], animals have always been an integral part of human life. The history of pastoralist and agricultural societies in Central Asia is intimately interwoven with the non-human world: animals shared their habitat with humans, domesticated animals such as camels, cattle, horses, donkeys, sheep, goats and yak were used as meat, fur, milk and fuel suppliers, drought animals, beasts of burden, mounts and wealth. Their needs drove humans as much as they drove the herds in search of pasture, water and shelter. Wild animals were cherished as heralds of upcoming seasonal weather change, hunted for meat, fur and the

1 Muslim Central Asia is used here in an inclusive sense that encompasses the five former Soviet Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, as well as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and Afghanistan,

alleged medical-magical faculties of their body parts or feared for their destructive potential.

Human – non-human relations are not forged, imagined, maintained and evaluated in a void. They exist in social and environmental contexts constantly negotiated and contested. When the relationship between human and non-human animals is investigated in an Islamicate context, usually prime reference is made to canonical texts. Without denying their fundamental religious importance, it is however texts that belong to the so-called "small genres" (folk tales, poetry, codices of ethics, hagiographies etc.) that informed popular attitudes. Especially for non-elite parts of Central Asian populations, these texts were the chief source of reference because of their accessibility. Literacy and a thorough knowledge of classical Arabic were not required since these "small genres" were often read out loud and performed publicly in vernaculars. The texts were memorised, discussed and referenced, and developed in a close interaction of their written and oral variants.[2] They were thus of paramount importance in shaping the spiritual map for the majority of Central Asians and guided them in making sense of their natural and supernatural environments which were often conceptually closely interrelated.

This article examines the semantics and practicalities of Central Asian human-animal relations. It departs from the conceptualisation of animals as shaped by language and vernacular texts, especially 19th century codices of conduct from the farmers' milieu, and discusses the mundane and spiritual relationship between human and non-human animals during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Muslim Central Asia. It explores how different kinds of animals were classified locally and allotted a space in the spiritual mapping of the world. Finally, it will show how these conceptualisations and classifications reverberate in Central Asian responses to contemporary, global debates on animal rights, sustainability and environmental protection. Thus, it looks at the interface of traditions as discourse and practise, and at how these traditions are (re-)appropriated, re-enacted or discouraged vis-a-vis global concerns about human-environment relations.

What do I mean by referring to tradition? In the case of the post-Soviet Central Asian republics, tradition occupies an important space in the metapragmatics of identity politics. It promised, even in its folklorized or Sovietized variants, to fill the moral void left by the demise of the Soviet Union.[3] Tradition is assumed to point out a middle path, allowing for capitalist development of the independent republics while preserving "national peculiarities". It is, however, rarely specified in an active manner. Mostly, tradition is reduced to a homogenising, ahistorical and essentialist wildcard character that is most markedly defined by the absence of anything classified as Soviet. This notwithstanding, the public understanding of tradition itself is very Soviet, harking back to the paradigm of the unity of language, ethnos and territory during the Stalinist era. The term has shown a remarkable resilience to efforts directed at liberating it from this narrow Soviet ethno-national definition. Trans-local, cross-cultural

2 See Bellér-Hann 2000, Dağyeli, 2011, 52–60 and 2016.

3 Esenova, 2002, Cummings, 2010, Jacquesson, 2016, McBrien, 2017.

and particular traditions, especially where they transgress contemporary national borders are downplayed in favour of the respective national meta-narrative.

All four Central Asian languages taken into consideration here (Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek) translate tradition as something that is regulated by custom or some other authoritative power.[4] If we take tradition as a "pattern of thought and action" that semantically goes back to the word "track", looking at tradition in connection with animals broadens the picture beyond mundane human-animal relations in their respective geographical, social and temporal space to include world-views, cultural values and ethics.[5] So if this article asks about the discursive potential of traditional world-views to affiliate themselves to a globalised discourse on sustainability and environmentalism, the limitations of the term *traditional* have to be kept in mind.

In different non-Western countries, religious-spiritual concepts of animals and environment often provide a foil for local adaptions to a globalised discourse on sustainability and environmentalism in an effort to find an autochthonous contribution to this discussion.[6] Irrespective of how far historical attitudes towards animals actually match our contemporary concerns, past practices are brought into communication with recent academic concepts like the 'dwelling perspective' Tim Ingold proposed to refer to all living beings constantly and continuously create the conditions for each other's existence, or the NatureCultures concept introduced by Bruno Latour and developed further by Donna Haraway and others.[7]

Given the importance of human-animal relations for Central Asia, it is remarkable that they have been so little researched, especially in historical perspective. Similar to Ottoman Studies, the "environmental turn" has gained a foothold belatedly in Central Asian Studies.[8] Apart from ethnographic and folkloristic accounts,[9] the main statements, until recently, have been made in passing and reiterated well-known provisions from canonical Islamic texts. While these undeniably exert a fundamental in-

4 In Kazakh *dästür* (from Persian *dastūr*, model, rule, canon), in Kyrgyz *salt* (from Arabic *salṭa*, authority), in Tajik and Uzbek *urf-odat* (from Arabic ᶜ*urf*, what is public, known, and ᶜ*adat*, custom, rite, observation, also customary law).

5 Sax, 2001, X.

6 See for example Peschard, 2014, Münster, 2014, 2016a and b. An example from Central Asia may be the programs *Rukhani zhanghyru* (Spiritual Renewal) and the *Seven Facets of the Steppe*, both introduced by former president Nursultan Nazarbayev that accredit nomadic Kazakhs with living in harmony with their environment although these programs are not specifically environmental but deal with a large number of historical, cultural and spiritual achievements. The emergence of "Tengrism", a political, holistic ideology that emphasizes a cosmological world-view surfaced in the 1970s and gained momentum after the dissolution of the Soviet Union could also be considered a forerunner here (see Larouelle, 2007).

7 Ingold 2000, Latour 1991, Haraway 1999, Gesing et al. 2019.

8 See İnal and Köse, 2019, 4.

9 Snesarev, 1969, chapter 6, Baĭalieva, 1972, chapter 1, Sarimsoqov, 2005, Qurbonxonova, 2011. A growing body of high-quality anthropological and historical literature attests to the awareness for environmental studies but animals remain an exception within this literature.

fluence on normative matters, especially with regard to categorisations of animals as licit and illicit for human consumption, their impact on micro-scale, daily relationships with animals remains to be scrutinised.

2. The Semantics and Taxonomies of Human-Animal Relations

Understanding the cultural knowledge embedded in discourse is important for understanding the semantics of human-animal classifications and consequently for the sense-making of the world of a given community. Popular and scientific discourse, however, need not necessarily match but may establish contradictory categories that exist simultaneously to be activated at specific occasions. Contemporary biology and multi-species research alike agree on the fact that humans are just another animal and that there is no discontinuous boundary between humans and the others. It has become a trend in scholarly literature to locate impermeable conceptual boundaries between humans and animals in post-Cartesian Western societies, and contrast them with alternative conceptualisations from other places in the world, often in a slightly idealistic manner.[10] While the essence of this stance remains beyond doubt, questions arise as to the particularities. If we regard human-animal relations in Central Asia, certainly not a place that is conventionally seen as belonging to "the West" (and other regions could serve as an example here as well), we would be hard pressed to come across a non-binary categorisation of the animal world. In Central Asian languages, the distinction between human and animal is semantically and conceptually clear, anthropocentric and hierarchical. A human (in Tajik and Uzbek *inson* or *odam*)[11] who does not show appropriate manners can be scolded as an animal but an animal cannot become a human. It is not, however, that every non-human animal equally counts as an animal. So how are animals thought and talked about? The dictionary terms in different Central Asian languages go back to roots that mean 'alive' or 'animate'.[12] The word *jon*(*i*)*vor* and its variations that stem from the Persian word for soul, suggest that an animal is an enlivened being. This bears implications for some categories of animals as will be shown below. A Tajik monolingual dictionary defines animals (*jonvar*) as 'all that is alive with the exception of humans' which implies that plants are not seen as part of the animate world because, even though the definition does not explicitly say so, plants cannot be called *jonvar*.[13] Its monolingual Uzbek counterpart essentially echoes this terminology by defining *jonivar* as 'everything alive

10 See for example Papagaroufali, 1996, 240, Yates-Doerr, 2019.

11 It is no coincidence that the latter word derives from Adam, the first human being and first prophet according to Islam.

12 The Uzbek word *hayvon* originates from the Arabic *ḥayy*-: alive or living. *Jonvar* (in Tajik) and varieties, e.g. *jonivar* (in Uzbek) *zhanuar* (in Kazakh) or *janïbar* (in Kyrgyz) goes back to the Persian *jān*, a term difficult to translate that encompasses meanings of soul, spirit, and animation.

13 Nazarzoda et al., 2008, 601.

… with the exception of plants'.[14] Likewise, the omission does not mean that humans can practically be called *jonivar*. The definition of the second Uzbek term, *hayvon*, which is the one that is more frequently used, narrows the perception of what an animal is further down: An animal is 'every living being with the ability for moving and feeling, … every animal except humans'.[15]

Taking into consideration how humans assess the sensory faculty of an animal by default also highlights which species do not count as animal proper. Most importantly, these are insects which are, while belonging to the larger animal kingdom (*jonvar*), much more frequently called *hasharot*, the plural form of the Arabic *ḥashara* (insect), whose root means "gather, crowd". What characterises insects more than an innate soul or sensory faculties is their mode of "being" a crowd, an "activity-centred description" in naming an animal or an animal collective.[16] Similar to insects, birds are also separated from the main body of animal kingdom and treated as a distinct order.[17]

Domestic animals were considered companions (*mū'nis*) of humans. Qurbonxonova lists horse, donkey, cow, sheep, goat, camel and dog as such companions.[18] Again, it is noteworthy that birds like quails that were kept for entertainment but also farm birds like chicken are not part of this enumeration. With the exception of donkey and dog, the animals described by Qurbonxonova also constitute the five pasture animals that traditionally belonged to the livestock. They were called collectively *bes tülik* in Kazakh or *besh tülük* in Kyrgyz.[19]

Thinking about the ways animals are conceptualised within different communities in Central Asia also means taking into account regional or micro-scale differences. For all the commonalities among Central Asian communities, I certainly do not want to suggest that human-animal relations in this vast region can be adequately represented from a macro perspective. Geographical and social place matters, temporality matters, and individuality matters. While it was common that herds were made up from different grazing animals, their composition and the prestige animals held were not uniform everywhere in Central Asia. Cattle enjoyed high prestige among some communities while they were despised among others, probably reflecting their status as the species most vulnerable to harsh weather conditions in the steppe. Especially among Kazakh pastoralists of the larger Manghyshlak region, cattle were to be chased away when they crossed one's path while sheep were cherished as the true sustenance of people, supplying them with everything from food to tools.[20] Goats could be per-

14 Madvaliev, 2006, vol. 2, 106.
15 Madvaliev, 2006, vol. 5, 482.
16 Ingold, 2000, 174. See also Dağyeli, 2020, 91–2 on the example of locusts.
17 This could be a secondary phenomenon, however, influenced by popular taxonomies in Slavic languages according to which birds and fish are distinct from other animals, and entered Central Asian conceptualisation via the Russian language. Compare Wierzbicka, 2013.
18 Qurbonxonova, 2011, 15–52.
19 Sometimes, sheep and goats are lumped together in one category, which turns the expression into *tört tülik/tülük*.
20 Karutz, 1924, 52–3.

ceived as valuable, pure animals with 'beautiful eyes'[21] or as 'devilish' (*shaytoniy*) in contrast to the "heavenly" sheep that bring grace (*barakat*) to humans.[22] These short examples illustrate that the question of how animals were talked about and conceptualised was contingent upon specific localised economic, social and cultural preferences, but also upon a cosmology that situated animals in a number of roles. These were largely, though not exclusively informed by Islamic canonical and even more so by non-canonical, vernacular texts like exempla stories, ethical treatises, miracle narratives etc.

2. Of one Kind? Humans, Animals and the Cosmological Order

The close cohabitation of humans and non-humans is reflected in a complex cosmological order by which specific beings and their ways of 'dwelling'[23] exist in arrangements parallel to those of humans. There is ample evidence of the anthropogenic hierarchy of animals in different parts of Central Asia: Especially the traditional pasture livestock (horses, sheep, goats, camels and cattle) was often ascribed paradisiac origin or at least a close relation with the supernatural world. The livestock model of the animals forming a herd that belongs to someone who cares for its wellbeing shaped the perception of other angulates as well. For example, undomesticated ungulates are conceptualised as "God's flock", mirroring an individual's flock and thus underlying comparable restrictions of exploitation.[24] In ethical codices for professions (*risāla-yi kasb*),[25] vernacular treatises many of which deal with animals as part of the professional environment, animals were believed to have been formed in a divine act of creation from the same substance as Adam, the first human, a belief that has been described as an element of an animistic human-animal relationship by Descola.[26] In more than just one case, animals are actually conceptualised as being made of 'Adam's clay', i.e. the clay God used when creating Adam, 'Adam's stock' (*nasl*) or 'Adam's temperament' (*mijāz*).[27] This conception is not exclusive to Central Asia. Many myths of origin and similar narratives talk about the common genesis of humans and animals.[28]

Bestowing a supernatural origin on animals makes them neither human nor superior to humans. The very substance animals are created of underpin this uneven relationship. The horse, for example is conceptualised as being literally from the same (clay) stock as Adam. The shared substance between humans and non-humans suggests closeness and relatedness but also points to an inherent anthropocentric and hierarchical worldview in which the animals are subordinated. They are created from

21 Qurbonxonova, 2011, 35 who speaks from a perspective of Badakhshani communities.
22 Sucharewa, 1991, 84.
23 Ingold, 2000, 5.
24 Baĭalieva, 1972, 16.
25 See Dağyeli, 2011.
26 Descola, 1996, 87–8, 94.
27 See Dağyeli, 2020, 80, IVR RAN A 403, fols. 2a and 3a.
28 See for example Mundkur, 1994, 142.

the surplus, from what is left of the clay set aside by God for Adam and only after the first human was created.[29] Others, like sheep or cattle originate from paradise but do not seem to be related to humans by bodily substance. They exist in paradise and are bestowed upon a prophet, often Adam, to enable him to make a living after being dispelled onto earth. On a third register, the goat is not ascribed a shared genealogy with humans or paradisiac origin but a miraculous coming-into-existence by being born by a heavenly ewe.[30]

Even where humans and animals are created from the same substance, they nevertheless do not cross the conceptual boundary that separates them. The boundary is maintained by language. Spirits and other supernatural beings can talk in human language, animals, irrespective of their paradisiac or human-substance origin cannot. In many *risāla*-texts of agriculture, the first drought ox is sent from paradise by divine command but is not content with his lot. Being able to speak and instigated by the devil, he starts to argue with the first farmer, Adam, and refuses work. Only after an angelic intervention, he is made to work by (almost literally) the carrot and the stick, being promised a share (*ujra*) in the harvested grain and straw while Adam is given a stick to drive him.[31] In some of the versions of this story, the ox's tongue is sealed because he makes Adam cry unremittingly whenever he confronts him with the question why he, the ox, should suffer under hard labour when he had not committed any sin – contrary to Adam.[32] The ox, after being coerced into labouring, does his work ever after while silently repeating invocations of God (*zikr*). This is an echo of Sura 17, verse 44 of the Quran which says that everything that exists in heaven and earth praise God although human ears are not capable of hearing this. Modernist interpretations sometimes struggle to uphold the conceptual boundary between humans and animals when interpreting this verse as a proof that there is an innate likeness between humans and animals.[33] In the *risāla* genre that sticks closer to the Quranic text, the ability to say *zikr* does not define closeness among animate beings. A teapot simmering in another text is likewise accredited with saying *zikr* while it was clearly not perceived as a living being.[34]

The cosmological order also rationalises the existence of animals that are dangerous or harmful to human interests by allocating them a role in the divine provision: Rather than being enemies, locusts and other menaces to lives and livelihoods are cast as custodians of morality, generosity, piety and similar values. Human negligence or failure to meet these values, either in some mythical past or repeatedly, results in God sending forth animals (or other natural disasters) on a punitive expedition. Locust swarms were thus not classified as a pest (in contrast to 19th century colonial

29 Dağyeli, 2020, 80, MS IVR RAN A 403, fol. 3a.
30 MS AYI. 41-42.
31 MS IFEAC 171/1, fols. 3a–3b.
32 Krasnowolska, 1998, 125.
33 See e.g. Nazari Tavakkoli, 2013, 11 (no page numbers in the document).
34 Gavrilov, 1912, 13–6.

treatises) but as divine visitation, the proverbial "whip of God" or "God's soldiers".[35] Animals could likewise be a more subtle, symbolic warning to successive generations of humans. Marmots, bears and other animal were perceived as descendants of a particular human who had infringed upon God's orders in mythical time and were punished by being turned into animals.[36]

Yet, the cosmological order captures only one side of human-animal relations. The reality on the ground often looked much harsher than cosmological concepts suggest. By the late 19th century, large parts of Central Asia had been conquered by the Russian Empire, put under direct or indirect colonial rule and experienced far-reaching administrative, social and economic transformations. Colonial reports, if animals are mentioned at all, paint a dire picture of the lot of domestic animals. The Russian colonial ethnographer couple Vladimir Nalivkin and Maria Nalivkina described pitiable dogs that would not receive feed, mostly due to poverty of their owners who could and would not afford to give any nutritious foodstuff to their guard dogs.[37] Photographs and accounts from the colonial period attest to bony, drudging horses turning mill wheels or irrigation pumps. Surely, the colonial feeling of superiority and a cultural bias towards certain animals like dogs played a role here. By contrast, the Turan tiger that was hunted down into near extinction by Russian colonial hunting expeditions did not rouse any compassion. Nevertheless, it was not only colonial staff that found fault with the ways domestic animals were treated in Central Asia. Their sorry state was also criticised by the eminent Tatar intellectual and reformer, Ismail Gasprinskii/Gaspiraly (1851–1914).[38] Arguably, some animals were cared for better than others, depending on their owners' affluence, his or her inclination towards the animal, and general socio-economic circumstances. Meat and riding horses as well as other livestock destined for sale and consumption were cared for better than, for example, horses destined to turn a grinding mill.[39] After cotton monoculture held sway in the Fergana Valley as a consequence of a cotton boom in Turkestan driven by foreign demand, horse fodder became scarce around the turn from the 19th to the 20th century because the cultivatable acreage set aside for lucerne had been drastically reduced.[40] It was just not possible even for better-to-do people to feed their horses adequately. Thus, the specific economic circumstances of the late 19th century could at least partly be responsible for the attitudes towards animals that received criticism.

35 See Dağyeli, 2020, 93.
36 See Qurbonxonova 2011, 116.
37 Nalivkin and Nalivkina, 2016, 118–9.
38 See Abdirashidov, 2011, 86. Due to the pandemic situation in 2020, I was not able to access the original.
39 Barak, 2020, 55–6 points to the difference in the muscle-fat ration and consequently the taste of pasture and working animals. I am indebted to Onur İnal who directed my attention to this.
40 Meakin, 1903, 32–3.

3. Tradition and Knowledge Remodelled: Reconfigurations of Folk Medicine, Spectacular and Education

> On a sultry, summer day in the middle of the silent desert, an old man appeared like a mirage. His silhouette moved slowly, like a shadow, and while there was nothing frightening about him, he gave off an acid smell of sweat which disturbed the nose of a magnificent reptile that happened to lie across his path not far away. The cobra, which was taken by surprise, gave a threatening hiss and was ready to lash out at the old man but, at the last moment, she stopped …[41]

In his story 'The Death of the Snake Catcher' the exiled Turkmen author Ak Welsapar brings us home to a professional snake catcher at some non-descript time around the later Soviet period. This snake catcher has spent his whole life trapping snakes in the desert to use them for medical purposes. An outsider in his human community, which regarded him by a mixture of disgust, awe and fear because of his mysterious dealings with the poisonous animals, he shared his modest yurt with his snakes until he set them free one day. While the story itself has a sad ending, it draws our attention to a rather unusual human – non-human relationship that looks back on a long history in Central Asia, namely that of folk medical practitioners and snakes.[42]

Snakes hold a peculiar position. Similar to Welsapar's story, they are regarded with a mixture of fear and respect because of their venom, which is at the same time used for folk medical treatment. Meat and fat of the snakes are likewise used. There are resorts where people go to specifically for a treatment with snake matter. The consumption of snake meat is a topic not everyone in Uzbekistan feels encouraged to talk about because some people are not sure whether the consumption is considered licit in Islam. Others who are less concerned about religious reservations are still afraid that their interlocutors might be disgusted if confronted with stories about snake meat consumption. The fact that folk medical treatments with venom and other snake matter are considered traditional also opens up ways for thinking about animals and nature that are considered genuinely local. The following ethnographic vignette will provide an example of how traditional practice offers anchor points for much bigger deliberations on human-animal relations and environmentalism.

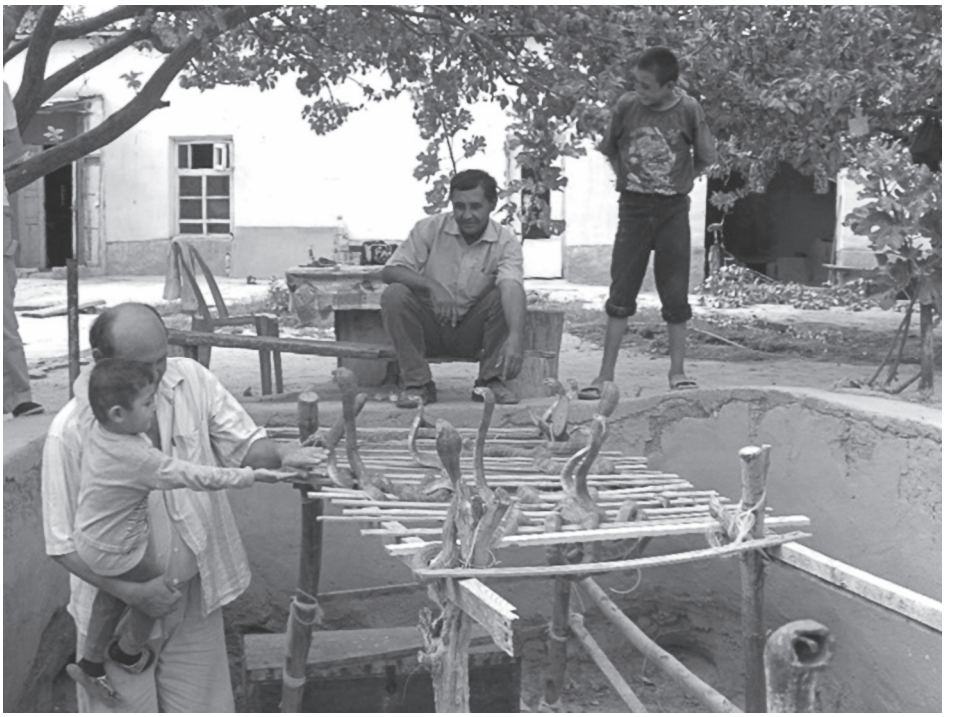
Back in 2008, I was in Samarkand with a colleague, teaching an intensive language course of Uzbek to students from Germany when a group of foreign geographers asked us for help with translation in a town some sixty kilometre south of Samarkand. As a compensation, they offered to introduce us to Anvar,[43] a local amateur historian with an amazing collection of historical objects and a reputation for treating

41 Welsapar, 2018.

42 It is difficult to say how long this relationship reaches back exactly as such topics rarely shine up in archival documents. Snakes are, however, among the animal forms in which the helper spirit of a folk healer can appear (Privratsky 2001, 222) and their meat is allegedly recommended by the famous Ibn Sina (Avicenna) as analeptic. In 19th century medical treatises, the use of their poison is mentioned (DeWeese 2013, 8).

43 Personal names have been changed for anonymity except in the case of public figures.

Figure 1. Alisher Yarmatov with his grandson in the cobra confine, 2008. Photo taken by the author



the sick with self-made herbal tinctures. Anvar received us in his shady courtyard (*havli*) where he had lovingly arranged his objects for us beneath tall trees in form of an open-air museum. While he was visibly proud of his collection, he told us that the region housed a more extraordinary healer than himself, a friend of his, whom we needed to visit as well.

So, on a sunny September morning, we entered the spacious courtyard of Alisher Yarmatov, a trained zootechnician and colourful personality who now works as folk medical practitioner (*tabib*).[44] Apart from this, he arranges spectacular films and photos of himself and family members playing with snakes, gives interviews about his work and the reptiles on local media, and disseminates knowledge about snakes for a general public.

In the middle of his courtyard, there was a hollow, in its midst a wooden rack, a meter or so away on each side from the edge of the pit. In the pit, there were dozens of cobras, at first rather uninterested in us. Only when Alisher stepped down to them

44 While the word *ṭabib* in its original Arabic usage has retained its meaning of doctor and transferred this meaning to our contemporary times, in Central Asia, *tabib* (and its variants) are used to designate a folk medical healer.

and heaped them up onto the rack, they started to hiss at us menacingly, half erected, and moved their heads in our direction. After this demonstration of power, they quickly lost interest in us again. Alisher took out one and, holding it close to his face, showed to us how trustful their relationship was. It had been years, he said, that he had been bitten although a mutilated finger of his attested to the riskiness of a snake bite. In his earlier life, he had drunk too much, he said and snakes would not tolerate the stench of alcohol.

Later, when we sat down for tea, he explained that he, a maverick, had always liked the company of snakes and felt a special relation to them.

> When I was a boy, I would sometimes escape from home to a cave in the hills over there. I would sit there and ponder over things that had hurt me in school or so. In the cave, there were snakes. Now, most people say a snake is cold. But to me, the snakes' faces were always warm (*issyq*, meaning inviting, welcoming).

Some years later, in 2014, I visited him again. His business had much expanded. He had published a booklet called *The King of Snakes or Doctor Cobra* and several videos on CD-ROM.[45] The cobras were now joined by some vipers (*cho'l qora ilon*), though in a different confine, a juvenile python and several specimen of desert monitors kept well away from the snakes. Although Alisher cared for all of his reptiles, his relation to the cobras was palpably different from that to the vipers. It was obvious from our conversation that he kept the vipers for their venom only but regarded them otherwise as ill tempered, aggressive and erratic. In his booklet, he nevertheless treats them in the same friendly manner as the cobras.

Alisher's engagement for reptiles differs evidently from what Western environmentalists and animal rights activists would recognise as a common cause, especially if one considers his public, spectacular performances with snakes that convey a circus-like atmosphere. However, his recognition as a *tabib* gives his multiple activities in schools, colleges, conferences, online and printed publications legitimacy to advocate for animal wellbeing different from that of urban, NGOs, some of them globally well connected. One could argue that Alisher's perspective on snakes and animals more generally is still a paternalistic one. One could question his snake shows or whether monitors indeed like to be carried around by him as he claims. He is, however, not being perceived as someone who tries to force allegedly alien concepts that origin in a saturated, remote world on Central Asians. As a *tabib* coming from a modest, small-town background himself, he does not make his audience feel deficient and backward. The journalist and photographer Nazira Boymurodova who has collaborated with Alisher reflects upon her own changing attitudes towards animals, instigated by Alisher's love for them:

45 Yarmatov, 2009. Meanwhile, there is a full-length film documentary on the Uzbek video blog Shov-Shuv Uz on him (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CD77-3q_fzI) as well as several of his shorter Youtube videos.

> When I saw Alisher's gentle, loving relation towards the snakes, let's say, my love for other animals, for other living beings, also opened up. At every step we meet, for example, be it an earthworm in the ground, be it a rose chafer, I started wanting to take a photo of all of them, with attentiveness, and to show them to people. I try to show to people that they are one bit of this animal world and nature with these photos because we, so I see this as my task, since we are [only] one part of nature, the animals have the same right as humans to live safely and freely in this nature. If we don't look at them with enmity but with friendliness, with the love innate to humans, we will also feel how the ecological situation improves.[46]

In combining his activity as *tabib* with his educational ambitions, Alisher deliberately draws on a register of traditionally established and sanctioned roles that allow him to spread knowledge and maybe even sympathy for snakes and reptiles more generally without being perceived as the expert outsider. He is concerned about the state of wildlife snake habitats but also takes local concerns seriously. His booklet is a mixture of memoirs, poetry and newspaper interviews. But it also includes science-based advice on how to treat snakes and what to do in a case of an emergency after a bite. This is no trivial matter in the countryside where people may run danger of being bitten by a snake while herding animals or fetching water. While sticking to registers that are familiar and considered legitimate, Alisher couples tradition and concern for the environment in ways that are acceptable to his audience.

4. Conclusion

In Central Asia as in other parts of the world, the degradation of the environment has caused increasing concern during the last decades.[47] This concern has long been dominated by cross-regional, anthropogenic disasters like the desiccation of the Aral Sea, the radioactive pollution of former test sites and uranium mines, or soil degradation due to salinisation, overgrazing and extensive use of pesticides. Against these menaces, human-animal relations have only recently come to the fore.[48] For a number of reasons, less educated, rural populations often regard activities of urban NGO activists with scepticism. There is a general distrust against urban experts who may visit briefly, ignorant of the difficult living conditions on the ground but finding fault with local practices. Communities are often irritated by postulations of humans as part of the animal world because it contradicts Islamic dogmas or other culturally shaped convictions, and by ideas about legally enshrined animal rights because they experience that even humans cannot satisfy their basic needs in a dignified way.

46 From the video Alisher Aka Yarmatov, minutes 4:03-4:54 (URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VwZUGkznWUg&pbjreload=101).

47 See for example Watters 2009, Wooden 2013, Stawkowski 2016, Wheeler 2018.

48 One example would be the MA thesis of Anastassiya Kulinova that deals with human-animal relations in the zoo of the Kazakh town of Karaganda (Nazarbayev University 2021).

There are, however, other ways of dealing with, and talking about the environment and human-animal relations that pay tribute to traditional concepts of animals, including their role in the natural and supernatural world. Reverberations of traditional human-animal relations as reflected in codices, folklore, hagiographies and similar genres can open up repertoires of regarding animals and join a global discourse in a distinctively local voice. In the words of Boria Sax: 'As we examine new ways of thinking about animals, it is best not to forget the older ones. These traditional perspectives are intimately linked to cultural values and practices that we have developed over millennia'.[49]

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49 Sax, 2001, X.

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