

Machine-Sewing Traditional Clothing in Tajikistan: National Fashion, Individual Artistry

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ABSTRACT

In today's Tajikistan, custom-made, self-consciously "national" clothes for women are the rule, rather than the exception. Consisting of a long dress or tunic and a matching pair of pants worn underneath, these contemporary and highly popular garments are known locally as *libosi milli*—national clothing. In this paper, I give an overview of the system of creating and wearing "national clothing" in contemporary Tajikistan, arguing that this clothing's grounding in tradition in no way negates its equally firm location in modernity. Using modern techniques and materials (of which I give a sampling), Tajik designers create clothing that is simultaneously modern, traditional, and highly personalized. I suggest that within this clothing system, tradition--incorporating both religious and national identities--and fashion are inseparable. I present the work of several female designers from Tajikistan--not famous fashion designers, but women who sew for themselves and their families or for customers who pay the equivalent of a few dollars for their services. I analyze how these artists synthesize multiple aesthetic preferences--national, religious, personal, historical, fashion-conscious--to create unique garments that situate their wearers firmly within Tajik national identity. This paper is based on my own fieldwork conducted in the summers of 2011, 2012, and 2013, as well as library-based research.

Background: The Concept of "National Clothing"

Tajik "national clothing" as a concept emerged from Russian and later Soviet ideas about national identity and its corresponding cultural markers, such as language, dress, and other highly visible signs. Dress in Soviet and post-Soviet Tajikistan has been politicized and made the site of debates over political and economic loyalties and moral and spiritual appropriateness. Beginning with a campaign of forced unveiling in 1927, clothing reform in Soviet Central Asia, targeted primarily at women, aimed to remove headscarves and alter clothing to create a new Soviet style that would represent a fusion between local Tajik and global Soviet styles, bringing Tajiks out of cultural "backwardness" and into a glorious communist future (Roy 2007). Today, debate continues over what exactly constitutes appropriate dress for Muslim Tajik women—must she wear long sleeves, or are short sleeves

acceptable? What type of head covering, if any, is appropriate? These questions are debated within Tajikistan at the national, local, and family levels.

Importantly, discussion of Tajik *libosi milli* (“national clothing”) mainly uses the term in reference to women’s clothing, particularly with respect to contemporary dress. The gendered nature of self-consciously “national” clothing has been observed in India and much of the rest of the world. In general, female bodies are made the site of “national” symbolic value, and women’s clothing retains distinctly “national” characteristics even as men adopt “western” styles (though Antonia Finnane suggests that the reverse was true for much of Chinese history; see Finnane 2008). This is also the case in Tajikistan, where men’s hats are often the only self-consciously “national” symbol displayed on bodies that are otherwise dressed in “European” clothing. While some women in Tajikistan do wear “European” styles, *libosi milli* is the preferred clothing for many, particular among conservative families and in rural areas. One seamstress I spoke to in 2013 went so far as to say that the loose, long-sleeved tunics or dresses called *kurtas* are the only religiously acceptable clothing for Tajik Muslim women (S. Mirzoeva 2013).

Libosi milli is alive and well inside Tajikistan, where it is everyday clothing for perhaps a majority of Tajik women. Consisting of a *kurta* and a matching pair of (usually loose, but sometimes fashionably tight) trousers called *pocha*, *ezor*, or *shalvor*, contemporary *libosi milli* meets cultural standards for modesty while also allowing a great deal of room for individual creativity in its design. Because dress is a major site of socio-cultural identity, a study of these garments and their roles in everyday life is an important component in understanding modern constructions of Tajik national identity.

Background: Locating Tajikistan

Tajikistan is located in Central Asia and bordered by China to the east, Afghanistan to the south, and Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to the north and west. With a population of around eight million, it is both the smallest and the poorest of the five Central Asian post-Soviet republics. Lack of economic opportunity at home, even for those with education and experience, drives many Tajiks, particularly men, out of the country to seek work. Overwhelmingly, Tajik migrants choose Russia and usually work in relatively low-paid jobs such as construction. While remittances from relatives working abroad make up an estimated forty-seven percent of Tajikistan's GDP (World Bank 2012), these funds sometimes stop coming, whether because a husband has remarried in Russia and abandoned his Tajik wife or due to death, illness, or other reasons.

The result of all this labor migration is a gender imbalance in Tajikistan, combined with economic instability and extremely limited economic opportunities. During the course of my research in Tajikistan, I engaged in participant observation in a sewing class for young women and girls and conducted both formal and informal interviews with seamstresses as well as individuals not personally involved in this profession but who had opinions on it nonetheless. Not all of the women I interviewed in the course of my research are the wives of migrant laborers, but many chose the profession of making clothes in large part because of the financial benefits involved. Yet economic considerations are not the only reason why thousands of Tajik women have chosen to learn the art of making *libosi milli*. As I will explain, some are drawn to it as a creative outlet, to be able to have the clothes they want to wear without having to pay another woman to create it, or for other reasons. Religious, national, and ethnic considerations also factor into a woman's relationship to sewing.

What I ultimately hope to show in this paper is that, contrary to the insistence by some Tajiks that machine-sewing traditional clothing is simply a *kasb* ("profession") and not a *hunar* or *san'at* ("art"), the creation of Tajik national dress using sewing machines, imported mass-

produced fabrics, and other “modern” tools and materials is both traditional and creative. The use of machinery involved in the creation of these traditional garments does not negate its position as a vibrant tradition, nor does it erase the marks of individual creativity and artistry that appear in each unique garment. By discussing the work of several individual artists and their viewpoints on and relationships with “national clothing” as both abstract concept and everyday reality, I aim to demonstrate that the use of these modern tools and techniques is one way in which thousands of Tajik women continue Tajik sartorial traditions that elite Tajiks tend to view as corrupted and in need of revival.¹ These two opposing viewpoints, I argue, represent two different modes of engaging with the same tradition, and I contend that neither is superior to the other but simply different.

Techniques and Materials

The primary tool used in creating national clothing in present-day Tajikistan is the sewing machine. My informants overwhelmingly preferred refurbished old Soviet models to the newer Chinese models, explaining that while the cost of each was roughly comparable, Soviet machines are sturdy and well-built, while the Chinese models now available break easily and do not last. Marifat Murodova, a young English teacher who was learning to sew in her spare time, told me that “Soviet things are strong” (*Chizi sovetiskii bo quvvat ast*). In July 2013, I accompanied Marifat to a bazaar known for low prices (Bozori Korvon, in Tajikistan’s capital city of Dushanbe), where she hoped to buy a sewing machine. She had been unable for several weeks to find anyone with expertise in such machines who was willing to go with her and help her choose a good one. After looking at a number of machines—all of them, it seemed, old, used Soviet models of various brands—she selected a hand-operated model at a cost of 350 somoni, about seventy US dollars.

Other machines commonly used in sewing *libosi milli* are “Yamata” and “Avilok.” The former is used to machine-embroider collars, sleeves, and pants cuffs. Usually embroidery is reserved only for special garments, since it can double the cost of a custom-made outfit. Dilorom Huseynova, who works with three other seamstresses at the Sadbarg shopping center in Dushanbe, demonstrated to me how the Avilok quickly finishes edges, ensuring that the fabric does not come apart or become ragged at the edge. These time-saving machines are uncommon in home workshops, particularly the pricey and rather large Yamata. The sewing classroom where I did participant observation of a class for girls and women had one Yamata and no Avilok; Gavhar Jalilova, a professional seamstress who works from home, had an Avilok but not a Yamata. She offered machine embroidery as a service on the dresses she created, but it was her daughter who did the embroidery at her own home, something I did not have the opportunity to observe.

Since the most popular time to wear *libosi milli* aside from holidays and festivals is during the hot summer months, *poplin* (poplin) is a popular fabric choice. It is light and breathes well, keeping the body cool in the summer heat, particularly when sewn to hang loosely on the body rather than fitting tightly (as is sometimes fashionable, particularly among younger women). Unfortunately, *poplin* has its downsides; it must be “wetted” (*tar kardā*) and then line-dried again before cutting and sewing can begin, and its colors, particularly if they are deep or bright, have a tendency to run, even after several washings. Because of this, patterns that depend on a color contrast, particularly between very light and very dark colors, usually become less beautiful over time and after multiple washings. Synthetic fabrics (*sintetika*) offer the possibility of bright, elaborate printed patterns that do not run, and the fabrics themselves do not shrink. Thus the step of making the fabric wet before tailoring work begins can be skipped. But *sintetika* is hot and breathes poorly, making it a poor choice for summer wear. Velour and velvet are much sought after for formal wear, all the more so when they are adorned with patterned

shapes of gold sequins sewn directly onto the fabric for sale. Their high cost (in some cases up to 300 somoni per meter) relative to other fabrics, particularly given the average income, puts them out of the reach of many and lends their wearers a certain prestige and status. Lutfia, whose financial circumstances were toward the lower end of the spectrum, rarely received permission from her husband or his brothers (who lived with her and her four children) to leave the house, but when she did, she invariably put on her best clothes for the occasion—a deep blue velvet outfit of *libosi milli* that she received from her husband's family on the occasion of her wedding nearly twenty years ago.

While several aesthetic subcultures can be distinguished amongst wearers of *libosi milli*, the overall aesthetic of Tajik national dress is a philosophy of 'more is more.' Bright colors, bold patterns, striking cuts, and, perhaps most importantly of all, glittering and gleaming decorative touches, are all much appreciated by Tajik women. To this end, bazaar sellers stock not only reams of colorful fabric in nearly every pattern and color imaginable, but also decorative ribbons and embroidered bands for trimming pants cuffs, iron-on plastic gemstones, sequins, beads, and numerous other decorative touches. These stalls usually offer sewing scissors, needles, thread in various colors, and other sewing necessities.

Construction Techniques

Before a garment can be sewn, measurements must be taken of the woman or girl who will wear it. Specific measurement techniques vary widely between seamstresses; these differences seem to be largely a reflection of training. Marhabo, who taught the class I enrolled in at Samtⁱⁱ, gave the correct order of measurements as follows:

1. *Darozii qad* [Length, or where the hem should fall]
2. *Kushodii bar* [Width of skirt at lowest point]

3. *Darozii kanzulchai pesh (peshak)* [Length of front yoke]
4. *Kushodii kanzulchai pesh* [Width of front yoke]
5. *Kushodii pushti gardan* [Width of back neck opening]
6. *Kushodii kanzulchai pusht* [Width of back yoke]
7. *Darozii kanzulchai pusht* [Length of back yoke]
8. *Kushodii kitf* [Width of shoulder (between neck opening and sleeve)]
9. *Darozii ostin* [Length of sleeve]
10. *Tagi kash/zeri kash* [Measurement of sleeve opening at underarm]
11. *Darozii qafasi sina* [Length to bust]
12. *Kushodii qafasi sina* [Width of bust]

One of the more experienced students next to me had these measurements arranged in her notes in a slightly different order, though they appeared to be the same in content, apparently from an earlier lesson with the same teacher. But working seamstresses take measurements that are largely idiosyncratic, though many of the most common measurements are taken by all the seamstresses I interviewed, worked with, or observed. Mavluda Mullojonova, taking my measurements in August 2012, measured the length of the kurta, length of the sleeve, width of sleeve (measuring around my arm), and then bust, waist, and hips. Gavhar rarely measured bust, waist, hips, or sleeve width, instead applying a one-size-fits-all approach that worked well given the loose, non-fitted nature of most *libosi milli* kurtas. Ra'no Nazulloeva departed from the standard practice of first measuring kurta length by starting with the bust, then length of the *kitf* (measurement from the neck opening to the top of the sleeve along the shoulder), only returning to the kurta length after taking several other measurements.

Construction of *libosi milli* begins with the collar (*girebon*). When I first expressed my interest in learning to sew to Lutfia, she immediately took me to visit one of her neighbors who worked as a seamstress from home. The neighbor wasn't home, but her daughter insisted that I photograph her mother's entire collection of collar patterns (*qolabho*, singular *qolab*). During the

time that I was attending sewing classes at *Samt*, my classmates and I were (in theory) required to produce ten different collars, sewing them all by hand, before moving on to other aspects of constructing national clothing. On my very first day of class, I spent the entire class time, nearly eight hours, tracing collar patterns onto white paper that had previously been used for Russian language classes. After amassing this collection, I and the other new students set to work sewing sample collars by hand. First the paper pattern is traced onto a sheet of *fruzilin* (iron-on facing), then this shape is cut out and ironed onto a second sheet of *fruzilin* on top of one piece of the fabric that will become the front half of the collar. The two pieces of fabric are then sewn together (by hand in the learning stage, but professional seamstresses use machines for this step), the excess is cut off, and the collar is turned inside-out and ironed flat. The students in the sewing class I attended at *Samt* were encouraged to acquire a *papka*, a plastic folder with clear plastic sleeves inside, in which to store and display these sample collars. The idea behind this is to be able to show off one's skill and also to give customers a range of options from which to choose.

Of course, methods of teaching and learning differ widely, and each seamstress I spoke with had her own story of how she learned. Most successful seamstresses (that is, those who were still working in the profession and making a living at it) I spoke with had learned either by apprenticing one-on-one with a seamstress at the seamstress's home or by apprenticing at an atelier, where girls and young women hoping to learn this lucrative skill work and learn simultaneously. A notable exception to this pattern was *Firuza*, who had, she said, taught herself at home. Despite her lack of formal training, she produced beautiful clothing, but I noticed while watching her work that her methods of constructing garments were quite idiosyncratic and in some cases much more convoluted than the relatively straightforward methods I was being taught at *Samt*. For example, I wrote these fieldnotes (edited slightly to

remove abbreviations and for readability) while watching her construct a collar for a dress she was sewing for me for Eid in August 2013:

Right now Firuza is making my *peshak*, but she's doing it differently from how I've ever seen it done. She attached one sheet of *fruzilin* with an iron—normal, ok—Gavhar also used just one sheet, not 2 like we learned at school. . . . First she cut the *peshak* out (on one ply of cloth) by tracing half of a *qolab* onto it, when the cloth was folded over twice (in half)—then she cut it out right at the line. Then she put that on top of another ply of cloth and sewed it roughly by hand with a dark thread, then sewed it by machine on the *inside* of that dark thread—but just on one side of the *peshak*. (See photos—machine used white thread) Now she's flipped it over and is sewing on the same general line of the *peshak*—just the inner part of the collar (see diagram left)—the outer part is still unsewn.



Figure 1. Firuza cuts right along the line of a collar she has sewn inside the lines, first by hand with dark thread and then with a machine using white thread. Standard practice is to first sew (either by hand or by machine) along the line of the qolab and afterward to cut off the excess fabric, leaving a few millimeters along the outside of the line. Firuza's strategy results in a thinner, but still usable, collar than the standard practice, and is the result of her having taught herself.

Importance of Clothing in Tajik Life

On the occasion of her wedding, a Tajik woman is supposed to receive numerous new outfits (the exact number expected and given varies), often of the finest and most expensive materials, from the groom's family. The cultural importance of this is so great that it was one of the first pieces of information my informant Faizali told me about Tajik culture. In the early days of my first trip to Tajikistan in June 2011, Faizali, then a fabric seller at Shoh Mansur bazaar in

the center of Dushanbe, described this Tajik wedding custom to me and asked, as if to confirm his knowledge of my country's customs, whether this happened in American culture or not. Two years later, a female acquaintance remarked that a wealthy family should ideally provide forty new sets of clothing for a bride. While this might be out of the financial reach of many families in Tajikistan, there is certainly an obligation to provide new clothes that is common to many Central Asian cultures, such as among Uyghurs and Uzbeks.

On the day before a wedding, a bride-to-be holds a special women-only party at which she displays these new clothes to family and friends, appearing first in one beautiful outfit and then another, while guests eat, socialize, dance, and take pictures with the bride. I attended one such party in August 2013. Although I arrived somewhat late, I was able to observe the bride change into at least six different outfits, all made of expensive fabrics such as silk *atlas*, velour, and sequin-covered and embroidered synthetics.



Figure 2. Six of the outfits presented to a new bride upon the occasion of her wedding.

The “National” in Fashion

Contrary to expectations of some westerners, fashion in Tajikistan is an active, rapidly changing system. Fabrics that were highly fashionable and seen on nearly everyone in 2011 were by 2013 relegated to what beggars wore. Every year new fabrics—especially the relatively cheap, affordable, and comfortable cotton poplins—are brought in from Chinese factories, and some become incredibly popular for a brief period of time. In addition, particular cuts, decorative accents, and other styling details follow similar processes of brief intense popularity followed by a falling out of style. In 2013, for example, faux “belts” (*tasma*) sewed onto the waists of kurtas were very popular, as was the addition of black lace accents at sleeves and cuffs. Competition

between *duzandas* (seamstresses) can be fierce; I once asked the owner of a shop at the upscale Sadbarg shopping center for permission to take some photos of her wares—creative ready-made designs I hadn't seen before along with rolls of fabric from China and Turkey. Apparently suspecting that I wanted to copy her designs for my own customers, she initially refused, but once I explained to her my intentions, she allowed me to take as many photos as I wanted, having been assured that her intellectual property was, for the time being anyway, safe.

One particularly fascinating trend in 2013 was the popularity of single-color cotton poplin fabrics adorned with small yellow or white diamond shapes of varying sizes. It took me several weeks to make the connection between this mass-produced printed fabric and the older tie-dyed *gulbast* fabrics of which several examples were on view at the Ethnographic Museum in Dushanbe. The colorful, organic patterns of *atlas* fabric, a woven fabric whose threads are tie-dyed before weaving, have been reproduced in numerous variations on both synthetic and poplin printed fabrics, but to my knowledge 2013 marked the first time *gulbast* was reproduced as a printed, mass-produced fabric—a fact which might explain its sudden popularity once it was introduced to the market. Many Tajiks, particularly those originally from southern regions of the country where *gulbast* was once a popular method of decorating fabric, seem to have felt a strong emotional connection to this pattern. Halima, the wife of a celebrated Tajik poet and forty-nine years old in 2013, described to me how women in her native city of Kulob used to tie and dip-dye fabric to produce the distinctive *gulbast* designs. In relating this, her nostalgia and her emotional connection to this art form were quite apparent. Further research might explore whether regional identities—so important in other aspects of Tajik life—affected the popularity of this faux *gulbast* fabric in various parts of the country and among people hailing from different regions. Dushanbe, though located somewhat centrally, is nonetheless home to a large number of people originally from Kulob, in the south. The distinctively southern (but simultaneously “national”) patterns of *gulbast* find their symbolic equivalent in the *atlas* patterns that were once

more common in the north of the country (perhaps most notably in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). Both of these fabrics are made to serve as “national” symbols as well as symbols of regional identity.

Choosing *Duzandagi*

In Tajiki, sewing as both activity and profession is known as *duzandagi*, while a person who sews is called a *duzanda*. The women I interviewed in Tajikistan all chose to sew (professionally or otherwise) for different reasons, had different backgrounds and motivations, and had different relationships to the work they did. Firuza, then seventeen, told me in August 2013 that she had started teaching herself how to sew three years earlier but that she had recently lost interest. Her initial reason for wanting to learn was that she had wanted to be able to design her own clothes. For a while she had taken orders (*zakas*) and sewn for paying customers, but now, she told me, she would only sew clothing “for ourselves. For people of ourselves. *Not* for strangers” (*Baroi xudamon. Baroi odamoi xudi. Baroi begonaho nest*). Firuza aspired to attend college after finishing high school and did not desire a career as a professional *duzanda*. For her, it is a creative outlet and a way to give gifts to her friends and family, but financial and career considerations are noticeably absent.

Unlike Firuza, Savsan Mirzoeva sews professionally and earns a profit from her work. For her, *libosi milli* is inextricably tied to religious and national identity and helps fulfill an important religious duty. She works from home, taking orders from friends and from customers who find her by word of mouth, and she sews “national clothing” exclusively, refusing, whenever possible, to sew “European” clothes. Unlike many seamstresses, Savsan hesitates even to sew *kurtas* with short sleeves. She considers it sinful for Tajik Muslim women to wear such styles, and she believes that, by creating this immodest clothing, she will be guilty of enabling the

wearers' sins and will therefore herself be held accountable (*javobgar*) on the Day of Judgment, when God weighs all sins to determine whether a person will go to Heaven or to Hell. When I interviewed Savsan in July 2013, she told me she was studying to become a pharmacist, but that she intended to continue sewing even after finishing her studies. For Savsan, as for most of the women I interviewed, *duzandagi* is not just a job or a way to make money but a creative outlet that is truly enjoyable.

While all the seamstresses I met primarily sewed *libosi milli*, their opinions about and relationships to Tajik national clothing differed. Twenty-one-year-old Nigora Mirzoeva (no relation to Savsan), who had been sewing for five years when I interviewed her in July 2013, told me that she mainly sewed *libosi milli* because that was what there was a demand for, but that she preferred to sew “European” (*avrupoi*) clothing “because it’s beautiful.” She showed me a dress she had created of *atlas* fabric—a strong symbol of Tajik national identity—for her four-year-old daughter Maryam, saying, “From national clothing, I sewed a European dress” (*Az libosi milli man kurtai avrupoi duxtam*). Yet despite her love for European-style clothing and the beauty and creative possibilities she finds in it, Nigora insisted that “every Tajik should wear national clothing” (*har yak Tojik boyad libosi milli pushad*).



Figure 3. "From national clothing, I sewed a European dress." Dress Nigora Mirzoeva created for her four-year-old daughter. July 2013.

Savsan, despite her radically different views from Nigora on appropriate *libosi milli* styles and the place of European clothing in Tajik culture, also stressed the heritage aspects of Tajik national clothing. For Savsan, "A Tajik should wear national clothing, Tajik clothing. . . . It shows that she is a Tajik, for example, that this girl is Tajik" (*Tojik boyad libosi milli pushad, libosi tojiki. . . . Tojik budanasha nishon metihad, misol ki, hamin duxtar tojik ai*). She emphasized the fact that these clothing styles "remain" (*mondagi*) after having been passed down from "our grandfathers and grandmothers." For Savsan, then, there is no conflict between "traditional" national clothing and the unquestionably modern techniques and materials used in their construction. She and the other seamstresses I met during the course of my research engage with their tradition as modern women living in a modern world, adopting new technologies and making changes in the tradition as they find them logical and appropriate. This pragmatic perspective is one mode of engagement with the tradition of Tajik *libosi milli*. Another mode seeks to restrict certain technological changes, confining "authentic" *libosi milli* to a small group of elite artists and denying that popular practices of making and wearing *libosi milli* fall properly within the tradition.

History, Identity, Heritage: Two Modes of Engagement

Dushanbe-based fashion designer Mukarrama Qayumova appears on television and is granted the prestige that comes from endorsement and recognition of her work by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), meetings with Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon, and appearances in international "fashion shows" (S. Qayumova, August 5, 2013). Mukarramaⁱⁱⁱ draws inspiration from ancient Persian sources such as motifs found in ancient paintings and carvings and illustrations from the *Shahname*, to create "the old

in a new style” (*kuhna ba nav*) in an attempt to revitalize what she sees as an ancient Tajik heritage of national dress by adapting its designs and techniques to the present day. Like many western collectors and observers of Central Asian clothing, Mukarrama holds up the past as a model of “authentic” Tajik national dress. In her case, she draws not from the nineteenth century (commonly understood in the western imagination as the golden age of Central Asian textiles and clothing) but reaches back even further to an ancient, pre-Islamic past, making use of archaeological and artistic sources such as paintings and carvings. Significantly, Mukarrama envisions not a specifically “Tajik” past, as was the tendency under the Soviet system, but rather a shared pan-Iranian heritage belonging to all Persian speakers, whom she calls both *xalqhoi eroni*, “Iranian peoples,” and *tojiknazhodon*, “people of the Tajik race” (M. Qayumova 2008, 4). She has expressed in no uncertain terms her view that present-day popular Tajik clothing is ultimately irrelevant and without value, claiming that the styles made and worn by non-elite Tajik women today are unable to become “heritage” and will never find their way into museums (M. Qayumova, August 9, 2013). It is important to note Mukarrama’s position in this debate; her entire project—and the fame that it has brought her—rests on the premise that “authentic” *libosi milli* is dead or dying. Why would it be necessary to “revitalize” a phenomenon that isn’t already moribund or dead? Recognizing that the tradition of *libosi milli* continues, but in a different, modern form, would require Mukarrama to rethink and rebrand her own work, which has garnered her so much fame and international attention. She potentially stands to lose a great deal from recognizing contemporary popular Tajik national clothing as a valid alternative to what she creates and presents as inherently more “authentic” than what is created by thousands of largely anonymous Tajik women throughout the country.

Mukarrama, like many Tajik political, social, and economic elites, does not have a very high opinion of the work that the majority of Tajik seamstresses do. In an August 2013 interview, she told me that the clothing they produce can never be either “history” or “heritage” (*ta’rix*,

miros); this status is reserved for handmade items. Faridun Kamoliddinov, a Tajik academic who has traveled to the United States several times, has told me that in his opinion, *duzandagi* is so easy that anyone can do it. He maintains that since it is work that is (in his opinion) unskilled, it is therefore not an art form. Instead, he has told me, *duzandagi* is work that uneducated women do because they have no other choice (personal communication, August 2012). In this respect, Mukarrama and Faridun agree; they contrast supposedly unskilled lower-class female labor to supposedly more skilled occupations such as those requiring high levels of formal education and the specialized, intricate, time-consuming work in textiles and clothing production that Mukarrama's "Haft Paykar" company engages in.

Mukarrama's contention that contemporary styles that are currently popular "can never be heritage" betrays an elitism that seeks to dictate what women should and should not wear, devaluing the cheap imported fabrics, mass-produced plastic stones and machine-embroidered ribbons, and sewing machines that put fashionable, attractive clothing within financial reach of huge numbers of women in a country whose per-capita GDP in 2011 was only \$935 (United Nations Statistics Division 2013). At the same time, Mukarrama's insistence that her creations—handmade using time- and labor-intensive techniques requiring great training and skill—are a more appropriate fashion choice for Tajik women than popular machine-made garments ignores the economic realities of the majority of Tajik women. My repeated inquiries into the actual cost of any of the items she makes and sells were met with a vague "It's affordable for everyone" (*bahama dastras meshavad*) (M. Qayumova, August 9, 2013).

Yet the Tajik seamstresses I spoke with all stress the skills and personal characteristics required to be successful in *duzandagi*. Some of the most common traits they emphasized were persistence, creativity, and *shavq*—a strong interest toward sewing and creating clothing. Ra'no Nazulloeva, a seamstress who worked at Sadbarg, told me in August 2013, "Working as a seamstress is not easy, girlfriend. It's hard" (*Duzandagi oson nest, dugona. Qind ast*). When I

asked seamstresses which aspects, if any, of their work were the most difficult or challenging, the more experienced seamstresses told me that everything was easy for them, but they agreed that at the learning stage everything is difficult, and that the majority of girls who start to learn will eventually quit. Marifat told me in August of that year that she had quit sewing because she had no time for it, saying, “I gave up [literally, “threw away”] sewing, I don’t have time” (*man duzandagiro partoftam, vaqt nadoram*), less than six weeks after she had started learning. Several of the girls and young women enrolled in the sewing class I attended at Samt stopped showing up after a few days or weeks (myself included—the quality of instruction left much to be desired, and I eventually grew frustrated and decided my time in Tajikistan could be better utilized elsewhere). Some women, such as Gavhar and Savsan, told me that *davlati* (state) instructional methods—such as those employed at Samt—were not very conducive to learning. The best way to learn, they said, was *peshi yak duzanda* (literally, “in front of a seamstress”). One can only learn by doing, Savsan emphasized, not just by being told or by seeing. Yet some individuals simply lose interest after a while, like self-taught Firuza, who told me that initially “I had interest, but not now. I have interest now too, but *little*” (*Shavq doshtam, ammo holo ne. Holo ham doram, lekin kam*). Becoming a successful *duzanda* requires maintaining this interest over many years, continually refining and adding to one’s skills, and having enough creativity and artistry to create aesthetically pleasing designs that customers will want to wear, becoming walking advertisements for the women who sewed them.

Tajik women incorporate modern tools and techniques into the construction of traditional Tajik national clothing in ways that conform to local aesthetic standards, personal convictions and predilections, and economic needs. Following Dorothy Noyes, I subscribe to the notion that “traditional creativity does not come to a halt when modern regimes impose themselves, but adapts to a changing social ecology and finds new forms and niches” (Noyes 2009, 43). Unlike Tajik elites who view popular *duzandagi* as outside of Tajik sartorial tradition, I maintain that the

work done by thousands of Tajik seamstresses across the country is not a mere *kasb*—profession, vocation—but is in fact a continuation of a very traditional art. Just as Mukarrama’s designs must be considered an artistic construction of Tajik national identity, so, I argue, must popular Tajik practices of *libosi milli*. Both are instances of “the creation of the future out of the past . . . by thinkers who fix upon this aspect or that, in accord with their needs or preoccupations” (Glassie 1995, 395). Tajik *libosi milli* incorporates religious and national identities, provides an outlet for personal creative expression, and actively constructs and reconstructs what it means to be a Tajik woman every time a woman sits down to her sewing machine.

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Notes

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- i. Andrew Gordon (2011, 16) notes that the introduction of the Singer sewing machine into Japan in the mid- to late nineteenth century created a divide between *yofuku* (Western clothes) that demanded the tight even stitches of the machine versus loosely stitched kimonos. I have found no evidence of such a division in Tajikistan, where the sewing machine seems to have been adopted readily and smoothly into the existing sartorial system.
 - ii. Samt (meaning "direction") is a charitable educational organization funded by the government of Iran. In addition to sewing classes, they offer instruction in English, Russian, and computer skills.
 - iii. I have made a conscious decision to treat all my informants equally by referring to them all by their first names, choosing to avoid the common but biased practice of using

first names when referring to “ethnographic” informants and last names when referring to academics and others in relative positions of power.