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The Successful Life of Qurbon Amirqulov: Memories of Leadership in the Southern Periphery of Uzbekistan

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Summary
Autobiographical stories, which are a favorite literary genre in Central Asia today, provide rich source material for a yet-to-be-written cultural history of the region in Soviet and post-Soviet times. "Destiny" is the extended life story of Qurbon Amirqulov, a manager and entrepreneur from the periphery of Uzbekistan who in synopsis rates his lifetime struggles and achievements as a thorough success. Investigating the author's account and interpretation, this paper points out the societal and economic ideals of the man, many of which collided with Soviet and to a lesser extent post-Soviet ideals and realities, and his strategies — in real life and in life-writing — for coming to terms with problematic aspects of the past and for coping with the ever-changing challenges of the present.

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Introduction

The transition from Soviet to post-Soviet life consists "not only of success stories, but also of obituaries" (Khazanov 2011: 19). Indeed, depending on the disciplinary perspective they have and on the sources they use, researchers arrive at very different points of the continuum in their assessments of it, ranging from success to disaster, with ethnographers generally more inclined towards the brighter side and political scientists to the darker one. This paper aims to draw the reader's attention to the voice of a man named Qurbon Amirqulov, a local long-term expert on the transition who has recently published materials of a kind not often tapped in scholarship on Central Asia: a combination of an extended autobiography and thematic reflections on his own professional and personal life. This work can be read as an absolute success story, but clearly tells us that his success — which the protagonist understands as being material prosperity-cum-peace of mind — was achieved at a high price. The expert is self-employed in the sense that neither historians nor ethnographers or political scientists invited him to share his knowledge and opinions; the initiative was his own. His writings are autobiographical, which makes the author liable to the "autobiographic pact" (Lejeune), and his writings legible as a

historical source. Qurbon Amirqulov's life unfolded in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras and reached its zenith in the period of national independence. Thus, he rightfully claims expertise in the local history, economy, and culture of Uzbekistan over more than half a century, from the 1950s to the 2000s. His information and considerations give us insights into the way in which the Soviet (and post-Soviet) system functioned, such as Deniz Kandiyoti (2002: 349) has called for, and he shares with his readership a perspective somewhere between "above" and "below," as will be discussed later.

Qurbon Amirqulov (*1939) comes from Surxondaryo, the southernmost province of Uzbekistan, and held leading functions in regional manufacturing, production, and redistributing enterprises. He gave his voluminous book a very brief title: *Destiny* (2006). The work was published by a private yet state-affirmative company[1] and stands out from most other life writing — which is popular everywhere in Central Asia today — in three remarkable ways: First, the author conveys the prominent message "my life has been a success," while most other writers have more ambiguous stories to tell or follow other paradigms altogether.[2] Second, in order to tell the full story, he includes the Soviet era as well as the independence period, while most writers touch on the independence period only briefly or exclude it altogether. Thirdly, Qurbon Amirqulov's story is predominantly about himself, while most other authors set their plots much more broadly. About four-fifths of Qurbon bobo's[3] book are a detailed, quasi-ethnographic description of his professional working life in which he was a local leader, while the introductory fifth includes some family history and accounts of the formative period of his life.

Large parts of Qurbon bobo's text can, in accordance with the guiding theme of this volume, be read as a story of coming to terms with the past and, even more so, of coping in the present, but such a reading would not do full justice to the author's intentions. What he is actually conveying seems to be a story of "success achieved through hard and honest work" in a life that necessarily included a great deal of hardship, danger, failure, and disappointment as well. The aim of this paper is to link up with debates on Soviet and post-Soviet selves in everyday life by investigating, from the perspective of cultural history, the ways in which this provincial "leader," as he perceives himself, in retrospect makes sense of his active life in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Uzbekistan.

1 *Taqdir Bitiklari*. Tashkent (Ma'naviyat) 2006 (430 pp., 5,000 copies), henceforth referred to as "Q."

2 One more example of a "success story" will be mentioned later: Rozmetov (2011), whose protagonist worked in the agricultural production sector. For a detailed characterization of the genre as such, which is extremely popular in the region, cf. Baldauf (forthcoming).

3 This honorific form of address, which is used when talking to or about elderly males, is the term the author prefers to employ when he refers to himself in the book.

Reifying a suitable past

As the story goes, Qurbon Amirqulov's father and paternal uncle had lost their own father at an early age and entered service with a wealthy entrepreneur and trader from Denov, then part of the Bukharan Emirate. This person first followed the Amir of Bukhara into Afghan exile in March 1921, but returned to his home village in the fall the same year. At the same village, Qurbon's father Amirqul attended literacy courses run by the Soviets and was appointed secretary of the executive committee of the village soviet in 1925. When the persecution of the so-called *mushtumzo'r* (Russ. *kulak*[4]) gained momentum shortly after that, the two brothers' (former) master was arrested and shot to death. Qurbon's uncle married his master's young widow, and Amirqul was given the daughter of their master's elder wife to wed. For some time, the couples lived on resources they had managed to rescue from the grip of the authorities, but one day they were denounced by a servant and then detained and tortured on the grounds of withholding treasures from the government. A fellow villager who worked as an interpreter in prison eventually told the brothers how they could save their own skins:

> However much they menace and torture you, just say, "we worked for the rich man as day laborers. He wouldn't even give us enough food to fill our stomachs, let alone show us where his gold was [buried]. We married his liberated wife and daughter — is that what you're accusing us of? We don't know of anything else [that could be the reason]!" — and insist on that. (Q 16f.)

By following this good advice, the young men were finally released from prison. They then sought refuge by moving to the neighboring district of Boysun.

The story of how Qurbon's father and uncle were rescued shows how densely intertwined the present and the past were in the early Soviet period. On the surface, the story is about a huge white lie: The young men, whom the master had actually trusted and employed in responsible positions and treated like relatives, were now posing as exploited farmhands (*batrak*) — an indeed favorable social status in the heyday of land reform in Uzbekistan (1926), outdone only by that of "liberated women" while the women's lib campaign (*Hujum*) of 1927 was under way. These lies about the past were not habitualized masks, such as the ones put on by thousands of outcasts of the new system (Fitzpatrick 2000: 116ff., 133ff.), or hard-earned new subjectivities of individuals who strove to "fashion their souls" in line with the demands of the new times (Hellbeck 1996); they were simply instant reactions to

4 Qurbon bobo does not indicate when or why his father's master was killed, but relates the event to the kulakization campaign (Q16). Kulakization was the "identification," expropriation, and persecution of better-off families, which actually started only in the late 1920s. (I prefer to call it *kulakization*, in line with the recently coined Uzbek term *quloqlashtirish*, meaning "to make sb. a kulak," rather than imitating the misleading ideological term *dekulakization*). In Uzbekistani popular memory, many reasons for pre- and early Stalinist persecution are confounded in the notion of "kulakization." For the case under consideration here, there is better reason to assume that the man was accused of counterrevolutionary activity and/or speculation (regarding the setting of this scene in the regional political and economic context of the mid-1920s, cf. Penati (2007, esp. p. 526)).

mortal danger. We have no evidence that the couples ever forged their identities again after their lucky escape.[5]

Things may be different with the person who held the clue to the creative reification of the young detainees' personal pasts, however. That person seems to have successfully reified his own past, too: his name gives us strong reason to assume that he came from the religious establishment, which was under heavy pressure from 1926 onwards. The fact that his Russian was good enough to earn him an interpreter's position with the secret police (Q 16) points to a trader's or entrepreneur's past, former service for the Tsarist administration, affiliation with the local Islamic enlightenment movement, or a combination of these, all of which would have made a person extremely vulnerable in the late 1920s. He might well have been the typical "vermin" who had worked his way into a position close to power from where he could undermine the new Soviet order (Penati 2007: 526f.) — or seen from a different perspective, the typical "survivor" (Fitzpatrick 2000: 226), a theme that recurs in many accounts all over the Soviet Union:[6] ordinary people as well as Party members and state officials, who resorted to major and minor lies and tricks about their past and present for the sake of bare survival, to make ends meet, or to achieve societal and professional goals and secure themselves resources and privileges.

However, the moment of habituality, which is important in the survivor paradigm, does not come out strongly in Qurbon bobo's account. Why is this the case? Because such strategies were typical only of the Stalin period (to which Penati and Fitzpatrick refer) and were solely employed in cases of ultimate threat, but immediately given up again when the worst of the terror was over, perhaps? Or is the absence of evidence due only to the retrospective position of our narrator and his desire for an *ex post* touch-up of the recent past, a contemporary narrative strategy of "coming to terms" with the post-Stalin Soviet period, which now appears so much less repressive and terrorizing than its immediate antecedent, so that possible factual continuity of "survivor" habits cannot be narrated without offending the victims of the Stalinist period once over? Or may rules of politeness and "retrospective forbearance" (*insof*) hinder the eye witness from describing all-too-compromising conduct, as habitual dishonesty would have been under conditions that were no longer dominated by brutal violence? These questions remain unanswered.

Qurbon's father Amirqul quickly made his peace with the Soviets. Due to his writing skills, he was again appointed secretary of a village soviet in 1929, this time in the district of Boysun. In 1941, he was recruited as a warehouse keeper at the national Farhod Canal construction site. In 1942, he was drafted to the Red Army and returned home in the summer of 1945. Sometime after that, he held relatively high positions in the local and regional Soviet economy. If Qurbon's father had anything

5 Such cases are, however, well known from Uzbekistan as such. For an example of a woman who had to forge proletarian roots and kept that version up for a very long time, cf. Kamp (2001: 52).

6 Cf. interview texts from post-WWII refugees in *The Harvard Project*, for example.

to hide from the authorities, it was not his past but his present: In 1948, regardless of the legal ban on polygamy, he married an 18-year-old girl (Q 30) and sent Qurbon's mother and her six children away to live in a distant relative's field warden shed in order to conceal his illegal family status — after all, he was a Party man, tax collector, chief accountant, head of a state meat factory, and had other roles as well. In retrospect, Qurbon bobo considers this an important turn in his life:

> I don't remember when I actually started to consider myself a "leader." Maybe that feeling arose when my father married another woman, our family was separated, [...] and I was the only male left in the household. (Q 289)

Power games

Qurbon studied at a number of regional and higher professional colleges and took a degree in Mechanical Engineering at the Tashkent Institute of Irrigation. From there he was detached to the supreme administration of regional sovkhozes at Termiz, the capital of his home province Surxondaryo, for assignment of work. The director of that state trust made him head of the central repair department of the *Iskra* rice-producing sovkhoz, which was in urgent need of professionals at the time. Qurbon started from scratch, with a roofless compound and several combine-harvesters that had been left there to rust. It was 1971, the early Brezhnev period.

> With all the energy of a young man, I got things going in the workshop in just a few days. Unlike most "big men," I always try to be present at the workshop, more than any repairman. I don't like giving orders and then watching from a distance. The results are better, as my workers are more efficient. And another characteristic of mine is that I like creative work and novelty, and I go for the easiest, most convenient, and most effective methods. (Q 66)

Within a year, he had invented a mobile filling funnel for the fertilizer airplane and a crop-drying device, both of which saved the sovkhoz manpower and raised its output. Qurbon was promoted to the position of head engineer of the sovkhoz. Together with a handpicked crew of workers, he tidied up the compound and had it concreted and roofed, planted fruit trees, and erected a number of auxiliary buildings. However, he did not get on well with the sovkhoz director with respect to personnel recruitment, and after a number of disputes, he applied to be released from his duties. The first secretary of the *raykom*, that is, the highest Party functionary in the district, gave him respite, clearly expecting him to change his unconventional ways, but meanwhile a friend from his days as a student invited Qurbon to head a machine park in the neighboring *rayon* of Angor. Qurbon gladly accepted,

> [...] because fifteen days after the dismissal of Qurbon Amirqulov, who had worked as workshop director for a year and as head engineer of the sovkhoz for four years, there was no bread left for him to eat at home [...] (Q 72),

he sarcastically remarks. On hearing about this move, the first secretary ordered him into his office and said the following:

> How dare you leave here to work in another rayon without our permission! [...] You're a member of the Party! You'll go and work wherever the Party dispatches you! Or else you'll have to face the consequences! (Q 73)

The next day the first secretary ordered Qurbon to replace a former classmate of his as head engineer at a neighboring sovkhoz, but Qurbon deemed this an unsuitable act and came up with all kinds of excuses not to start working there. Again, sometime later, the director of the rayon's central machine park asked him if he would stand in for the head of their logistics department, who was off sick, which he did, but Qurbon had to leave again when the person came back to work. It was only after complaining to the director, who would "decree" appointments "in accord with the [Party] head of the rayon," that Qurbon was appointed deputy head of logistics at last (Q 73ff.).

The story of how Qurbon bobo began his working life is indicative of quite a few things worthy of mention. Firstly, in peripheral regions, technical specialists were in great demand back in the early 1970s, as state enterprises were jostling for qualified personnel, and suitably qualified young people had many options because of this *de facto* dominance of the supply-and-demand principle under Soviet auspices.[7] Qurbon was kept on the payroll in the neighboring district even though he had actually been called back "home" for more than a month (Q 74). Secondly, professional and Party authorities shared decision-making power at all levels, which rendered the system prone to blockades and obstruction whenever objectives diverged. Divergence of professionalism, Party, and other objectives was often underpinned by crisscrossing clientelistic motives, and Party representatives always had — or at least claimed to have — the last word. Thirdly, Party membership seems to have been natural for anyone who wanted to achieve anything, and Party discipline was commanded. But ultimately, all of the above-said could be abrogated as soon as a person was determined to pursue an alternative option, be they a Party official or member, the head of an enterprise or a subaltern, an insider to the respective issue, or an outsider. The whole trick was to understand how meaningful long insistence was and when it would turn against its originator.

Qurbon bobo recounts a case of "best practice" in the insistence-and-yielding game which he came to experience one day in 1975 when he was summoned to the raykom office out of the blue. The first secretary told Qurbon that he (Qurbon) had been chosen as the new director of the state corporation for cereal products, which collected and stored rice and grain from kolkhozes and sovkhozes and delivered semi-finished goods. Qurbon flatly declined the position, anticipating power games such as deliberate surplus deliveries of raw materials being made in order to tax the corporation's capacity, damage his own reputation, and check his autonomy as a

7 In Uzbekistan this situation continued well into the 1980s (Abdurahmonov 1984).

leader,[8] inferior deliveries on the part of kolkhozes and sovkhozes, whose workers would keep superior produce for themselves while wasting away "production plan wheat and rice,"[9] and constant reprimands by controllers from above and outside once he had become responsible for the enterprise. First Secretary Xoliq Murodov was "a master of words and action," however, as Qurbon bobo respectfully concedes (Q 95ff.). Qurbon had gained a reputation not only as a skilled and inventive professional, but also as a civil servant who fought embezzlement, wastage, loafing, theft, fraud, and other negative aspects of daily Soviet life, regardless of whether these crimes were carried out by subalterns or ordered from "above" with the tacit consent of officials (Q 244, 262, et al.). Only a short time before that, Sharof Rashidov, the First Secretary of the Uzbekistani CP and head of the republic, had expressed his warm thanks to Qurbon for successfully implementing a device then named "supportive agricultural enterprise," which put Brezhnev's consumption pact policy into practice.[10] In short, a man of his caliber was useful to a raykom secretary. On the other hand, given Qurbon's notorious stubbornness, he would be easy to get rid of if the necessity arose — all they needed to do was to make a few improper demands of him. But the ultimate reason for raykom secretary Murodov to hire Qurbon was that he, in turn, was put under pressure by the Provincial Executive Committee (his superiors) to employ another person with whom he did not want to work:

> To put it in a nutshell, it was convenient for Xoliq Murodov to have me employed as director of the cereal corporation in every respect. (Q 97)

Qurbon ultimately gave in and accepted. Thus in 1975 he became director of a state firm, which under his continuous leadership first developed into a flourishing Soviet corporation and then was transformed into a successful post-Soviet manufacturing enterprise.

Coping with Soviet and post-Soviet everyday life

Qurbon bobo's account of everyday life in the agricultural production and processing sector brings up the issue of how to best characterize kolkhoz and sovkhoz workers' approach to work. Caleb Wall suggests that James Scott's concept of

8 This was exactly what happened when he finally became director: flour was rotting away in the storage basement due to "ill-wishing" (as he calls it) out-of-plan delivery of grain (Q 104-5).

9 This strategy adopted by *kolkhozniki* and *sovkhozniki* of coping with — to their understanding — exaggerated demands of the plan and of subverting state-sanctioned quality standards to the detriment of the proceeding enterprise is described in detail (Q 176). For an analogous farmer strategy in post-Soviet Uzbekistan, cf. Wall (2007: 223-24).

10 *Yordamchi xo'jalik* were small yet efficient subsidiary farms attached to kolkhozes and industrial enterprises. They provided quality produce for the workers in order to raise their job satisfaction and work output, with welcome side effects such as the reduction of rural unemployment and urban–rural income imbalance. For information on the successor tool in post-Soviet Uzbekistan, cf. Kandiyoti (2002b: 5f.). The diverting of means and equipment from the primary to the supportive enterprise, of which Qurbon bobo makes no mention, seems to have been a regular Soviet and post-Soviet strategy (cf. Egamov & Usmonov 1989: 14ff. and Wall 2007: 224ff. respectively).

peasant resistance does not apply to rural reality in post-Soviet Uzbekistan: non-compliance among plan workers turned *dehqon* and *fermer* may come in similar forms to those identified by Scott (minimal investment in product quality, petty theft and misappropriation, work to rule or less, etc.), but it does not come with the same intention and effect (Wall 2007: 237[11]). Qurbon bobo's practice confirms Wall's assumption that "old tricks" by the subalterns were internalized in the system so that both sides outwitted each other: in order to prevent petty theft, the punishment for which was immediate dismissal (Q 263f.), Qurbon had an annual per capita ration of 100 kg of rice handed out to each employee free of charge.

> I looked for the reasons for this evil [insider theft] and tackled it with justice: Being the director of the *kombinat*, I don't buy rice from the bazaar but get it from the *kombinat* for nothing. [...] If I don't purchase my own rice, then why should the others do so? After all the engineer, deputy director, warehouse keeper, and the workers certainly contribute to its processing much more than I do.

Qurbon accepted the all-Soviet cadre privilege of a free share, which must have been regularly internalized in the system the way Wall suggests, but extended it to all members of the *kombinat*, thus saving three times more on stolen goods and significantly reducing the crime rate in the enterprise, he says (263). If petty theft had once been a weapon used by "exploited civil servants," then the Soviet state had outwitted its cadres by legalizing it, just as it had ultimately legitimized gleaning in the war and post-war years of famine after fruitless attempts to fight it.[12] As a man of wits, or "out of justice," as he prefers to rationalize it, Qurbon copied this internalizing strategy — a "coping strategy" to prevent excess criminalization in his realm, making it one of the features on the micro-level of Central Asian plan economy that Deniz Kandiyoti (2002a: 351) would no doubt define as an "artifact of the Soviet system," which its inventor construed in terms of "traditionalism" by invoking the Islamic and local concept of *adolat*, "justice, fairness, well-balancedness."

Actually, what makes Scott's concepts so difficult to apply to the Soviet case is the uncertainty about who, under Soviet conditions, are the weak and who the strong (i.e., the holders of power). Scott himself does not go beyond the binary opposition

11 I do not unconditionally share Wall's interpretation of Scott's concept, but in this respect he is certainly right: the spirit of productive opposition is missing. Wall's observations concern the post-Soviet period, but what he scrutinizes is strikingly similar to what Qurbon Amirqulov and others have described for Soviet times.

12 Wall (2007: 229f.), in a sub-chapter entitled "Gleaning or Theft" (which does not actually elaborate on the gleaning vs. theft example), explains that according to the moral economy of his interlocutors in post-Soviet Khorezm, the same misappropriation would be a "coping strategy" if performed by people in need, while it would simply be "corruption" if performed by anyone else. In post-WWII Soviet Uzbekistan, gleaning was tacitly accepted by the same authorities who would otherwise mete out severe punishment for minimal offenses — as long as the act was done by children; even children from affluent families were involved in gleaning (To'rayev 2011: 15).

of "dominators and subordinates."[13] Qurbon bobo — probably like many Soviet cadres — was both of these at the same time. He was a powerful boss who set the rules, exercised rigid control over his employees (Q 78 et al.), and took the liberty of sacking non-compliants on the spot. But at the same time, he was a subordinate of (high and low) officials who expected him to extol from his own subordinates whatever the plan or "those above" demanded. As the man put it whom Qurbon succeeded in office,

> [Qurbon] isn't going to last five months here. We'll feed him to the sharks![14] (Q 77)

The systemic interdependence of subordinates and superiors — the latter, under threat of criminalization, were held responsible for "mistakes" and failure in their sphere of influence, with 75 cadres having been sued before Qurbon came into office, as the head of the province alerted him (ibid.) — gave people who ought to have been subalterns on account of their jobs real power. This regularly forced their superiors into compliance in the reverse direction, be it through indulgence, benefits, or — as Qurbon understood it — "justice." Non-compliance on the part of superiors (!) would have inevitably led to non-fulfillment of the state plan, a worst-case scenario for local and regional leaders. This deadlock would be repeated on all levels, its most notorious result being the so-called "Uzbek affair" involving large-scale fraud regarding the cotton plan — a thoroughly compromising compromise[15] that touched all levels of the planning, administration, production, and control chain.

Local leaders

The "intercalary role" of local and regional officials between state authorities and the rural population has been discussed by Bellér-Hann and Hann (1999) in connection with the post-Maoist agricultural production sector of neighboring Xinjiang. The *zhang*s "leaders" on different levels of the hierarchy apply various strategies: they implement state policies, but they may also side with non-compliant subalterns if this is what they deem more appropriate in a given situation. Qurbon bobo perceives himself as much the same kind of "leader" (*rahbar*). Although he headed processing rather than producing enterprises, his double bind was much the same as the "intercalary predicament" of the agricultural directors discussed by Bellér-Hann and Hann. Since the industrial sector is no less understudied than the agricultural one, some of Qurbon bobo's observations and considerations may be worth being

13 Robinson (2004) finds the "role of groups and relations outside the simple binary of dominator and subordinate," the "existence of hybrid and/or bystander groups, and/or the existence of divisions between different categories of subordinates and/or dominators" is missing in Scott's model.

14 Uzbek *uni idoraga boshlik emas, oshliq qilib yuboramiz*.

15 Kandiyoti (2002b: 350) defines it as a process of adaptation on the part of the central state, which granted liberties to the peripheral regions in exchange for political loyalty, but to my understanding this definition underestimates the agency of the respective "subalterns."

quoted here. He entitles a lengthy chapter of his book "Is it easy to be a leader?"[16] and relates to the issue in many more places.

According to Qurbon bobo, there are two fundamentally different types of leaders: political leaders who work in the state administration, the Party, and various political bodies, and leaders within the state economy. Since he is a "leader trained in the immediate realm of production" himself and always stayed clear of politicians, his reflexions mostly relate to the latter type (Q 277). His litany of "ways to become a leader" reads like a worst-practice index, with only one entry on the honorable side ("a man is appointed for leadership as a reward for the honest work he has done"), but nine on the other ("[...] with the help of friends and relatives," "... catching a superior's eye by delivering an impressive speech," "... through 'material support' given to a superior official," "[...] because nobody else was available for the job," "[...] upon his return from 'higher education,'" "[...] because his previous job was needed for somebody else," etc. (Q 282f.)). Given Qurbon's long-term experience in the field, there is good reason to believe that cadre selection really did work that way. After all, he was a victim himself in several cases[17] — and in one case viewed *ex post facto*, he was a beneficiary — of such cadre misplacement, as shown above: the supreme Party representative of the rayon did not recruit him on the grounds of his superior qualifications, but in order to avoid employing another candidate, the positive outcomes of Qurbon's occupation only being of secondary importance.

Talking of coping strategies, we should mention the way in which superiors would rationalize their mode of cadre recruitment, namely, by invoking the principle of "trust" (*ishonch*, Q 102 et al.): The main obligation of a civil servant, employee, etc. is to justify the trust and confidence that superiors, and most prominently the Party, put in him. If he fails to perform well, the blame will be put on him, not on those who selected him.[18]

Many an ill-qualified leader who had been promoted through patronage or by other improper ways was dependent on his protector's goodwill (Q 283). Qurbon's obstinacy and outspoken dislike of the position he was promoted to did not spare him from having to fulfill the production plan and other legal obligations, but it did reduce the pressure that could be put on him from "above" in illicit matters. Whenever he was supposed to turn a blind eye on habitual misappropriation and other common irregularities committed by fellow cadres and superior officials, according to his narration, he would decline (Q 79, 94, 101 et al.), regardless of the

16 *Rahbarlik osonmi?* (Q 276–324).

17 When Qurbon was offered the position as sovkhoz director, he declined it because he felt unqualified. The head of the provincial Party agriculture department, who had prepared the proposal in coordination with the first secretary of the raykom (note the doubling up of responsibilities here), "gave the First Secretary a meaningful look and said: "This is the first time I've ever met a man who

risk of hatred and revenge (Q 106 et al.). Flattery would have been the cheapest and most appropriate way to "get on well with superiors (*kattalar*) in the previous Soviet system," as an experienced leading provincial official once reminded him with a twinkle in his eye, but Qurbon did not opt for that solution either (Q 121). The most difficult thing to repel were interventions by high Party officials grounded in policy-related concerns: the rayon Party secretary tried to force him into accepting substandard produce from the sovkhozes so that the plan would be fulfilled earlier than expected. Qurbon insisted on accepting only grain that conformed to state standards, which teased the Party official into involving the state prosecutor, but "in times like those, I had enough strength, wits, and endurance," he said (Q 107). Not only demands, but even favors asked by superiors made Qurbon feel uneasy, given their irrationality and indifference to wasting public goods. When one minister granted him a wish in return for his successful work (and in order to enhance his own reputation on the ground, as Qurbon does not hesitate to remark), the minister "helped the leader out" with an undesired official car to massage his ego, but in order to finally obtain the useful machinery and loan for his enterprise that he had been asking for, Qurbon had to struggle quite a bit (Q 119f.).

The fact that pressure also came from the workers' side is not compatible with Qurbon bobo's image of himself: "Woe to the leader who cajoles a subordinate," he wrote (Q 78). In practice, however, he found many ways to assure himself of their cooperation. He outwitted subversionists through his ostentatious presence at their workplace, which not only improved work ethics (Q 66), but also paid off in an additional way: he knew the challenges of production from nearby and thus escaped the notorious deskilling effect of leadership ("for learning, power is a disability," Chambers 1997: 76). Finally, he provided decent housing and recreation facilities for his workers and staff, made sure that their working environment was adequate (Q 299), and granted his people wages that were so much higher than those of average enterprises that ill-minded observers would suspect him of "partaking" in them through a mutually profitable transaction (Q 307). He insists, however, that he demanded adequate performance in return and gave his employees full pay as a reward: "Leaders must be demanding but they must not be *zolim*," the latter being a historical term which once applied to rulers who were unjust and exploitative. Qurbon proudly mentions that

> [...] God be praised a thousand times, in none of my workplaces have workers or employees ever complained about me or written as much as a single line [to my superiors] in complaint, (Q 305)

which alludes to one of the "weapons" that the Soviet state put in the hands of subordinates so that superior officials could collect unfiltered information from below while circumventing the "intercalary" cadres: letters of complaint (Fitzpatrick 2000: 165). Qurbon was denounced only in the post-Soviet period, and by his peers rather than subordinates.

In comparison with the *zhang*s of Xinjiang, Qurbon was a more inventive *rahbar*. The *zhang*s merely comply with cases of non-compliance, so to say, by "promoting peasant interests" through alleviation of quotas or covering up for peasants' poor performance (Bellér-Hann and Hann 1999: 20), both of which are defensive strategies responding directly to strategies "from below." Qurbon does, in fact, also comply when handing out produce to the workers instead of waiting for them to sneak it out themselves, but his strategy is of a special kind. If he was really striving for "justice," as he says, he might have raised their salaries, which he didn't. Instead, he "converted the price of labor in[to] a gracious gift" (Bourdieu 2000: 351) which, according to local understanding, would bind his people much more tightly than money.[19] In addition, he applies a pro-active strategy: he relies heavily on incentives, as mentioned above. These not only benefitted his subordinates, but consequently made his enterprise prosperous — an obvious win-win situation.

All in all, Qurbon bobo did experience the "intercalary predicament," but according to his narration, he was not subdued by it. The only explicit grievances he has to make are directed at Soviet ideology, which discouraged what Qurbon calls "personality" (*shaxs*) in leadership:

> The Soviet system did not allow leaders to individuate. It did not support them in developing their personality, but condemned them to suppress it. (Q 280)

Regardless of these limitations set by the system, his own mode of operation conformed to standards of entrepreneurship rather than management (and definitely not administration or officialdom). The system may not have broadly encouraged this businessman-like attitude, which Qurbon considers hereditary (Q 294), but Qurbon bobo is certainly mistaken in believing he was a rare exception to the rule. The system did tolerate leaders of this kind, and quite a few cadres seem to have operated like market economy entrepreneurs, albeit on behalf of planned state enterprises. Sadulla Rozmetow, a director of cotton- and grain-producing kolkhozes/sovkhozes in the Turkmen part of Khorezm who worked in leading positions from the 1950s to 2010, draws a strikingly similar picture of his professional life in his memoirs (Rozmetow 2012). Khvan Man Gym, the long-term director of a flagship kolkhoz in the environs of Tashkent, also widely shared Qurbon bobo's approach to leadership, according to the memories of subordinates, colleagues, and relatives (cf. Ten 2011).

Politics and transition

One might assume that such leaders had an easy start in post-Soviet entrepreneurial life. However, the transition did take its toll: Khvan Man Gym was engulfed by the

19 Qurbon did not just replace money with grain (after all, they were a grain-processing enterprise), but he applied a deeply pre-modern device: he would not hand out grain on the grounds of accomplishment or rank, but of need, basing the amount on the size of respective worker's household.

"Uzbek affair," and his famous kolkhoz *Politotdel* collapsed at the end of the 1980s (Ten 2011: 255; Egamov and Usmonov 1989: 89). Sadulla Rozmetow and Qurbon bobo, on the other hand, who make a point of never having been involved in accounting fraud in their writings — their superior economic results rendering such dishonesty unnecessary[20] — passed smoothly into independence. As a matter of fact, both authors are reticent about the details of that transition. Sadulla Rozmetow seems to have endeared himself to the promoters of the new order by delivering an enthusiastic speech in support of private property, which he understood as the only efficient remedy against mismanagement and economic decay, at the second Turkmenistan Council of Elders in 1991.[21] His renown, his advanced age (*1920), and perhaps also his personal acquaintance with President Niyazov may have been helpful in successfully transforming their kolkhoz into a "farmers' enterprise" (Turkmen *daýhan hojalygy*) and expanding into the cotton oil-producing sector by founding an oil mill rather than continuing to sell their cottonseed to the state (Rozmetow 2012: 128f.). Sadulla Rozmetow's agricultural-cum-manufacturing enterprise, which saw swift positive development over the 1990s and 2000s, may be atypical, but it adds an important alternative facet to the otherwise rather murky picture of rural economy in the transition period (cf. Khazanov 2011: 26f., for example).

Qurbon bobo also remained in office all through the perestroika and early independence periods (Q 126ff.). In the early 1990s, when plan economy and liberal entrepreneurship overlapped in chaotic and widely unregulated ways for a short period, his enterprise made a roaring trade in gas and water pipes that Qurbon had purchased cheaply in Russia (cash he had collected from a loan granted by his ministry, money which was then conveniently devalorized through inflation and monetary reform) and sold after using as many as were needed in his own district (Q 133ff.). Raising the gas supply index from 33 to 66 percent in a matter of half a decade from 1990 to 1995 made Surxondaryo the best-supplied province in the whole of Uzbekistan (Q 145) — and Qurbon Amirqulov, a much-honored (and -envied) public person.

As mentioned above, Qurbon bobo claims not to have dabbled in politics. However, this is exactly what he did at the end of the Soviet Union's era, and there is good reason to assume that two periods in office as people's deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the UzSSR and its successor body (starting from 1989) earned him much of the information, network, and invulnerability necessary for him to be able to make large-scale transactions. In 1989, Qurbon actually wanted to run as deputy to the rayon soviet. His candidacy was turned down, though, since — true to the spirit of perestroika — only "workers toiling directly in production or construction, or shepherds, or at least engineers," were permitted to run as candidates, while

20 Cf. Rozmetow (2012: 108f.; Q 127).

21 *Türkmenistanyň ýaşulularynyň ikinji maslahaty* (Mary, August 1991), cf. Rozmetov (2012: 124). Among other things, the Council passed a law on the privatization of property.

"people in high positions" (*mansabdor shaxslar*) were not — or at least this is what he was told (Q 129). Qurbon was deeply hurt by this, and out of obstinacy, he decided to run for the Supreme Soviet. He outran several other candidates, promising that he would supply the entire rayon with gas and drinking water. Once elected, he made sure he became a member of the Commission for Planning and Budgeting. From then on, he talked on equal terms with officials at the top level (Q 135). To make a long story short, by befriending the right people and roaming much of the decaying USSR, Qurbon obtained all the pipes he needed without ever waiting for plan allocations. Thus he laid the financial basis for the success of his enterprise in the transition period.

> The independent mode of managing an enterprise, which is a fruit of national independence, was exactly right for me. Our factory started booming. (Q 139)

Maybe Qurbon bobo was independent in the day-to-day management of "his" firm, but on the political plane, nearby Tashkent turned out to be more intruding than distant Moscow had ever been. The conspicuous success of his business[22] teased the appetite of regional political leaders. In 2000, he found himself confronted with the suggestion to incorporate a rundown, debt-ridden, rice-producing *shirkat* ("joint stock company"[23]) into his enterprise. Originating from the provincial governor (*hokim*) of Surxondaryo, the proposal was conveyed by the *hokim*'s representative (*vakil*) to the Muzrabot district and the district governor. Qurbon anticipated trouble, as he wrote:

> There is not a great deal of difference between a suggestion made by a superior authority and an order. (Q 176)

Qurbon understood that merging his *korxona* and this *shirkat* was the regional leadership's strategy to rescue the ailing *shirkat*. Having confidence in the strength of his own enterprise and deciding to take on the challenge of proving that he was not a "parasite living off the labor of producers" but a skilled primary producer, Qurbon accepted the offer. The formality of gaining the *shirkat* members' consent was settled by the officials, and the deal was legalized through resolutions by the district and provincial governors (Q 179). (The incorporation did not last very long, however. As soon as Qurbon had paid off the firm's debts and got it off the ground, the former director filed a lawsuit against him on the grounds of illegal incorporation, which resulted in the two businesses split up again. Qurbon was found innocent, though, and got all his money back. Luckily so, he concludes, since this struggle cost him two years of his life and brought him close to disaster. In the end, his

22 The firm had been renamed *Mehnat-Rohat*, i.e., "hard work — peace of mind." Its legal status is not clearly explained by Qurbon bobo. The fact that he was planning to hand leadership over to his younger brother and/or son upon his retirement seems to indicate that it had become private, hereditary property. However, the way in which politicians interfered in crucial matters like mergers with other corporations, changes in production profiles, etc. contradicts this assumption.

23 For a concise definition of *shirkat* and other post-independence rural enterprises and their emergence from earlier types of enterprise, cf. Trevisani (2010: 102ff.).

old enterprise emerged from the hassle in better shape than ever, because leadership of the former *shirkat* had earned him new business contacts and the opportunity to purchase a large plot of rice cultivation land for his enterprise at a cheap price (Q 202).)

The lessons Qurbon bobo learned from these experiences reveal what independence actually means for entrepreneurial minds in off-center regions. The "intercalary predicament" seems to have lost most of its virulence in comparison with Soviet times: subalterns cause no more concern.[24] Qurbon bobo now turns his full attention to his superiors. There is even less distinction between Party and administrational officials than before,[25] state power has merged into a single entity, and even an entrepreneur as experienced and well-connected as Qurbon finds it difficult to evade "cooperation." The production plan still puts pressure on leaders, but Qurbon's secondary enterprise seems to be largely untouched by this problem, since they can shift the main burden to the primary producers. On the other hand, the termination of obligatory state allocation of loans, machinery, and production means after 1991 has made management of an enterprise significantly easier: "Got the money? Okay" is what it boils down to now (Q 139).

The *shirkat* merging incident lays bare the legal incompetence of some high-ranking officials, while the actual goals of their interference remain unclear (maintaining jobs in an underprivileged area? fear of themselves being shamed and fired for mismanagement, as often happens in Uzbekistan? Or other reasons?).

Anatoly Khazanov's observation that privatization "has not resulted in the emergence of independent economic elites" so far in the Central Asian republics (2011: 23) holds true for the agro-processing industry in the peripheral countryside: while Qurbon bobo enjoys independence regarding the internal management of his business, Party-cum-administrative authorities can intervene in vital matters at any time. However, Khazanov's statement about "the fusion of the ruling elites with a new stratum of proprietors, whose very existence depends on their ties with those in power" (ibid.) needs to be qualified: although Uzbekistan has hitherto gained little renown for its observation of the rule of law, in Qurbon's case, legality came out victorious against the outspoken interests of regional political leaders.[26] The illegal incorporation, which its former leaders brought to court in defense of their own property rights, was reversed, *and* perhaps most surprisingly, Qurbon's enterprise

24 Drawing conclusions from the absence of mention is, of course, somewhat risky, but the difference between Qurbon bobo's frequent mention of subordinate non-compliance in the former period and the total lack thereof in the more recent one is quite striking.

25 For more details about this issue, cf. also Petrić (2010: 168).

26 To Qurbon bobo's distress, it came out against his own interests, too. He does not tell us in detail how the lawsuit unfolded, but from the evidence he does provide, I would say that he tried his best to supply expert assessments in support of his propriet(t)2(ur)4(se,f)20(eagespquitt thieff t)4(o)-2(ur5(t)ts,)4((hSus pr)e7(m)13 re)]TJ

was restituted the subsidies it had put into the ailing *shirkat*. Thus the rights of both proprietor parties were preserved from illegal intervention from the political side, and neither the party that might have gained from the merger, nor the other party were significantly privileged or damaged, let alone existentially affected. Later on, the provincial governor was even found to be responsible for making "severe mistakes in his leadership of the province and for illegal action" and was removed from office in 2004[27] (Q 203).

That said in favor of Uzbekistani legalism, we still have to take one additional fact into account: Qurbon bobo's own involvement in politics. Notwithstanding his reservations about the political profession, in 1994 he accepted a proposal by the first secretary of the Surxondaryo provincial council (now *kengash*) of the People's Democratic Party to be nominated for candidacy for the *Oliy Majlis*, the Uzbekistani parliament. He was supported by "toilers" from various agricultural firms and factories in his home district, Muzrabot, but ...

> [...] before the elections, the leaders "in question" behind the curtains agreed that Qurbon Amirqulov's candidacy needed to be shifted from Muzrabot to another district, and without much further ado I was made a candidate of Boysun. (Q 150)

Feeling uneasy about running against the local candidate from Boysun and realizing that he was also unwelcome in the eyes of the district governor of Boysun, Qurbon decided to withdraw. He was prevented from doing so by the provincial Party authority, however. So Qurbon — who, after all, had been born and raised in that very district — decided to rely on the support of local school friends and accept the challenge. It turned out that his candidacy was meant to serve a superior goal: Before the presidential elections, the president of state had promised local elders to supply Boysun district with natural gas, but the authorities had failed to deliver it. Given Qurbon's achievements in the neighboring district of Muzrabot, he was the man to make the president's promises come true.

> I will gladly contribute whatever I can to complete what Islom Aka has initiated, I said. (Q 152)

This is how he came to be elected parliamentary representative of Boysun district in 1994 with 98 percent of the votes (Q 155), and a member of the Surxondaryo Provincial Council in 2004 with almost the same amount of success (Q 203).[28]

Qurbon bobo does not say so, but in fact his political function and economic success worked hand in hand. Being an extremely successful director of an enterprise, he came in handy when regional officials of lesser talent or industriousness were in

27 As for the leaders of the rundown *shirkat*, they did not manage to stabilize the company after restitution. The director and his head accountant were finally taken to court due to "a major deficit in the rice crop in 2003 and habitual embezzlement" (Q 203).

28 In the 1999 elections, he failed to win his seat again, due to the mobilization of "administrative resources" in support of his competitor and unfair games against him that were little short of calumny, as he remarks (Q 173f.).

need of an "action man." In return for his good services in rescuing their own necks and stopping the President of Uzbekistan from being shamed before the populace, they supported his enterprise by assigning him a plot of land for a large cattle farm (Q 157) and "a parcel of land on which to construct a supermarket near the *Yubiley* bazaar in the city of Termiz" (Q 169). This step paved the way for him to move into the trading business and other activities. Qurbon bobo had all the innovative ideas to build up and sustain an enterprise, but he could not have done so without officials supporting or at least tolerating his work. In that sense, he resembles the "political entrepreneurs" whom Tommaso Trevisani encountered in the Khorezmian agribusiness (2010: 184), albeit on a significantly larger scale. Khazanov, when stating that "power and property have become inseparable" (2011: 23), most probably did not have entrepreneurs from peripheral regions like Surxondaryo in mind, nor would a person like Qurbon Amirqulov, who is a passionate entrepreneur and a politician *faute de mieux*, qualify as part of the "ruling stratum" that "seizes or controls the property without giving up their power" (ibid.). However, as far as the inextricableness of property, business, and political power is concerned, his is a case in point.

Writing

In conclusion, I should like to add a few considerations about Qurbon bobo's life-writing, asking myself whether authoring a book named *Taqdir Bitiklari* ("Destiny," or "Writings of Destiny"), the first element of which can be read as an allusion to a prescribed fate, or to the writing-up of one's life experience) should be understood as an act of coming to terms with the past and coping in the present.

Taqdir Bitiklari was published in 2006 in a print run of 5,000 copies, which at that time was an extraordinarily high figure compared to the average 500–3,000 copies of similar life histories. The author dedicates his book to his children, grandchildren, and friends, which would hardly make for an audience as broad as this. The *Ma'naviyat* publishing house, which is a private enterprise but has close ties to state power and supports nation-building and the transition process through its publication strategy, obviously judged his manuscript to be important, perhaps because "that which is singular or private is always contained within that which is shared or public" (Jackson 2002: 292).

In Qurbon bobo's book, just one word has been typeset in bold: *adolat* (Q 6, introduction). The author defines this term as "the invariable yardstick against which everything on earth will be measured"; *adolat* is the ideal condition of and the human struggle for balance, equilibrium. In Qurbon's story, *adolat* appears as an individual capacity best circumscribed through its opposite, *zulm*, meaning "oppression, unfairness, darkness of mind" — *adolat* is the kind of fairness in giving and taking, assigning and demanding which he strove to put into daily practice as a leader. Promoting *adolat* is also the virtue of the supreme ruler (in this case, President Karimov), who saves "an ordinary entrepreneurial subject like me from

falling victim to envy and strife" and defends Qurbon against (supposedly corrupt) subordinate authorities (Q 144). *Adolat* is, however, not exclusively directed from above to below, but according to Qurbon bobo it cuts both ways: subordinates also need to observe *adolat* by adequately balancing their working performance and expectations (Q 304f.) All in all, Qurbon Amirqulov's narration is an attempt to come to terms with his personal history[29] by checking his doings and the doings of those people who — for better or for worse — mattered in his life[30] against the standards of *adolat*. His life history is inextricably entangled in the Soviet and post-Soviet history of the last seventy years, and he is very much aware of that.

At one point, Qurbon bobo compares his writings to a *jangnoma* (Q 144), that is, a heroic epic or a tale about constant struggle. In this sense his life-writing amounts to an act of self-assertion, a response to absurdities, and a way out of inconsistencies, or as Michael Jackson puts it, "a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances" (2006: 15). That is by no means to say that Qurbon bobo takes refuge in words whenever he falls short of action. However, in a way, his "intercalary predicament," which has been described above, seems to recur in the realm of narration: When tuning in the discourse of economic success as being a natural result of hard work, economic spirit, and technical know-how, yet certainly independent of political power, he affirms the "official transcript" of post-Soviet Uzbekistan;[31] accounts of how his firm came out victorious against politicians trespassing into the economic field[32] read like an illustration of the president of state's 2002 admonition to officials to not abuse flourishing enterprises by treating them like sources of easy income.[33] At the same time, his subtle yet unequivocal narrative strategy of putting discouraging evidence in a utopian perspective reveals a strong "desire to resist" (Scott 1990: 111–12, 124, et al.), put forward with reasonable prudence (Robinson 2004). Let us look at an example now.

Besides being a talented manager, Qurbon bobo is a passionate master builder (Q 209ff.). His personal dreams and social responsibility coalesce in his vision of edifices that are simple yet ingenious, purpose-built yet aesthetical, conforming to

29 Eakin (1989: ix) suggests that "the autobiographer explicitly commits himself or herself not to some impossible historical exactitude but rather to the sincere effort to come to terms with and to understand his or her own life." Qurbon bobo considers this "effort" an easy task: "From my early childhood days until today, whatever destiny has brought to me has been "nailed down" in my memory as if it happened yesterday" (Q 4). All reflection seems to be included in the process of calling his memories to mind.

30 Like most Uzbekistani life-writers of his generation, Qurbon bobo almost totally precludes what he considers his private life from his narration, that is, the relationship with his wife and, to a slightly lesser degree, his children.

31 Cf. Scott (1990: 87) regarding the "complicity" of subordinates in producing a "sanitized official transcript."

32 Cf. the above-named incorporation issue; he also reports on blatant exaggeration of tax claims (Q 196f.).

33 Quoted in Erkayev (2002: 111).

ultimate technical standards while accommodated to local wants and habits. Whenever he was in a position to do so, he constructed production buildings and residential houses, shelters and storage facilities, roads and tunnels, water and gas supply systems, and whatever was needed for a good and productive life. Wittingly or unwittingly, he resumes the practical understanding of pre-enlightenment leaders' self-eternalization:

> Structures that are built consciously, according to a perfect plan, and with a sense of taste will outlive the people who made them or had them made. (Q 218)

Building is Qurbon bobo's concretization of a comprehensive civilizational project which includes the classical laying out of fruit gardens and parks (carefully to be hedged in against the surrounding wilderness by fences and walls), but also the Soviet-like appropriation of fallow land for agriculture. It ultimately extends into the wastelands, which he attempts to tame through backfills and ditches [...] (Q 86f., 164, 178, 202, 217, 237, and *passim*). All of these endeavors revolve around *obodonlik* and *madaniyat*, civilization and its material foundations, which he refers to again and again.

This effort to improve life and the world can be read as Qurbon bobo's very personal aspirations, which are nurtured by concepts of civilization omnipresent in the region from olden times. At the same time, however, it recalls a deeply Soviet stance which Sheila Fitzpatrick defines as "stories" in line with the socialist realist outlook on the realities of life: "[...] citizens also developed the ability to see things as they were becoming and ought to be, rather than as they were. An empty ditch was a canal in the making; a vacant lot [...] littered with rubbish and weeds, was a future park" (2000: 9). Back in Fitzpatrick's 1930s, the citizens were meant to envision the bright future out of naught; Qurbon bobo, working at the end of the Soviet period, had to reimagine civilization on top of the refuse and spoilage of Soviet society which had, to his understanding, thoroughly accustomed people to misperformance and fraud (Q 121, 209ff.),[34] while it was honest work that would make dreams come true. He converts the rubbish of the past into a "reservoir of treasures" (*zaxira*) for the construction of facilities that serve the future and are pleasant in the present (Q 248f.). His personal contribution to the identity-building effort of independent Uzbekistan literally becomes concrete in a recreation facility in the heart of an unattractive agricultural area:

> On the road from Yangiobod to Gagarin, we constructed a castle like the castles in fairytales. On top of it we raised a structure in the shape of a huge yurt, which we are going to make into a teahouse for people to relax in. An Uzbek felt yurt made of concrete. (Q 163)

34 Qurbon bobo does not believe in Soviet education at all, but he praises independence due to the introduction of the secondary professional education system (Q 390f.). In real life, he preferred to hire young workers for his enterprises, since he believed they were "not spoiled yet" (Q 261).

Qurbon bobo's inspiration has no limits: His ultimate project is a paradise-like recreational area that includes a 600 x 50-meter fishpond bordered with natural stones from distant mountains (and for practical reasons spanned by wires to prevent birds from fishing in it), located at the hottest spot in Surxondaryo province (Q 232ff.). Actually, Qurbon bobo's unlimited belief in man's ability to subdue nature calls to mind Soviet utopianism of earlier decades, and so does his enthusiasm in writing about stunning achievements. Still, difference is appreciable: Qurbon bobo did put his utopia into practice, and when its first version failed, he gave it a better second try to make it happen (cf. Q 232) rather than abandoning the project,[35] as the photograph of his fishpond resort proves (Q 225).

Given his self-prescribed workload, Qurbon Amirqulov may not have had time (or the inclination) to read the kind of passionate literature designed to encourage an increase in the production and development of rural civilization, which flooded Soviet Uzbekistan in the 1970–1980s:

> I have checked out all of your virgin lands that are waiting to be tapped. In fact, man can turn stony ground, brier patches, and whatever bad land exists into paradise. [...] I will pick out the stones and replace them with fertile soil carried in the palm of my hands, in my shirttail. I will make the land arable, and within two or three years I will turn it into a storybook cotton field! (Xoldor 1986: 32)

While these are the words one writer of the 1980s puts into the mouth of a bemedaled *sovkhoznik*, Qurbon's lines read as follows:

> Around our administrative building there were many bumpy plots of land. I got our grader to work and had the plots leveled. As a result, 15 ha of land were opened. We plowed three times and harrowed. I had manure and mineral fertilizer spread. Then melons, vegetables, and potatoes were sown. (Q 82f.)

The efficiency of Qurbon bobo's modern technical devices has replaced the socialist romanticism of physical toil. In his writings, outright denial of anything valuable in the advanced Soviet system, from state-run(-down) education and administration to working life and everyday life, is combined with an appraisal of the achievements of selected individuals (including himself in a prominent place). This mode of making sense of things reads like a full inversion of the *tipichnost'* concept of socialist realism. The changed nature of discourse also manifests itself in the matter-of-fact language which Qurbon bobo contracts with "Soviet speak," everyday or literary language. At one point, he makes his attitude to "Soviet" linguistic behavior explicit to the reader:

> Have you noticed [kolkhoz director] G'oz makes promises on behalf of the kolkhoz farmers and firms, but he obscures his words by saying "they're fulfilling [the plan],"

35 The author regretfully mentions a number of abandoned projects, one of them being the second half of a housing project he had initiated and carried out while he was head of the provincial agrochemical trust (Q 83).

> "they're achieving [their goal]." He doesn't want to say anything tangible like "we will achieve," which might get him or others into trouble tomorrow. (Q 280)[36]

The lack of concreteness of the word may be regarded as a "linguistic weapon of the weak." If Scott is right in saying that "the self-control and indirection required of the powerless [...] contrast sharply with the less inhibited directness of the powerful" (1990: 136), then Qurbon bobo's language usage is tantamount to a claim to power.[37]

Conclusion

Qurbon Amirqulov's life history was published in 2006 at the height of life-writing in Uzbekistan. The introductory part of his book is in line with the developing conventions of the genre: Qurbon bobo briefly recounts the story of his father as an example of manifold and repeated struggles to come to terms with a personal past that did not conform to the demands of early Soviet power, and to cope in a new kind of present for which local people were not yet prepared. The main part of the book, however, is Qurbon bobo's attempt to make sense of his own life, which unfolded in the mature Soviet period and was taken to perfection during independence.

Qurbon rose to leading positions at a time when leadership was not for individuals to aspire to:

> It is well known that it is the people that shape history. But only an avant-gardist leading force can take this people to new victories, towards a brighter future. This leading force is our dear Communist Party. (Saymoqov 1981: 3)

In his own commentary on Soviet notions of leadership, Qurbon states the following:

> In the Soviet era, talking down the role of individuals had developed into a regular state policy. Inventions and findings of global importance, achievements made by skilled chiefs, indeed the loyal labor of the people as such were all attributed to the Communist Party. [...] Leveling down the whole of society this way [...]ultimately led to the demise of as powerful a state as the Soviet Union was. (Q 417f.)

Qurbon obviously never consented to being reduced to mediocrity, but insisted on taking leadership seriously in economic as well as political life. As a consequence, whatever firm he took responsibility for would develop into a flourishing enterprise, however high the cost might be to himself in having to cope with an "intercalary" position in which superiority and subalternness were entangled in most challenging ways. Upon retirement, he decided to resume his experience and lay out his vision of things that matter in a book made up of an extended life history and considerations about many general issues. On the discursive plane, his narration is a fundamental

36 The author is contrasting *bajararmiz, uddasidan chiqarmiz* on the "abstract" and *bajaramiz, uddasidan chiqamiz* on the "concrete" side.

37 Needless to say, Qurbon bobo, unlike most of his fellow autobiography writers today, never makes jokes of the (post-)Soviet "anecdote" type.

critique of a society rotting away due to the irresponsibleness of its leaders. Sadly, he does not except the present from his critique. At the same time, his narration is an outline of a substantiated counter-project, which he — successfully, as he says — struggled to put into practice in his lifetime.

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