

The Past as a Burden: Washers of the Dead between Merit and Stigma

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Summary

In some parts of southwestern Central Asia, washing the deceased before burial was (and to some extent still is) traditionally undertaken by professional corpse washers, a low-status, marginalized group. Against the backdrop of a popular recourse to tradition and the past in these countries as a resource for identity formation after the demise of the Soviet Union, this article asks how people whose collective memory of the past does not fit in neatly with the current representation of a harmonic pre-colonial society negotiate their status in society. Historically, corpse washers formed endogamous groups in many larger Central Asian cities and were considered ritually polluting by the majority population. They were and are at the same time perceived as people with special powers who inhabit a liminal space between life and death. Corpse washers lived in their own residential quarters apart from other inhabitants and both parties followed certain rules of avoidance. Soviet policy officially abolished their stigmatization and discrimination. New professional pathways opened up and many corpse washers left their former profession and their living quarters to settle elsewhere. Today, corpse washers have to adopt new ways of justifying why they stick to a profession considered to be impure and base although alternatives are available. Representations of the profession as meritorious and God-sent sometimes come into conflict with modernist, scripturalist interpretations of Islam that oppose traditional Central Asian burial customs.

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Introduction

Recourse to “tradition” and “heritage” plays an important role in the shaping of identity in all former Soviet Central Asian countries. An idealized past Golden Age is pitched as a “model for the active reconstruction of the present” (Shils 1981: 209). Within this process, the notion of time encapsulated in these terms is deliberately employed to establish certain discourses concerning the past. Words like “tradition” and “heritage” are not neutral, but carry inherent — in this case, positive — assessments of time. They serve as vehicles for the establishment of official narratives about the past which relegate alternating memories to the margins.