CHAPTER FIVE

THE LIFE CYCLE

As in other predominantly agricultural societies, in Eastern Turkestan, too, everyday life was punctuated by events of the life cycle. These rituals were both important vehicles for making and maintaining community and occasions for reciprocal exchange.\(^1\) They marked rites of passage from one stage of human existence to the next with the setting provided by the immediate kin group. Life-cycle rituals also involved individuals with whom kinship ties were loose or even non-existent. The neighbourhood, which typically centred on the mosque, often overlapped with kinship ties but could also cut across and extend beyond these; it was based on the principle of propinquity rather than that of blood.\(^2\) Territorial concentration was one major organizing principle, and kinship provided an overlapping but not identical structure. It will be argued that the logic of reciprocity permeated most of these rituals. Through them, existing social ties were perpetuated and reinforced, but they were also occasions to probe the boundaries of community by temporarily extending it. In contrast to religious rituals, the timing of which was prescribed by the Islamic calendar, life-cycle rituals depended on the important events of human life: birth, marriage, death and initiation rituals. All joyful events were called "toy", which distinguished them from death rituals.

5.1 Entering the Human Community

Humans entering the world became part of a household and a network of kinsmen, who from the very beginning were involved with the various stages of the reception and socialization of the newborn. During my fieldwork in the 1990s, one elderly woman compared a newborn baby

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\(^1\) In his doctoral dissertation on the ‘Folklore and Identity of the modern Uyghur in northern Xinjiang’ Jay Dautcher pointed out the tension between the competitive nature of gift exchange and the prevalence of reciprocal principles (1999: 127, 151–62).

\(^2\) Cf. the notion of ‘closeness’ in Morocco as analysed by Eickelman 2002: 96.
to the growing wheat, which is always surrounded by similar plants, thereby emphasizing the inherently social and communal nature of humans: they are surrounded by relatives from the moment they are born. Ideas about kinship are closely connected to ideas about human procreation, which is where we start our discussion.

Folk ideas concerning human procreation have been the object of anthropological enquiry for quite some time; in the early 1990s, they were given new impetus by the work of Carol Delaney. During fieldwork in a Central Anatolian village, she found that villagers attributed the primary, active role in the creation of children to men as ‘seed-givers’, while women were relegated to a secondary, passive role as ‘fields’. Delaney then extended this hierarchically ordered monogenetic view of human procreation to interpret social organization generally. She claimed that this monogenetic view of procreation was linked to monotheistic religions, and she presented one large, tidy system of belief: “Paternity is embedded in an entire matrix of beliefs about the world and the way it is constructed...From the most intimate to ultimate contexts, from physical to metaphysical realities, an entire world is constructed and systematically interrelated”.

In Eastern Turkestan there is no elaborate metaphor comparable to that of ‘seed and soil’ in Anatolia. Although human procreation was typically mentioned within the framework of Islamic ontology, even mythical representations of the creation of humankind, relating God’s creation of the Prophet Adam from clay and his union with Eve, were not entirely free of bodily imagery. This was also the case with a story, dictated by a farmer and molla in 1935, which makes no use of metaphor and focuses on a miracle:

The holy Adam—peace be upon him—and mother Eve were separated from each other for seven years. One day the holy Adam—peace be upon him—and mother Eve met each other on a glacier...They had coition [sic!] at this place. The seminal fluid flowed out on the glacier. The seminal fluid froze. From this the jade stone has its origin. That is the miracle of the holy Adam—peace be upon him. That women feel cold on their rump and men on their knees has remained from this time.

4 Delaney 1986: 510.
6 Jarring 1951a: 64.