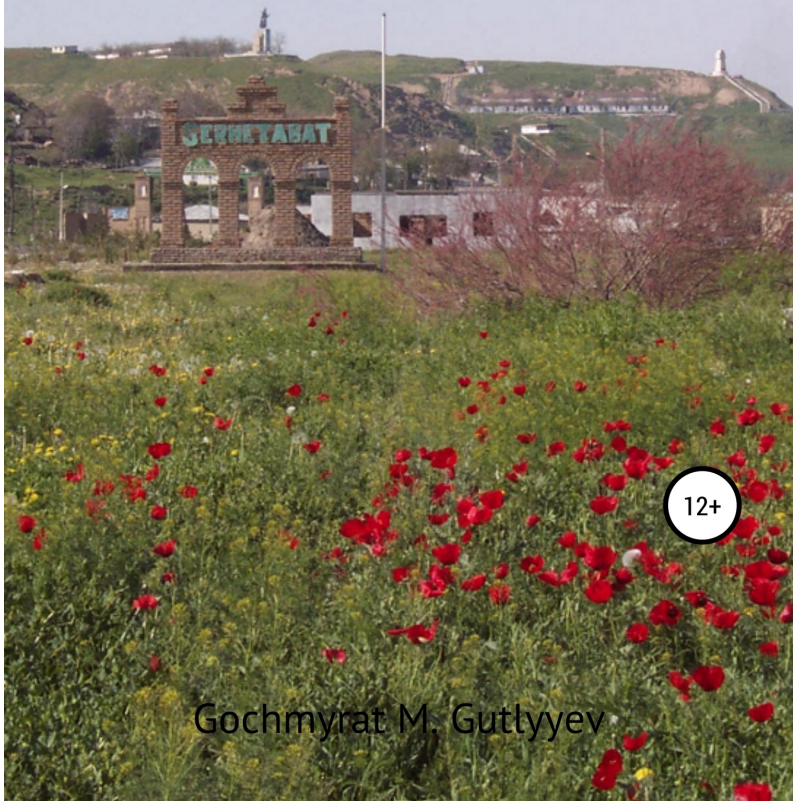


Feel yourself like at home



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Gochmyrat M. Gutlyyev

# Gochmyrat Gutlyyev

## Feel yourself like at home

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*SelfPub; 2019*

### **Аннотация**

Turkmenistan is a country throughout post-Soviet spaces where social tensions did not result in victims; where there were never armed conflicts on ethnic groups' or religious grounds. Probably, aspects of everyday life's culture are of great value. Current book of native inhabitant of Turkmen interior country is presented a view "from inside" to aspects of Turkmen' behavior in their everyday life. Style of narrating in a manner "eye-to-eye", bringing into it genre scenes from real life add a temptation into the reading .

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# Acknowledgments

When at 2002 I was asked to be an expedition master for visiting my areas American scientist Victor Fet of Huntington, West Virginia, I did not expect to meet my future “khalypa”<sup>1</sup>. Not only on ecology and wildlife, but in writing as well.

Next year honorable Victor introduced me to other outstanding person. Steven G. Torres of Sacramento, California then became my host-advisor (and my future to-become-true friend) while my participation in exchange program with a residence in his part of USA. It looked like I became a family business for him, his wife Alison and their daughters and, of course, for Alison’s mother. Just during a long friendly conversation with them I started to put into fragmentary pieces some ideas “to deliver my folks’ mentality to a compassionate foreigner”. Moreover, much later, at 2017, even not knowing my inward inclinations to write, Steve and Alison created some conditions for me to concentrate full attention to finalize my essays, leaving aside routine chores, and to compose the present book. It was initially in Russian.

Then Victor and Steve, when I undertook myself to translate it, kindly agreed volunteering to correct my “self-learnt and

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<sup>1</sup> “Khalypa” is Turkmen concept of a teacher, with philosophical and psychological meanings. It is more than a teacher in particular subject of study, or just a mentor. The person will be considered as a spiritual leader, giving lessons of life.

vernacular” English and to transform it into proper and accurate lines.

I appreciate their efforts sincerely and whole-heartedly.

Let me repeat once again: in the beginning I put my thoughts and ideas into short sketches and fragmentary notes. Then for some period of time I nearly threw away all those text or left them on book shelf. Fortunately, at 2007 I was invited to participate in Central Euroasia Leadership Academy where I met Nancy Crossman. She was a story writer for a group, which I studied in. The lady chased me under every occasion with her endless questions regarding different sides of my folks’ mode of life. And made it in such friendly and tactful manner that I even did not intend to wonder: “why are you asking only me, not other members of Turkmenistan’s group?”. On the contrary, just thanks to her curiosity at the year I decided to try writing a full size book on the issue (Turkmen’ traditions and mentality).

Briefly, I am considering all above mentioned distinctive personalities as true inspirers of the book, if not direct co-authors of it.

Also I wish to thank my both sons Akmukhamed and Nowruz, who truly backed me up while crossing a hardship of recent years. And they still stand elbow-to-elbow with me in present days.

# Foreword

*“Most of my important lessons about life have come from recognizing how others from a different culture view things.”*

*Edgar H. Schein*

In 2004 I was contacted by a representative from the United States Department of State, who asked if I would be interested in participating in an international program that sponsors scientists from other countries. At that time, I was working for the California Department of Fish and Wildlife as a senior scientist overseeing over 50 statewide wildlife conservation projects, including those that benefited large and small mammals as well as endangered species and multi-species projects. The State Department official described to me a program administered through the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), a non-profit organization that helps facilitate education and leadership opportunities worldwide. After learning more about this interesting program, I agreed to host a visiting professional from Turkmenistan. I was especially enthusiastic to participate because seventeen years earlier in 1987, I co-hosted a visiting scientist, Dr. Victor Fet, and his family – coincidentally also from Turkmenistan. Dr. Fet edited and co-authored “Biogeography and Ecology of Turkmenistan,” the first book to detail the flora and fauna of Turkmenistan.

As an ecologist and scientist, I became absolutely fascinated with this unique and ancient desert region that is home to so many important ancestral plant and animal species. The more I learned from Dr. Fet's book, the more enthralled I became with the Turkmen culture and other parts of Central Asia. To many westerners, this area in general and the Turkmen culture in particular, are relatively unknown.

I will always remember the first time I met Gochmyrat Gutlyyev at the Sacramento airport, where he arrived after about two weeks of intensive training from the State Department in Washington, D.C. – a crash course about American culture and customs. Not knowing what he looked like, I stood beyond the security checkpoint holding a sign with his name on it. I scanned the sea of people coming off planes until at last, a slender, dark-haired fellow wearing a navy blue wool pea coat spotted my sign. He immediately broke into a huge grin, a smile that animated his entire face. “You must be Gochmyrat,” I said. After we greeted each other, we got his luggage and I drove him to my home. My daughters had decorated our front door with a homemade sign that said, in brightly colored crayon, “Welcome, Gochmyrat!” I was anxious to get to know Gochmyrat and I also felt a huge sense of responsibility because I wanted him to have a good experience in this international exchange program. I tried to picture how he must be feeling: I imagined myself coming to a country on the opposite side of the planet, a country about which I knew only what I had read and what a crash course had just taught me.

Where would I even start? And what would it be like to stay with complete strangers?

The State Department official told me before Gochmyrat's arrival that his areas of expertise and interest for this internship were wildlife conservation and cultural tourism. Accordingly, I arranged for Gochmyrat to travel the entire state of California to visit various wildlife management and habitat conservation projects. These projects included studying the California Department of Fish and Wildlife's methods for developing water sources for wildlife in the California deserts, as well as catching and handling mule deer, bighorn sheep, mountain lions, and endangered species for several conservation and research projects. I also arranged for Gochmyrat to participate in several helicopter wildlife surveys and capture projects throughout the state. So that Gochmyrat could get the widest range of cultural experiences with different people and projects, I decided not to accompany him on many of these trips. Instead, I arranged his travels so that he could work and live with each project leader. I was impressed with his ability to adapt to these different settings, people, and personalities. I was very pleased with the positive feedback I received from my colleagues who truly enjoyed working with Gochmyrat and having him meet their families. Gochmyrat had excellent English language skills and he quickly endeared himself to me, my family, other professionals and their families. As a side note, I should say that I consider myself to be an adaptable, adventurous person and I enjoy travels and new

challenges. Yet I will admit to being humbled by Gochmyrat's ability to adapt and take risks – he is even better at it than I am!

Gochmyrat's visit was rewarding both professionally and personally. By the end of his visit, my colleagues and I (and our respective families) had developed a newfound knowledge about and respect for another part of the world – Central Asia in general, Turkmenistan in particular. We learned as much from Gochmyrat as perhaps he did from us. He was an excellent ambassador of his homeland, Turkmenistan. My colleagues and I developed an appreciation of the value of working with professionals and scientists from other countries. In fact, one of my colleagues, Dr. Vern Bleich, and I published a paper in a national wildlife science journal on the benefits of hosting international scientists. The editorial letter, called "On International Involvement in Wildlife Conservation," was published in 2004 (*Wildlife Society Bulletin* 32:1013-1014). Gochmyrat's visit ended with him having formed many friendships with scientists and their families, some of which will last a lifetime.

Over the past 15 years since his visit, Gochmyrat and I have stayed in frequent contact. He often sends me his writings, which I really enjoy. I have watched him blossom into a writer who can articulate the subtleties and nuances of different ethnic customs and cultures. In many of his essays, he contrasts Turkmen perspectives with that of other cultural perspectives. His work gives me new perspectives on my own country; as

I read his essays, I can be an “outsider looking in” and I recognize that westerners can have a somewhat ethnocentric attitude. So often, people in modern countries feel the need to develop or modernize other, so-called “underdeveloped” countries. Gochmyrat’s writings remind me that we westerners might be better served by appreciating that Turkmenistan has been at the crossroads of civilizations for many centuries and that we have a lot to learn here.

This book demonstrates Gochmyrat’s devotion to preserving Turkmen traditions and promoting cultural understanding. His pride in Turkmenistan and in preserving its heritage is obvious, and his approach to using experiences and stories to do this is very interesting and effective. He hopes his book will serve as a starting point “for a conversation“ (to use Gochmyrat’s words) for a cultural guide to prepare for a visit to Turkmenistan, and to encourage teaching Turkmen culture to other guides as representatives of Turkmenistan. Most importantly, Gochmyrat encourages all of us scientists, world travelers, and global citizens to take time to treasure our own heritage and culture and to enjoy learning that of others, so that the world can be a better place.

In thinking about this collection of Gochmyrat’s essays, I am reminded of a quote that my dear friend, Dr. Victor Fet (now at Marshall University), is fond of reciting by 18th century Turkmen National Poet Makhtumkul: “Brotherhood is our custom, friendship is our law.”

It is my dream to someday visit my friend in Turkmenistan.

*Steven G. Torres*

*California*

*March 2019*

# Preface

Even if the statement “sometimes for immediate effect it is best to begin a short story, a tale or mere conversation from its possible conclusion” is widely accepted, I am often inclined to use another, if not more, popular concept. The essence of this is paraphrased in the lyric “life is a ring, and ring has no beginning and has no end”.

It is not easy to explain how my dream to write this book was born, because with every passing day I get a stronger feeling that the idea has accompanied me for all of my life since childhood growing up in a remote multinational frontier town in Turkmenistan. Nevertheless, let’s start my story not from the end, but from the middle: In 2004 I was lucky enough to take part in an exchange program, within which I traveled “nearly on a foot tour” through several states of Pacific Coast of the United States. I was a guest, arriving from an unfamiliar country (of incomprehensible mentality and an unknown mode of life). This presented a serious riddle for Americans hosting me in their homes and families: how to receive me, what meals to offer, what to offer for entertainment during free time? As an illustration and to bring you a smile, let me share a small but expected example. Prior to my departure from Sacramento, California to southern California towards Mexican border, Leon Lesicka (my

next hospitable partner and future friend-to-become) phoned to Steven Torres (my host advisor and newly friend, already) and requested to tell me: “please, tell him to talk in full voice, because Americans prefer a LOUD voice in conversations.” The honorable Mr. Leon did not know in advance that I possess a low voice and very sharp hearing, that’s why I would prefer to talk quietly. But on other hand, he did not know if I would be able to meet unknown company easily, and be able to communicate effectively. In my two weeks I stayed in the small Californian town of Brawley, nearly right on Mexican border.

*I am underlying the fact because I also lived on another Southern state line, Afghanistan’s. Surely, nearly all Americans whom I interacted those days were not aware of my native country, Turkmenistan. That is why I decided to indicate its geographical location by stating – “I am living just on Northern border of Afghanistan. Let me to emphasis that my visit occurred after the tragic 9/11 event, when a shock was not subsided yet. And all Americans may know where the country is located.*

During our next friendly tea-drinking Leon suddenly said with warmth and sincerity “you are a really enjoyable guest”. It sounded so unexpected and strange for me that I asked right away to clarify what he meant. Just then I discovered that he had some apprehension anticipating my visit because during his long life (to the date about ninety years old) it was the first time he met a Turkmen, and he did not want to offend a visitor by not knowing some details of my culture or any sensitivities that I

might have. Of course, I was quick to calm my courteous host that the tradition of hospitality is imbibed into our blood as well as respecting others folkways, whose homes we would be staying. Leon and all his numbered family showed boundless patience and warmth towards me.

Much later, during the last week of my four months long tour in miraculous California, I remember sitting with Steven Torres himself in a cozy café at the outskirts of Sacramento at the local Farmers' Market. We talked thirstily, of endless themes and experiences. He reflected on my journey and challenges, and I needed to explain in more details, how “now-became-theirs” this visitor from the opposite side of the globe entered into their everyday mode of life relatively easy. My now true friend in half voice remarked: “I am astonished how calmly you are feeling yourself among us, Americans. If I should appear in strange country, I do not think I would be able to behave with the same confident manner among those folks”. I told him that there was a period of life where I was the leader of the only alpine club in Turkmenistan. My challenge was to introduce a course of lectures aimed for beginners that required considering the “subtle manners of behavior in remote areas, in order not to touch the feelings of local people”. And I added that even before this period of my life I developed my own steady habit to trying to find any written materials regarding a region and the people of it, as preparation for where I travel. Naturally I acted the same way too, when getting ready for a trip to the United States in

order to take part in Contemporary Issues Fellowship Program. That's why it was quite an explainable matter that in my case a cultural shock was not detected so sharply as it was for some of the other participants of our round. Besides, I was ready to face any habits/behaviors of Americans which might seem strange for a foreigner, and to expect their possible funny questions. Nevertheless, I made several observations on the issue which may cause a smile, even for those who experienced themselves with the Americans' mode of life.

I should admit that during a friendly party during this trip, I caught me myself with the worrisome fact (of course, not burst out aloud): "though, if preparing for a trip to my country, and try to look for literature related to everyday life of Turkmen, you would spend a lot of efforts for the task, and you would not find anything written in an intelligible style, at all..." Surely, there should be some dry scientific treatises covering a FEW aspects of traditions and rituals of Turkmenistan somewhere? But what about popular versions designed for a common person interested in the culture and customs of an unknown nation? Just then and there a vague idea started to develop in my mind: "why don't I try to write something like a guide-book on mentality, traditions and mode of life of my own folks?" Let me add that this idea was born not on a blank slate of stone, but laid into prepared soil, sorry for an agricultural concept.

I should mention that my second profession and dearest hobby is that of a cultural guide. I worked several years as a guide-

interpreter in tourism spheres (for few tourist agencies) in tight and direct contact with inquisitive guests of Turkmenistan, from many different countries in second half of the 1990's. So I was often needed to answer uninterrupted questions: For example, "What does your name mean? How do Turkmen greet each other and strangers? What is your traditional meal?" Plus, I needed to be ready for utterly unexpected requests for the presence of these totally unprepared guests. For instance, when I was leading a sightseeing tour of a unique mosque at the town of Annay located at outskirts of metropolitan Ashgabat, a Japanese group (themselves surprised) became invited guests at sadaka<sup>2</sup>, dedicated to the new birth of grandson and son after many long years of awaiting. It is understandably that ceaseless sizzles of photo cameras and buzzing of videos were started at once, because the Japanese "took aims" at all details of the exotic event for them. Part of this celebration included cooking a very caloric dishes for which their stomachs would be unaccustomed – pilaff in giant kazans<sup>3</sup>, chorba<sup>4</sup> with pieces of fat floating on a surface. Of course, they declined the courteous invitation of these cordial hosts and did not partake in the meals. So, how should you advise them to follow a national custom "duzyny datmak" ("to taste a

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<sup>2</sup> Sadaka – special ritual, an event to sacrifice in order to thank Heaven for a blessed support in life

<sup>3</sup> Kszan – a big round cauldron, of volumes between of 40-100 liter.

<sup>4</sup> Chorba – a traditional soup of mutton and onions. To diverse it is allowed to add potatoes and tomatoes.

salt”<sup>5</sup>)? They would need to be instructed about the history and expectations of guests and to caution them that certain behaviors or responses might be taken as arrogant “duzdan uly bolma” (“do not put yourself higher than a salt”) by locals. I interrupt the telling of this story at halfway, because unrolling the full story has a plot that will have several aims later. I’m doing this as an enticement, to maintain the curiosity and fascination of your reading: “what else happens later?”

I want to emphasize that during the first period of Independence of Turkmenistan (1991-2000), a flow of foreigners willing to visit our still mystic and mysterious country increased greatly. However, competent guides, speaking fluently in foreign languages and being themselves representatives of our national culture, were literally few. Therefore, not every person, who named himself “a guide-interpreter”, would accurately respond with passion to the ceaseless firing questions about “everyday mode of life”. Meanwhile, let me soothe my kind listeners and readers that I resolved these challenges without any special difficulties, to the great satisfaction and pleasure for all parties involved. I simply used my sharp sense of humor and understanding of important aspects these cultures and behaviors (both nations – Japanese and my own folks). Honestly at this time, if I had material on these issues that was written in the

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<sup>5</sup> “To taste a salt” – a ritual joining to a meal. A one should take at least a drop of bread or tiny portion of a course and eat it. It will be a token that he/she “shares” the meals. Refusing the procedure might be taken as rudeness and an offence.

manner of a folktales' narrator "like talking directly from the first person", it would have been much easier and more interesting to arrange a dialog with curious traveling guests.

Just then and there, while sitting at the table in cozy café, my initially shy idea was born: "maybe, to try to compose conversations from there and here?" I started by making initial fragmentary field notes, not yet linked to each other. Then my life faced some more urgent tasks and I was forced to put my notes into a far box. About a decade passed and my hair turned grey, and after participation in an international conference in 2007 the idea, now reinforced, returned to me again: "better that I do it myself, than to pass my idea to someone else". Why? – because participants from other countries have literally bombarded me with the same questions regarding my Turkmen countrymen. They were interested in everything – mentality, nature, and peculiarities of rural life.

Naturally, it is quite understandable that my resulting book does not pretend to be scientific in nature and represent the exact interpretations to the respective country's traditions. Therefore, exacting critics shouldn't be in a hurry to find disagreements and/or contradictions. This is the opinion of the author, my own attitude and experiences to this, and my deep and respectful understanding of Turkmen community life. I would even say – this is my invitation to a conversation, an incentive to examine other sources of supplementing information, and to establish a better understanding between cultures. There is a certain

abruptness to some of my essays and short stories; some that look like unfinished themes are made intentionally – to think over and find explanations yourself. Then a conversation with a reader can be among equals, not of a mentor with his students, shouldn't it? That's why once again I will interrupt this narrative on a half word...

Once again, I will remind you – this is a non-fiction book of my travels, not a detailed journal dissertation.

# The Greetings

*“A salam is not just yours,  
A salam belongs to the Almighty”*

*A proverb*

Do you know any other way to start a conversation, tactfully and friendly, when you meet anyone – be it an acquaintance or a stranger, a countryman or a foreigner, a person of your own tribe or a representative of another ethnic group, – if not with a greeting?

And which form of the address should one select – just “Hello!” or “How are you doing?” – based on a specific situation and for a specific audience?

True, some men and women are able to get in touch with any audience, with people previously unknown or only slightly familiar to them, or to enter into a conversation with a stranger quite easily and unconstrained just at very first minutes of a meeting even without a formal greeting such as “hello”.

As for myself, I might look at them with an admiring envy of their excellent communicative skills, honestly. For I had definite difficulties in my youth, sometimes, to start just an elementary conversation – even with an acquaintance, leave alone a stranger, due to certain features of my personality. However, just those initial seconds and minutes are the most important stages when

to create required mood of a meeting, to understand intentions of the visitor and to show your attitude towards him, are not they?

Therefore, naturally, styles and forms of greetings have their precious meaning in any culture, whatever the mentality of its people. That is of course, if one takes the subject much wider, without limiting the discussion exclusively to the complicated manner of the Turkmen in the field of addressing and greeting.

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