

A Society in Transition: Ismailis in the Tajik Pamirs

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1 Outline of the problem

The Western Pamir in the Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) is one of the poorest regions of Tajikistan. Numerous high mountain ridges are intersected by long and deep valleys, where villages and hamlets are located on marginal grounds. This geographical isolation of the GBAO people is one important reason for their cultural difference from most of the Tajik population. Whereas the majority of Tajiks are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi School, the Pamiris or Mountain Tajiks (with little exceptions only) are Shia Muslims of the Ismaili branch, followers of the Aga Khan (Olimova 1999).

The Pamir Mountains were isolated for centuries. With the interest of the Tsarist Russia in this strategic important area, the Pamirs got publicity and became a part of the Great Game, the strategic conflict between the British Empire in the South (Afghanistan and Pakistan) and the Tsarist Russian Empire for supremacy in Central Asia (Bliss 2006). Within the Soviet Union (1930 to 1990) the GBAO benefited from its important strategic position alongside the border to South Asia (Afghanistan, Wakhan Corridor) and China. On the one hand GBAO received heavy subsidies from Moscow, on the other, the Soviets showed a highly ambiguous attitude towards people's religious life. The latter constituted a tightrope walk for the Ismaili communities in practicing their faith and traditions.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and Tajikistan's declaration of independence in September 1991, the people of GBAO immediately lost their privileged position. With little arable land and no industry, people's life rapidly fell into extreme poverty. In addition to the economic decline the Pamiris suffered in another way: they supported the losing side of Tajikistan's civil war (1993-97). In retaliation, the national government did (and still does) not pay too much attention to the needs of the Pamiris. The survival during the first years of transition was only possible with humanitarian aid, provided mainly by the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN).

Under those secular socio-political conditions and the dramatic economic decline in most recent years, issues arise with regard to the population's religious life. The present paper addresses the Ismaili faith and traditions during the atheist Soviet period (the various ways the Pamiris tried to practice their religion) and highlights some recent developments in religious and cultural life since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The paper is mainly based on a Masters thesis at the University of Bern, Switzerland (Zimmermann 2006).

2 Methodological Approach

Investigations about the religious life of the Ismailis in the Pamirs are scarce. Only few written documents are available. Therefore, interviews with GBAO villagers serve as the main basis for the here presented research work.

The emphasis of the work is based on qualitative research interviews. At the most basic level Kvale (1996) defines qualitative research interviews as conversations where the interviewer tries to understand the world from the subjects' point of view. Miller and Glassner (1997) consider the respondents' answers as cultural stories, where the interviewees try to make their actions explainable and understandable by their narratives.

The method of the standardised interview was applied for all interviews, but the possibility to move to an open-ended interview was always given. The frame of the interview allowed the interviewee to respond directly to the questions as well as to narrate his/her „inner experiences” and emotions. A detailed questionnaire provided a certain structure in the interview and served as an aide-memoir, just in case the narration should drift away too much from the original issues.

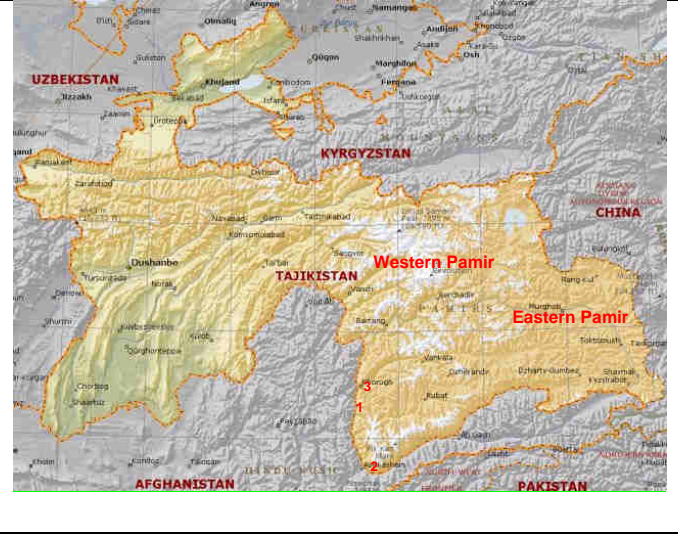
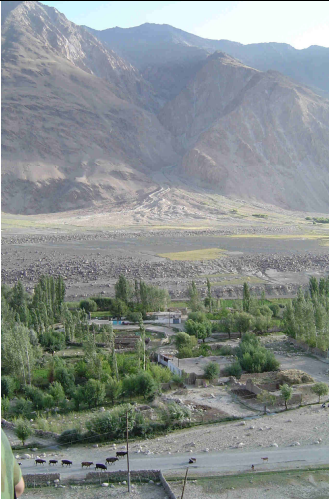
Interviews were conducted in different villages in the Western Pamirs in spring 2006; most of them in 3 places (see Plate 1). The interview partners (total number: 35), originating from 12 settlements, were villagers from “normal” families and few religious leaders (*mullohs* and *khalifas*). The interview partners were selected by a trusted friend of the author, originating from Pish but no longer living there. This person assisted in translating from the local language (*shugni*) into Tajik and/or English as some interview partners were not speaking Tajik. This person also provided valuable insight into the communities' life.

3 Study Area

Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (Tajik: Viloyati Mukhtori Kuhistoni Badakhshon) is a mountainous province of Tajikistan (Plate 1). It makes up 40% of the country's land area but only about 4 % of its population. According to AKDN¹, approximately 206,000 persons lived in GBAO in the year 2004. The Pamiris live in small towns and villages along the main valleys. The scarcity of water and the sophisticated irrigation system is the main reason for the concentration of people in distinct

¹ [http://www.akdn.org/mountains/Day%201/Presentation%20for%20Paper%201%20-20Jumakhonov%20\(Eng\).pdf](http://www.akdn.org/mountains/Day%201/Presentation%20for%20Paper%201%20-20Jumakhonov%20(Eng).pdf) Access 04.03.2006

settlements (Plate 2). Summer in Western Pamirs is warm, winter cold and partly humid (sometimes lots of snow triggering destructive avalanches).

	
<p>Plate 1: The Pamirs (Tajikistan): Main places for interviews: 1. Pish, 2. Ishkashim, 3. Khorog Map Source: http://www.acig.org/artman/uploads/map_tajikistan.jpg</p>	<p>Plate 2: Typical village near Ishkashim (Photo: BZ, Aug. 2003)</p>

Centuries of isolation in these high altitude valleys resulted in many different languages, different not only from the lowland Tajiks, but from one another. Almost each mountain community has its own dialect, in Western Pamir of Iranian origin, in Eastern Pamir of Turkish origin. Because Russian was the official language during the Soviet period, the Pamiri languages have been influenced by Russian. Across the international borders, Pamiris are able to communicate in Persian and Dari (Afghanistan), an important asset for intensive cultural and religious exchange.

The cultural traditions of the Ismaili communities in the Pamirs are derived from their ethnic origin. The various Ismaili communities living in GBAO share the same elements of their cultural beliefs, values and traditions, irrespective of their origins. However, the traditions sometimes differ slightly from place to place as for example the element of preparing milk with some meat in Pish in contrary to the preparing of milk with some butter and sugar in Ishkashim at an important stage of the wedding ceremony.

4 Ismailis' life under Soviet control

Economic and political frame

In the early 1920s, the establishment of Soviet rule in Central Asia led to the creation of a new entity called Tajikistan as a republic within the Soviet Union. The Soviet central authority followed a way that was culturally alien to the Tajik people. The

strong industrialisation as one Soviet doctrine did touch Tajikistan only marginally; the GBAO was almost completely omitted from this development. However, the location of GBAO was of such strategic importance to the Soviets that they subsidised the region strongly: about 80 % of the region's budget came directly from Moscow (Emadi 1998). In addition, the socialist system tried to deconstruct the old polity in GBAO. The Soviets built schools and a hospital, opened some small factories, provided various social services and collectivised agricultural land. With these developments they penetrated deep into the historically grown social structures and opened ways to shape a new society. While the Soviets saw religion as separate from and different to socialism and therefore suppressed Islam and Ismailism and looked for eradicating the system of Muslim law, the Ismailis of GBAO tried to find a form of co-existence with the Soviet system, without losing their traditional and religious values completely.

The Soviets' struggle against the ideology and the practises of the Ismailis was fierce (Olimova 1999). The Soviets observed Ismaili religious guides, adepts and teachers intensely. Many *khalifas* went underground or fled the country. Everybody who spread or practised religion somehow was put to jail or sent to Siberia. In 1936, another hardship hit the Ismailis in GBAO. The central power in Moscow as well as the communist party and the government of Tajikistan decided to close the borders to Afghanistan, because of the undesirable closeness to non-Soviet Afghanistan (Buškov and Kalandarov 2003: 112). By this action many family ties as well as cultural and religious contacts between the Ismailis of GBAO and their Afghan neighbours were cut through. Furthermore the connection with their Imam (Aga Khan III) in Bombay was interrupted and the Ismailis in GBAO could no longer get the *farmans*, the orders or guidelines coming from him. With time passing, they had the feeling of becoming forgotten. Nevertheless, they tried to maintain their own traditions and religion through a distinct behavioural pattern and various secret approaches. The most important activities repeatedly mentioned by the villagers are listed below.

Meetings in secret places

Despite the Soviet ideology and overall control system with KGB and snitchers the Ismailis of GBAO found ways to practice and increase their religious knowledge. An important means were widespread secret meetings in private homes. Several interview partners from different villages narrated about frequent secret meetings during night. Two people had to watch out for the police possibly approaching the house; one was posed on the roof, the other one outside the door. Inside, the *khalifas* or *mullohs* prayed with the people and read religious books. The following discussion provided ample possibilities for the villagers present to learn about their religion and to practice religious life. When a gathering with a religious leader deemed to be too dangerous, simply a villager took over his role. In addition to the secret meetings the *khalifas* maintained some sort of small schools for adults (*maktabho*), where they

educated interested people in various religious aspects. Such secret *maktabhos* existed in Gunt, Roshtkala, Bartang, Porshnev, Ishkashim, and Khorog. Even if the number was rather limited this type of education was considered to be very important for the Pamiri society.

Reading of prohibited (religious) literature

The Soviets were suspiciously looking for Arab and Persian literature. They completely prohibited speaking, reading and writing in these two languages. That's why people locked their books, their religious manuscripts and pictures from their Imam in boxes and buried them outside the house, often under the rocks behind the village. According to Buškov and Kalandarov (2003: 112) the Soviets accused people, who had such literature, of "anti-Soviet action". In spite of all precautionary measures the apparatchiks occasionally found religious literature or a picture of the Imam in an Ismaili household. They put these documents to fire and draconically punished the owner. One interview partner emotionally told that his grandfather, the *khalifa* from Khorog, was sentenced to jail for 16 years because of the possession of prohibited literature. The supply of new books was a critical endeavour. It only worked through Afghanistan. Sometimes men who were sent to Afghanistan for work or later for espionage brought prohibited documents and books back home to GBAO.

The reading of books and the discussion of their content was of utmost importance to learn about and to preserve Ismaili religious traditions, faith and ethics. As aforementioned, *khalifas* and *mullohs* read books to interested people whenever possible. Particularly the various masterpieces by Nasir-i Khusraw were (and still are today as many people told) very important to conserve the Ismaili faith, as they contain the essence of the Ismaili religion.

Unfortunately, many of these hidden documents got lost as the parents died without telling their off-springs the hide-out or the owner simply forgot over the years where he put his books. Today, many young people heavily regret this lost.

Performing traditional ceremonies

The use of traditional ceremonies was seen as an important way, some interviewees even said the only way, to learn about their religion. The two most important ceremonies in Ismaili life are *nikoh* (wedding) and *charoghravshan* (funeral). Others clearly enrich social (and religious) life.

In the 1960s and 70s the Soviets permitted a so-called "popular Islam". This enabled the families to perform a number of traditional ceremonies and even extend these to practice (hidden) religious rites like the New Year ceremony *navruz* (permitted) and *nikoh* (tolerated, but closely watched). The funeral ceremony *charoghravshan* was fully prohibited. The visit of *mazors* (holy place, shrine) was not considered as a religious act by the Soviets. People practised these traditional ceremonies in the private

sphere, never in the public because of the omnipresent Soviet observations. Teachers and people with a government job were particularly careful, and vulnerable. They risked losing their job immediately when they went too far in this popular Islam.

Navruz is celebrated during the vernal equinox. It is the time where the fieldwork starts, the period of planting wheat. The Soviets even published *navruz* in the newspapers and people could celebrate it openly. *Navruz* was acceptable for the Soviets, because New Year was celebrated in the whole world. In the Pamirs *navruz* was a very old, traditional holiday, where the families had to clean their house, cook some special food and visit all neighbours.

The visit of mazors All interviewees from the Wakhan (Bagush, Namadgut, Shirgin and Zong) mentioned the *mazors*. The word *mazor* derives from the Arabic, meaning “visit”. *Mazors* are holy places or shrines. It seems that parents and grandparents tried to transfer some religious matters to the children by visiting a *mazor* or by speaking about it.

Nikoh, which actually stands for the religious legislation of marriage, is normally used as synonym for the whole wedding ceremony. The Soviets did not like people celebrating *nikoh*. They watched it carefully.

Charoghravshan To participate in *charoghravshan*, the funeral ceremony, was a risk, because it was fully prohibited. Nevertheless, people held on this tradition, observing the necessary vigilance. During *charoghravshan* all people of the village were together and during this congregation the *khalifa* or *mulloh* could talk about the religion and they sang *maddohs*. The *maddoh*, the song of praise, consists of different kinds of religious poetry, mostly written in Tajik or Persian language. Especially by the singing of the *maddohs* the *khalifas* and *mullohs* had the possibility to propagate the spiritual and religious values of the Ismaili religion.

Praying

The question about praying turned out to be rather sensitive, because most of the interview partners had to answer that they did not pray during the Soviet period. They often seemed ashamed about it.

Some elderly people prayed, mostly in a separate, closed room. Many people said that they wanted to pray, but were afraid of being caught. They didn't want to put at risk their own, their father's or their relative's job as teacher or government worker. During the secret meetings, however, praying played an important role.

Educating children

The *khalifas* and *mullohs* educated their own children in religious affairs at home. Families, who wanted their children to be educated in religion as well, could send their children to the *khalifa's* or *mulloh's* house. But to do so was dangerous and one had to be very careful. Many interview partners told that they refrained from doing so.

During the interviews it became obvious that families with grandparents or elderly parents who lived as children in the pre-Soviet time were in a better position than the rest of the families. Grandparents and elderly people could pass on some knowledge about faith, ethics and traditions to the children.

Some families tried to transfer religious matters to their children by visiting a *mazor* and explaining the meaning of this place. To visit a *mazor* could be considered as a simple family trip.

5 Recent developments in the GBAO IsmÁÝÐID societies

Economic hardship overshadowing cultural development

The situation of the Pamiri Ismailis turned bad after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the following civil war. The subsidies from Moscow ended abruptly and the Tajik government neglected the region due to the Pamiris loyalty for the opposition during the civil war. The Soviet infrastructure soon broke down. Most of the productive generations were graduates of the sophisticated Soviet education system and lacked experience in farming. People had to reactivate their traditional tools like plough or hoe. And they had to learn from the old villagers how to farm, i.e. they went back to agricultural subsistence. However, this subsistence strategy barely sufficed for a living. Surviving was only possible due to the assistance of Aga Khan IV, who started providing humanitarian aid during the civil war.

Today, agriculture is the mainstay of the economy. Farmers produce wheat, barley, vegetables, grapes, fruits, and nuts. Livestock breeding is important as well. Agriculture is largely not mechanised and production is still insufficient for domestic food needs. Despite the international assistance people often cannot survive without the income generated by family members working abroad. According to Kreuzmann's field survey in 2001 (Kreuzmann, 2003) between 75 and 90 % of all households in GBAO had at least one family member working in Pakistan or Russia (labour migration).

This economic hardship very often came up during the interviews. Many interview partners mentioned missing jobs, declining infrastructure, poor or missing school opportunities, poor health conditions and finally meagre food supply. This last point, however, one would never realise when invited in a Pamiri house: the hospitality is overwhelming. Despite the economic problems and overall poverty the cultural and religious life awakened again und has definitely strengthened during the past 10 years. In the course of almost all interviews the local population showed openly their pride for their Ismaili being with clear traditions, beliefs and values. Obviously, they are revitalising their cultural and religious heritage, partly with the help of Aga Khan Institutions and with the knowledge of the old villagers. The interest of the young

generation in this development is striking. The following developments could be recognised in the Pamiri society:

Strengthened traditions and religion

It became obvious that the traditional and religious culture of Ismailism could survive under the Soviets despite suppression and a climate of fear. The ideological gap created by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the intensive bid for his believers from the Imam's side nurtured the Ismaili consciousness. Especially since the first visit of Aga Khan IV in 1995 in GBAO the traditional and religious awareness and activity has strengthened. There is a clear intensification concerning the following of traditional and religious practices as pointed out by many villagers.

Old traditions: People try to reactivate old traditions that often originate from Zoroastrian days, like the burning of *strachm*, the holy herb that is used to ward off evil and bring blessings upon the house and those who participate in this ritual. They are also still fond of *tashdobs* and *tumors*, the written charms against illness or for the fulfilling of one's wishes. Many people still believe in supernatural forces.

Traditional religious ceremonies: During the interviews it turned out that *charoghravshan* is the most important ceremony for today's Ismailis. *Nikoh*, the wedding ceremony, is very popular as well. Especially women like to talk about it. For both ceremonies people need the assistance of a *khalifa*. The two ceremonies are strictly followed and people clearly enjoy today's freedom of practice. ITREB (Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board; an Ismaili organisation working in partnership with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, to strengthen the religious heritage) is promoting the correct course of these traditions. According to one interview partner, ITREB teaches the *khalifas* to perform *charoghravshan* in its very traditional way, emphasising on the singing of *maddohs*, the song of praise. These songs consist of different kinds of religious poetry, mostly written in the Tajik or Persian language. Many of these *maddoh* texts went lost during the Soviet period; they have to be reintroduced and its use strengthened. Another important element of *charoghravshan* is the use of candles made from cotton stripes, sometimes from wood during the ceremony.

The *maddoh* is not only performed as part of the funeral ceremony, but also as an own religious or artistic practice. The poetry can be either of classical Persian mystic poetry (often related to the poetry of Rumi and Hafiz) or of modern poetry devoted to the veneration of the Ismaili Imams.

The interviews revealed that the tradition of *nikoh* (wedding ceremony) enjoys a real revival as people can celebrate it now openly (Plate 3 and 4). Although many young couples like to celebrate with their friends in a western style in Khorog or Dushanbe, the traditional way of celebrating *nikoh* in the village is an absolute must.



Plate 3: Wedding ceremony in Pish, April 2006:
At about ten o'clock in the morning the wedding day starts in the house of the groom with the *Sartaroshon*, the traditional hair-cutting and shaving



Plate 4: Wedding ceremony in Pish, April 2006:
The *khalifa* reads the *Hutbai Nikoh* (Prayer on Nuptials) and prepares milk with butter and a small piece of meat. The couple is considered to be married after they both have tasted the special food.

Religion: According to Karim (2000), the two most important elements of today's Pamiri Ismailis are to devote to their present Imam and to increase their knowledge about their Ismaili history and religion. The interviews clearly proofed the importance of these two aspects:

Almost everybody said that he is praying today. Most persons mentioned that they started to do so after the first visit of their Imam in 1995. Only two interview partners admitted that they are not praying. The older one (a 60 years old man) said: "Today I am also not praying, but I respect the *farmons* coming from our Imam." In all houses visited, a portrait of today's Imam, Aga Khan IV, can be found in a privileged corner. People feel very grateful towards their Imam.

The binding *farmons* coming from the Imam, the educational series of the *ta'lim* books (*akhloq va ma'rifat*) for children and ITREB are three terms which were mentioned during almost all interviews. This underlines the importance for the religious and ethical education and a good behaviour in the daily life of today's Ismailis. People recognize in this kind of education the basis of their Ismaili history, religion and ideology.

The Ismailis of GBAO consider a good general education of their children as extremely important. The Imam, who promotes education in all of his Ismaili communities, ordered AKDN to invest in infrastructure, improve basic conditions for teachers at public schools, and reform teacher training in GBAO. Within this modern and liberal education, AKDN provides a special religious education for children. These lessons are provided once or twice a week within the regular school classes. Children learn about the Islam in general, their Ismaili history, God, their Imams as well as about ethics, daily life, nature, science and other countries.

The *dasond*, the tax that every believing Ismaili is supposed to tribute to the Imam (12½ % of the gross income) is well known in GBAO. However, the Pamiris are allowed to give an amount according to their economic ability. Aga Khan IV is not that strict concerning this matter; he might think that the Pamiris first have to recover. A part of the collected money remains in and for the community and the rest is given to the Imam. The villagers very much acknowledge this system.

Religious demarcation and an invigorated Ismaili ethnicity

Pamiri Ismailis clearly stress the difference between themselves and the rest of the Tajik population. Although they emphasise the equality of all human beings, they have a certain animosity towards the Sunnis, because the majority of the mainly Sunni Tajiks consider the Ismaili Pamiris as *kafirs* (unbelievers). But this is true also the other way round. Pamiri Ismailis maintain a clear distance towards the Sunnis in the region and do not like to strive for assimilation with their neighbours. Mixed marriages are still rare - the main obstacle is religion. Even workers abroad try to stick to each other and are hesitant to be too close with others, as a number of interview partners mentioned. One person having studied in a former Soviet country told that she was reprehended by her family because she maintained contact to a Tajik.

In general, people are proud to be Pamiri and Ismaili, or vice versa. They like to talk about their roots, their families, their religion and traditions and they like to underline that they were able to constitute their own identity over time. When asked about their nationality, Pamiris would always explain that they are Tajik citizens but of course not of Tajik origin. This strengthened Ismaili ethnicity is proudly emphasised by almost all locals.

Family ties and gender issues

Social changes during the Soviet period and in today's post Soviet era are obvious. Nevertheless the Pamiri Ismailis remained a very traditional society. Familial bonds, mutual dependence of extended family members and the respect for the elders of the family are important traits of this society. Since the mid 90s these societal values are regularly addressed in the *farmans* by Aga Khan IV. The Imam encourages the Pamiris to live, maintain and even increase these positive qualities, and he clearly calls for a modern style Islam.

The respect people show for their *khalifas*, for old people and for guests is remarkable. The mother has a very privileged status: nobody would dare to act against the will of his/her mother. Although they like to make fun of and with their mother in a loving way, they would first ask their mother for advice when facing a problem.

According to Falkingham (2000) women played a central role in the private sphere of the family before the Soviet period. During the Soviet presence gender equality in the public sphere was emphasised. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union one can see a

slow growing of gender inequality due to the political and economic transition. By the reason that it became difficult for everybody to get a job after the collapse of the Soviet Union, women were the first to remain at home and to learn to adopt “the old roles”, meaning only to be responsible for the domestic sphere. Since the independence of Tajikistan there has been a dramatic change in the gender balance within politics. Women had been forced back into subsistence production, housework, and, if possible, small trading in order to cope with the very difficult economic situation. Due to these circumstances women no longer had time to participate actively in the “public” decision-making scene, even at the local level.

A deep fear for a cultural and economic regress was sometimes aired during discussions, obviously indicating to the positive side the Pamiris experienced under the Soviets. With the collapse of the Soviet Union the guarantee for certain progress, development and “liberalism” (here compared to the situation in Afghanistan) is at stake. For a number of people, maybe mainly those who have closer links to Dushanbe and even other parts of the world, this constitutes a threat to the whole society. They are afraid of losing what they gained under the Soviets.

Concluding remarks

The Ismaili beliefs, religion and traditions could easily be retrieved from the Soviet era. Despite of denying any religiosity, of close observation of traditional ceremonies and harsh punishment for following religious rites the Soviets were not able to eradicate the spiritual life of the Pamiri society. The local inhabitants developed various strategies to maintain a certain level of (secret) religiosity and to fully benefit from the so-called popular Islam, even if this was limited to the private sphere. They practised their traditions and their religion according to the circumstances and possibilities, although caution and fear were always present.

Nowadays people do not quarrel with the fate of lost opportunities for religion or traditions during the Soviet era, and they do not condemn the Soviet system. Moreover, most persons acknowledge the secular (economic) benefits they enjoyed within the Soviet Union. People were content to have a job, several subsidies and other benefits, including, for instance, cultural activities, but in general the Pamiris were (and still are) proud to be Ismailis. They never tried to be Soviets; but they simply tried to cooperate with the imposed system.

Today Ismaili Pamiris define themselves not only about their religion. To be an Ismaili affects all elements of one’s life. It is an ideology consisting of ethnic-cultural as well as religious aspects. The provision of humanitarian assistance, the creation of institutional capacity in the fields of health, education, agriculture, infrastructure, culture and religion, the agencies of the AKDN and the Institute of Ismaili Studies addressed not only the desperate livelihood conditions but also add to the social and cultural life of the Pamiris. The religious and traditional life clearly invigorated in the last 10

years. People like to practice and live again their traditions, beliefs and values openly. The huge support by the Aga Khan institutions in all areas of life created a profound adoration of the Imam Aga Khan IV. This obvious dependence in economic, social, and cultural terms is never seen as a burden - in contrary it is considered as a huge asset.

Nevertheless, a deep (hidden) fear for a social and economic regress was sometimes aired. There is a fear of losing what was gained during Soviet Union. This relates to education, health, and infrastructure but as well to gender or family-related issues. The appeals of Aga Khan IV to strive for knowledge, pluralism, modernity, personal responsibility and at the same time for preservation of the traditions fall, in general, on open ears. There is hope that strengthened traditions and religion are compatible with modernity and pluralism.

Acknowledgment

Consistent support, guidance and inspiration from many sources were offered during the whole research. Prof. Dr. Anke von Kügelgen (University of Bern, Switzerland) gave constant academic and personal support. A lot of people in Tajikistan, Great Britain and Switzerland provided assistance in many ways (e.g. a wonderful DVD about Nasir-i Khusraw in Badakhshan, transportation to the Pamirs, many interesting discussions and advices, correction of the English text).

Dr. Sharifa Khudobakhshova served as a local guide, translator and a wonderful friend during the field stay in the Pamirs. The hospitality of Gulnora in Pish and Munira in Ishkashim remains unforgettable. The largest thanks however are entitled to the family of the authoress.

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