



BRILL

Journal of Persianate Studies 4 (2011) 171-188



brill.nl/jps

Paving the Way: Isma'ili Genealogy and Mobility along Tajikistan's Pamir Highway

AU1

Till Mostowlansky¹
[please supply affiliation]

Abstract

This article is an ethnographic study of Isma'ili communities along the Pamir Highway. "The road," as it is referred to locally, links Southern Kyrgyzstan with settlements in the eastern part of Tajikistan; its construction traces back to Soviet modernization policy. However, the highway's construction in the course of the twentieth century led not only to a physical, but also a social transformation of the region. Labor migration of Isma'ili Tajiks to various settlements along the road resulted in ethnically and confessionally mixed communities. Thus, the Pamir Highway as an ethnographic point of reference provides an entry to discussion of topics such as genealogy, identity, diaspora, and the notion of an Isma'ili heartland.

Keywords

Isma'ilis, Tajikistan, roads, modernity, genealogy, diaspora, identity

*Roads may look resilient but their lives are finite and,
in the great scheme of things, short.*
(Joe Moran, *On Roads*)

Introduction

Up in Murghab, the Eastern Pamirs' administrative center, there is a place called PATU. The acronym stands for the Russian term *Pamirskoe avtotransportnoe upravlenie* and denotes the transport directorate that was in charge of road maintenance in Tajikistan's easternmost region. In Soviet times, the PATU of the district town of Murghab was a housing estate that included a garage and a motel for lorry drivers as well as shops and a snack bar. PATU, or "lorry fleet" (*avtobaza*) as it is sometimes called, provided work and shelter for

¹ I would like to express my gratitude for comments and criticism to Jo-Ann Gross (The College of New Jersey) and Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz (University of Bern).

several Isma'ili families, most of whose members were involved in driving, road construction, car repair work, or the food service industry.

According to its inhabitants, PATU used to be a "happy" and "busy" place until the 1990s due to dense traffic on the Pamir Highway from Osh to Khorog. Today, business has gone. The motel and snack bar have moldered, cattle grazes on the desert soil and there is not much work except for that occasioned by infrequent visits by Chinese lorry drivers. However, despite the stressed economic situation in Murghab, the Isma'ili families with whom I conducted fieldwork² from 2008 to 2010 have no intention of leaving PATU, to which they migrated from the 1960s onwards. In this article I seek to explore reasons for the mobility of Isma'ili families and communities along the transport routes in the Tajik Pamirs. Furthermore, I attempt to analyze how migration and settlement are explained and legitimized through genealogy, history, and the notion of an Isma'ili heartland.

Along the Road

The term "Pamir Highway" describes a part of the Central Asian road network that connects the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) with the Tajikistani capital Dushanbe as well as Osh in Southern Kyrgyzstan. While far from being a "highway" in the strict sense of the term, the *Pamirskii trakt* (as it was officially known in the Soviet Union) is locally referred to as "the road" (*roh* in Tajik, *jol* in Kyrgyz, and *doroga* in Russian). The road, which constitutes an essential supply line between Osh and Khorog, has been under construction since the 1930s and led to a fundamental reshaping of the region.³ The construction of the Osh-Khorog road link not only facilitated movement between two geographical points but also provided access to Murghab, a region located between the two, which had been sparsely populated before the 1930s (see Bliss, 98). Nowadays, Murghab is a district (*nohiya*) of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region and includes large parts of the Eastern Pamirs' desert high plateau. The maintenance of the road under conditions of extreme climatic differences, high altitude, avalanches, and erosion means constant reconstruction. That is why in the course of the twentieth century a network of settlements, car repair shops, and duty posts was established along

² This article is based on data I collected during twelve months of field research in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan between 2008 and 2010. I choose to anonymize my informants' names and to blur their identities when necessary.

³ For the social impact of road construction, see Dalakoglou; Khan; Kreutzmann; Masquelier; Roseman.

the road. While there is a long history of mobility through the Eastern Pamirs prior to that, the road and its infrastructure provided a framework for the first permanent settlements and subsequent migration to Murghab district.

The administrative center of Murghab district (of the same name) is located halfway between Osh and Khorog. Murghab is a small district town with a population of approximately 7,000⁴ that is divided into Sunni-Kyrgyz and Isma'ili-Tajiks. Whereas the road section between Murghab and Osh is almost exclusively inhabited by Kyrgyz, the settlements along the road to Khorog are mixed as far as Koitezek, a mountain pass that indicates the descent to the Ghunt valley.

The categories "Kyrgyz" and "Isma'ili" are only schematic representations of much more complex descriptive patterns in everyday life. These categories are, however, important terms of self-representation in Murghab. While the term "Kyrgyz" refers to ethnicity, but also indicates a Sunni orientation in regard to religion, "Isma'ili" means belonging to the transnational Isma'ili community (see Steinberg, 87-106), but subsequently also refers to an Iranian mother tongue, Pamiri (*pomiri*) origin and official Tajik ethnicity.⁵ It is important to note, however, that the function and application of these terms vary from context to context.

PATU, Murghab's former "lorry fleet," is not the only place where Isma'ili families started to settle from the end of World War II onwards. Generally, Murghab is divided into Kyrgyz, Isma'ili, and mixed quarters. Even though these boundaries are not consistent, they play a vital role when inhabitants of Murghab refer to the spatial dimensions of their town. From a Kyrgyz perspective, visiting an Isma'ili family⁶ would often mean that "you go to PATU" (*PATUga bara jatasyn*) or "you go to the customs office" (*tamozhnyiga bara jatasyn*). Thus areas are indicated where the majority of Isma'ilis lives and where most governmental institutions have been located since Soviet times. The area between PATU and the customs office is usually called "center," *markaz* in Tajik or *tseñtr* in Russian. Both geographic points are connected through an alley called "Lenin Street" where the KGB and other governmental agencies were situated and which is hallmarked by an imposing Lenin statue. The fact that many Isma'ili families still live and own houses in the district of former Soviet authority indicates their important role in reshaping the Eastern

⁴ This figure is based on data from the local administration in Murghab for the year 2008.

⁵ For historical descriptions of the Isma'ili tradition in Central Asia, see Niyozov; Elnazarov and Aksakalov. For recent ethnographic accounts, see Almazova, ed.

⁶ While Isma'ilis mainly use three terms of self-description, "Isma'ili," "Pamiri," and "Tajik," the Kyrgyz refer to Isma'ilis by the term *pamirlik* ("Pamiri"). *Pamirlik*, however, includes being of Isma'ili faith and having a Pamiri mother tongue.

Pamirs' political, cultural, as well as socio-economic landscape in the course of the second half of the twentieth century.

The Modernization of Belonging

Sultonsho (Soltān-shāh) was fixing a white Tangem when I met him for the first time in PATU. Tangems are Chinese minibuses that are slowly replacing Soviet cars in Tajikistan. Due to its low fuel consumption the Tangem became popular in the Pamirs in recent years, though it is hardly the type of car that best fits the bumpy highway. That and its lack of cargo room provoke numerous jokes about the Tangem all over the region. Sultonsho's funny remarks from the car pit about the luxurious appeal of the Tangem's cramped seats to small Chinese guys made us both laugh. These laughs were the beginning of a friendship that gave me a deep inside perspective into the Isma'ili life of the Eastern Pamirs. Every time I returned to Murghab between 2008 and 2010 I learned more about Sultonsho's extended family network within and beyond Murghab. And I soon realized that the existence of this network, which began to grow over the last four decades, influences the worldview of its members even if they do not frequently move in the tracks of their relatives and friends.

Sultonsho is in his late-thirties. Just after he was born in a village in the Upper Ghunt valley in the 1970s, his family moved to Murghab where his father had found work as a car mechanic. Sultonsho's father describes life in the lower parts of the Pamirs as difficult at that time. "There wasn't much land, we were a lot of children in the family, and the village was growing in general. That's why I decided to take the job in Murghab," explains Sultonsho's father during one of the many afternoons we spent drinking tea together in PATU. Moving from a village in the Ghunt valley to Murghab meant a change from a linguistically and religiously consistent community to a place shaped by the presence of different ethnic and religious groups. Founded as a Russian military fort (*Post pamirskii*) at the end of the nineteenth century,⁷ Murghab developed into an important road supply station in the 1930s.⁸ As Sultonsho's father remembers, the population of Murghab mainly consisted of Kyrgyz, Soviet army, and Tajiks (which mostly means Isma'ili families) at the time he moved there.

⁷ See Bliss, 73. For Soviet opinions on political and economic change in the Pamirs in the course of the twentieth century, see Masov, ed.; Maanaev and V. Ploskikh, eds., 99-141.

⁸ For the early history of the road, see Slavinskii, ed.

The move from Ghunt to Murghab not only involved a fundamental change in terms of the cultural environment, but also signified an ecological and climatic movement from an agricultural mountain village (*qishloq*) to high altitude desert (*pustina*).

Sultonsho explains this process of change to me in terms of a binary opposition:

While people in the village (*qishloq*) remained as they were, we took on different jobs (*digar kor*) and developed a different life-style. We became modern (*zamonavi*) and are very modern (*kbele zamonavi*) now. Pamiris in Murghab were well educated. They were teachers, mechanics, drivers, party members, road constructors, and border guards. And they traveled the region.

Becoming modern, on the one hand, meant to be involved in the Soviet enterprise to uplift all people and regions to a similar degree of modernity.⁹ This is implied by the Russian term *sovremennyi* (or *zamonavi* in Tajik and *zamanbap* in Kyrgyz) that is commonly used in Central Asian languages. *Sovremennyi* means not only “modern” but also “contemporary,” and therefore points to a notion of development that is based on overcoming a backward past. On the other hand, *sovremennyi* is often used in Central Asia to distinguish between city and village culture. The example of Murghab shows, however, that such cultural differences are not necessarily defined through the size of a settlement, but rather through its function in a region and its inhabitants’ lifestyles.

The town of Murghab was built in order to administer the sensitive border region with China and Afghanistan and to serve as transport hub for supplying other parts of Gorno-Badakhshan. In contrast to surrounding Kyrgyz villages, the district town (*rayon*) is not only ethnically mixed, but its inhabitants are also of very diverse regional backgrounds. While the Kyrgyz inhabitants of the town self-identify as members of various descent groups (*uruu*), the Isma‘ilis often emphasize their regional belonging and respective languages and dialects.

Although Sultonsho was born in the Ghunt valley where Shughni is predominantly spoken, his mother tongue is Bartangi. Bartang is a river valley just north of Ghunt and belongs to the district of Rushon. Whereas both dialects, Shughni and Bartangi, belong to the Pamir branch of the Southeastern Iranian languages, there are differences in grammar and vocabulary. In Sultonsho’s family, however, the most important element of difference is expressed through a dimension of identity that is defined by genealogy. The

⁹ For the concept of “multiple modernities,” see Eisenstadt. For its adaption to a Central Asian environment, see McBrien.

majority of Bartangis who now live in the Upper Ghunt valley migrated there at the beginning of the twentieth century. Sultonsho's uncle Faruh (Farrokh), who still lives in a village in Ghunt, calls the period that followed migration "after Sarez" (*ba' di Sarez*). He points to an event that is still widely discussed in Murghab as a dramatic period in the history of the Eastern Pamirs.

In 1911, an earthquake led to the formation of a gigantic natural dam in Bartang (Abdullaev and Akbarzadeh, 187). When part of the narrow valley started to fill up with water and turned into a lake, many Bartangis lost their property and land. The lack of land is also what Faruh defines as the main reason for migration. While pastures in Bartang were disappearing, there was still land left in the high altitude part of Ghunt. For Sultonsho and his family, Bartang is not only a contemporary place with living relatives, but also a point of remembrance with its own historical time. This became clear to me on several occasions while talking to Bartangis, but it especially struck me during a walk with Sultonsho through the small bazaar of Murghab. It was a freezing winter day, but when the intense mountain sun came out of hiding we stopped at the entrance from where one can view the long-stretched town at the slope. After a while Sultonsho said, "Every single person in Murghab has some home place outside the town. But this town is still the place where most of us have grown up. It's homeland now (*rodina*)." Back home in PATU, I tried to find out more about Sultonsho's other place of belonging:

Till: You talked about other places Murghabi people come from earlier at the bazaar...

Sultonsho: Yes, I mean as we come from Bartang, there are Ishkashimis, Shughni people, and of course Kyrgyz who used to live in different places according to their family descent. I think Murghab itself wasn't an important pasture in earlier times.

Till: And you still go and visit Bartang?

Sultonsho: Yes, of course. From time to time if work allows me... Bartang is a pure, serene place. Wherever you go, people will invite you to their homes and feed you with meat. My wife and me, we couldn't eat for a week after our last visit.

While we were both still smiling about Pamiri hospitality and its few unpleasant side effects, Sultonsho went on with his talk and told me about his ancestors' migrations. During an unspecified time (*davno, davno*), Sultonsho's ancestors supposedly migrated from Iran to Bartang. According to his father's memories, the Iranian ancestors were part of the religious elite—a status that the family has inherited until today. Sultonsho's contemporary relatives still include Isma'ili *khalifas* and *domullos*, professions that often include access to supernatural powers.

Till: Iran is far away from Bartang. Why did they come to the Pamirs? And how did they come?

Sultonsho: I have no exact idea why they came to Bartang, but I suppose they were guided. In our family, it is said that they traveled on trunk trees.

Till: Oh, amazing... I didn't think about that option...

Sultonsho: Yes, at that time, it was a very common thing for *domullos*. I can't imagine myself, but this was really in ancient times (*v drevnosti*).

Till: You mean that this skill doesn't exist anymore?

Sultonsho: No, of course not. People are modern (*sovremennye*) now, we don't have such skills and would only abuse them.

In Murghab, it is a widespread opinion that Soviet modernization led to the rationalization and oblivion of ancient cultural skills. While this is also true for many Isma'ili villages, Murghab is perceived as a distinctively modern place since the town itself is a product of the Soviet planning landscape. Such places can be found all over the former Soviet Union and were often meant to support specific infrastructural projects (such as the Pamir Highway). Another prominent example in Tajikistan is the dam town of Norak in the western part of the country. Norak was built in the 1960s in order to provide shelter for engineers and workers (and their families) involved in the construction and maintenance of the dam and hydroelectric station (Abdullaev and Akbarzadeh, 156).

Since the beginning of its existence, Murghab has served three main purposes that are closely interconnected: to provide access to and administration of a sensitive border region, to provide a support line to the town of Khorog at the Afghan border, and to involve the region's inhabitants in broader Soviet discourse by the means of education and mobility. These points and their side effects have led to what Sultonsho defines as "modernity" (*sovremennost'*) in the sense of a deficient, but (positively) developing category. This category includes everything that defines the status quo of human development in the Eastern Pamirs—the loss of specific skills through abandoning a distinctively religious way of life, an ever growing, mobile family network from Osh, London, and Moscow, as well as a means of technology and infrastructure that allows a glimpse beyond the peaks of Gorno-Badakhshan.¹⁰

¹⁰ This first of all applies to the context of trade and labor migration. For literature on labor migration from Tajikistan, see Olimova and Bosc; Olimova and Olimov; Jones et al.

From Osh to Khorog and Back

During field research conducted between 2008 and 2010, I traveled approximately 7,000 kilometers on the road between Osh and Khorog. Thus, being on the road in shared taxis became an important aspect of my work. I could observe how people of different ethnic origin and citizenship interacted on these long and tiring trips through potholes and rivers, how they welcomed the journeys as a change from daily routine in summer, and how they established strong feelings of community commitment when we got stuck in the winter. At the beginning, I was considered an exotic outsider in these cars since I had not yet learned what “being from the Pamirs” is all about. But with growing experience in leading a local life, which includes appreciation for *shir choi*¹¹ as well as organizing fuel in the middle of nowhere, I was finally described as somebody who has “learnt the Pamirs” (*sen Pamir okudung*). Step by step, I also got to know most officials at checkpoints, road constructors in their camps along the highway, and the *dormasters* who live with their families in duty stations at the roadside and are responsible for monitoring damage, climate, and movement. Due to these contacts I was usually invited to homes along the road and could explore the extended Isma‘ili family networks of the region. Thus, I not only had encounters with Sultonsho’s relatives but also with other families that frequently travel between Osh and Khorog.

It was a chilly summer morning when a Murghabi Kyrgyz driver picked up passengers at our houses. When it was my turn, there were already four passengers in the cream-colored Volga. I squeezed into the backseat together with three other men and we went off to Osh in a city car that was hardly suited to cross-mountain passes above 4,000 meters. On the 16-hour journey from Murghab to Osh, with various car breakdowns and hassles at checkpoints, I got to know all of the passengers. But one of them became my friend and a constant source of information on the region.

Holiknazar (Khāleq-nazar) is a middle-aged Isma‘ili. He was born in Murghab and still lives in the house where he was born on the hill above the bazaar. However, he married an Isma‘ili girl from Osh and usually travels to the Kyrgyzstani city twice a year. In summertime, he sends his children to Osh so they can stay there with their grandparents and eat fruits and vegetables that are not available in the Eastern Pamirs. The day we met he was on the way to Kyrgyzstan to visit his family. After an exhausting journey we decided to meet regularly in Osh and afterwards spent many an evening together

¹¹ Shughni for “salty milk tea with butter” (Kyrgyz *ak chai*). *Shir choi* serves as basic meal throughout the Pamirs.

drinking beer and waiting for the coolness of the night. Holiknazar's family owns a house in Osh that is located in the eastern part of the city. As in Murghab, most of the Isma'ili families live in the district of the former PATU. And as in Murghab, this district was built for workers who were involved in the organization and realization of supply traffic to Gorno-Badakhshan. From the 1930s onwards, Osh used to be the center for the establishment of a supply line to the Pamirs, and the need for a well-organized road network from the Fergana Valley to Khorog became obvious.

An insightful source of information in regard to the early process of paving the way between Osh and Khorog is a collection of essays about the construction of the Pamir Highway that was published in 1935 (Slavinskii, ed.). In the preface, the editor emphasizes the fact that "the fight for the road" (*bor'ba za dorogu*) was perceived as an essential part of establishing socialism in the periphery (*okraina*) of the country.

The recent years brought a final stroke to the roadlessness of Kyrgyzia. By now we have highways instead of mountain paths in many districts. Instead of camel and ox now the Soviet car speeds up on these roads. And instead of isolated districts there is now one connected and unified economic whole where there used to be inaccessible periphery until recently (idem, 3).

Nowadays, this erstwhile "economic whole" is no longer directed from the city of Osh. The Eastern Pamirs and Southern Kyrgyzstan are now separated by a national border that includes a range of checkpoints with side effects such as taxes, bribery, and contraband. However, as a point of economic and educational orientation, Osh remains important to the Pamirs, even though lorries bound to Murghab and Khorog are now a matter of private entrepreneurial initiatives. The fading transport between the PATUs of Osh and Murghab has also affected the Isma'ili community of the city. Few young people are willing to stay in Southern Kyrgyzstan, which is above all perceived as politically unstable and economically underprivileged.

Alisho (‘Ali-shāh) is an elder member of the Isma'ili community in Osh and lives in PATU. Despite the fact that he has spent most of his life in the city, Alisho seeks an opportunity to sell his house and move back to his place of origin in the Ghunt valley. His life story is closely connected to the history of the Pamir Highway between Osh and Khorog. In 1949, when he was a young boy, Alisho set out for a long period of journeys between various locations along the road. As many boys from the Upper Ghunt valley at that time, Alisho was forced to leave his home due to existential shortages in the post-war period:

There was little food . . . the time after the war was hard. I had just finished the 8th grade and stayed home for vacation. Then an older friend asked me why I would need to go back to school. He would give me a job and I would earn some money. I then went to the road and caught a car to Murghab.

In Murghab, Alisho met a better economic environment that allowed him to start a career as a locksmith and driver. Jobs were created due to Soviet infrastructure investments and the developing road connection between Osh and Khorog required construction, transport, and maintenance. Alisho remembers that there were only five Isma'ili families in Murghab at that time. Only in subsequent years would the number of Isma'ilis grow due to engagement in governmental offices and transport agencies. After a period of training in different parts of the Soviet Union, Alisho settled in Osh, raised a family and worked for the Consumer's Union (*Potrebsoyuz*) until 2003. Despite the fact that he holds Kyrgyzstani citizenship and has spent most of his life in the Fergana valley, Alisho plans to move back to his village of origin in the Upper Gunt valley—if he only can find a homebuyer for his house.

Alisho's life story is in many respects representative of the oldest generation of Isma'ilis in Osh. After years of mobility without restrictions along the artery Osh-Khorog, "bad times" (*tiazhelye vremena*) started with the perestroika and a growing emphasis on ethnic categories. As turning points in the decay, Alisho points to the Osh riots in 1990 and the emerging importance of national borders. Both developments finally contributed to the meltdown of Soviet road agencies that were experienced as multi-ethnic and transnational enterprises.

On the other hand, Holiknazar has a different perception of the quality of time frameworks. Holiknazar, now middle-aged and from Murghab, describes his youth in the Tajik civil war in the 1990s as problem-free (*blagopoluchnyi*). At that time, there was a strong presence of the Russian military in the Eastern Pamirs, which provided jobs and well-paid salaries for contract soldiers (*kontraktniki*). For Holiknazar, who served at the Afghan border for many years, the time of prosperity in the region was inextricably linked with the Russian army and it only came to an end when the last units left at the beginning of the new century. Now, there is little to do in Murghab for people who do not own cattle. Holiknazar therefore describes himself as "sitting around" (*my sidim*), a "loafer" (*bezdel'nik*), or "without purpose" (*beker*). His everyday routine is structured by drinking tea, spending time with his children, and taking regular walks through the bazaar. This routine is infrequently interrupted by trips to the High Plateau in order to collect *tersken* bushes for fuel and occasional one-day jobs with Chinese transport companies.

Trips to Osh would evoke ambivalent feelings, Holiknazar told me many times when we traveled together from Murghab down to the Fergana valley. Osh meant fruits, teahouses, and good beer of which the Eastern Pamirs are deprived. It meant big city life and held the potential of a morally corrupt lifestyle. Osh was a place of business opportunities and family in exile. And since spring 2010, Osh means ethnicized conflict, as Holiknazar states, and a danger to the Isma'ili community.

Holiknazar's perception of Isma'ili life in Central Asia is informed by a feeling of loss of power in an "uncivilized" (*netsivilizovannye*), predominantly Turkic, environment. During our joint trip to Osh in 2009 Holiknazar explained to me how history has logically led to the present-day situation of Isma'ilis in Tajikistan. Since Holiknazar is well acquainted with Isma'ili and Central Asian history, he gave many examples from the past which emphasized his general feeling of unease towards the present.

Holiknazar: You know, we used to be powerful... I mean, we the Isma'ilis. But *they* were always against us, fought wars against us.

Till: Who are *they*?

Holiknazar: The Mongols, the Turks....

Till: You mean... when...? During the Fatimid era... Alamut... or when?

Holiknazar: Yes, Alamut. And then later when they took Bukhara and Samarkand. And now they started to turn Tajiks into Uzbeks. They have to change their ethnicity in the passports. They have always been against us Tajiks, against us Isma'ilis.

This short statement that Holiknazar gave when we stopped for lunch in a small teahouse somewhere in the Alai, halfway between Murghab and Osh, led to a moment of silence at our table. The other passengers, all of them Murghabi Kyrgyz, abstained from comments on Holiknazar's opinion that clearly held the potential of conflict. However, in his statement Holiknazar expressed an anxiety that reveals multi-layered aspects of Isma'ili identity in a Pamiri context. Being Isma'ili means to originate from the Pamirs, but it also includes being of Iranian descent as well as being part of a transnational community whose history reaches out well beyond Central Asia. It furthermore means to be ethnically defined as Tajik within the framework of the Tajik nation-state. For Holiknazar these categories are not contradictory but are a matter of positioning in a specific environment. In Osh, for example, all Isma'ilis are first of all defined as Tajiks, due to ethnic classification in their passports. Reference to the Indo-European Iranian heritage of Isma'ilis distinguishes them from Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, who are speakers of Turkic

languages and are supposed to have “Mongolian” physical features of Asian origin.¹²

Holiknazar talks simultaneously about Alamut, Bukhara, Samarkand, and recent ethnicity policy in Uzbekistan. While Alamut refers to medieval Isma‘ili history in Iran,¹³ the mention of Bukhara and Samarkand references sore points of Tajik national ideology. The fact that the two supposedly “Tajik cities” became part of the Uzbek SSR in early Soviet times and are still part of today’s Uzbekistan fosters a Tajikistani self-perception of an “incomplete country.”¹⁴ The intermingling of Isma‘ili and Tajikistani history does not constitute a contradiction for Holiknazar, however, as these categories are inseparable in everyday life. But they are emphasized in different ways respective to the social context in which they are used.

In Osh, Isma‘ilis are generally referred to as Tajiks. Their ethnicity is defined as such in Kyrgyzstani and Tajikistani passports and does therefore not require further differentiation. In the Pamirs, being part of the transnational Isma‘ili community is mostly reflected in the public sphere, where a majority of the population is Isma‘ili, or in mixed Sunni-Isma‘ili communities such as Murghab. In Osh, Isma‘ili discourse remains a matter of the private sphere. When, in June 2010, violence broke out between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the city in the aftermath of the overthrow of the president, Kurmanbek Bakiev, most Isma‘ilis kept a low profile and quietly supported the Kyrgyz.¹⁵ Solidarity with the ruling group, however, not only points to political positioning in the context of a destabilized country, but also indicates the power of historical Central Asian categories when it comes to the construction of difference. These categories are in turn often used to explain the existence of very recent conflict lines.

For Holiknazar, the violence that all inhabitants of Osh experienced in the summer of 2010 was essentially a battle between nomadic Kyrgyz and settled Uzbeks. Even though both groups have dwelled in houses there since the early days of the Soviet Union, these categories have not lost their quality as explanatory models for collective actions. For Holiknazar, former economic modes of life have evaporated into mentality.¹⁶

¹² For the foundations of Tajik national identity, see Bergne; Hirsch.

¹³ In mentioning Alamut, Holiknazar refers to a historical period in Isma‘ili history (1090-1256) that is often perceived as the foundation of Nizari Isma‘ili political activity. Geographically, the term Alamut denotes a fortress in Northern Iran which was destroyed during the Mongol invasion at the end of the thirteenth century. See Daftary, 301-402.

¹⁴ See Fumagalli, 575.

¹⁵ For the background of this conflict see Liu; Fumagalli.

¹⁶ For the construction of cultural distinctiveness in Central Asia in historical perspective, see Manz.

For example, when we spent many an evening out together in Osh a year prior to the conflict, Holiknazar praised the distinctive Uzbek sense of cuisine and culture as well as Kyrgyz open-mindedness and enthusiasm for drinking. The dichotomy's negative side included Uzbek greed and deceit as well as an unprincipled and blurry Kyrgyz attitude towards other ethnicities. A year later we sat in Holiknazar's house in Murghab and mourned the loss of the "old Osh." The influx of goods from Southern Kyrgyzstan had stopped for some time then and the watermelon we ate had been brought from Dushanbe and could never be as sweet and tasty as the ones from Osh. Despite his hatred for the Uzbeks, who in his opinion had instigated conflict, Holiknazar yearningly talked about the many peaceful summers he had spent in the city.

Till: Don't you think that after some time everything will be peaceful again?

Holiknazar: Maybe, but Osh without Uzbeks is nothing. Murghab without Osh is nothing. Kyrgyz are nomads. They can't cook... they don't sell spare parts for cars and they don't know how to trade. Uzbeks are traders. They could live everywhere, believe me. But what is Osh without Laghmon?¹⁷ There was always something going on in Osh thanks to the Uzbeks... new things, products, food... they're like Afghans. They just know how to sell and make profit.

Holiknazar's statements include all aspects of being a mobile member of the Isma'ili community in the Tajik Pamirs. Movement to different places along the road means having to adapt to fundamentally different settings within a short period of time. While the town of Khorog and surrounding valleys at the Afghan border are considered to be the heartland of Isma'ili life, with the majority of its inhabitants belonging to the Isma'ili community, this situation changes with movement eastward. Majority relations suddenly turn into multi-layered forms of diaspora¹⁸ in nation-state settings. As Magnus Marsden states, it is "the social and moral multidimensionality that borderland life may inject into even the most apparently bounded forms of collective identity" (Marsden, 220), and which lead to a constant re-definition of identity in such roadside communities. When Holiknazar speaks of the Bartang valley and Khorog as genealogical points of reference in regard to his own biographical as well as general Isma'ili origin, Murghab becomes a place of diaspora which requires a high level of adaption to a predominantly Kyrgyz environment. Holiknazar considers the Isma'ili communities in Murghab and Osh as islands

¹⁷ A Central Asian/Chinese noodle dish that is often considered well prepared by Uzbeks and Uighurs.

¹⁸ For the conceptualization of the term "diaspora" as analytical category, see Baumann 2000, 2003.

(*ostrov*) located within an environment that demands constant negotiation of identity. However, while Murghab is still located within the borders of Tajikistan and Ismaʿilis are therefore part of the political mainstream, the situation in Osh differs considerably. Within an altered nation-state environment and different political hierarchies, other dimensions of identity are foregrounded. When Holiknazar argues against Uzbeks as historical enemies of the Tajiks, he refers to very recent conflicts between the two states. While Holiknazar would hardly sympathize with “those Tajiks in Dushanbe” inside Tajikistan, in Osh common citizenship becomes an important marker for him. Being against the Uzbeks in times of violent conflict thus establishes intimacy and alliance with the ruling Kyrgyz majority.

To Mix or Not to Mix

The question of how to adapt to local conditions without a loss of genealogical reference points is crucial to Ismaʿili communities in the Tajik Pamirs. In the winter of 2009 I traveled from Osh to Murghab together with two elderly Ismaʿili traders. Both women, Gulnor and Ajmi frequently commute between Southern Kyrgyzstan and the Eastern Pamirs in order to sell clothes in the bazaar of Murghab. When we stopped at a teahouse on the way to the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, a young Kyrgyz waitress caught the attention of Gulnor and Ajmi. They started a discussion which indicates that a limit to local adaption within a non-Ismaʿili environment is often set by marriage strategies.

Gulnor (pointing at the waitress): Look at that Kyrgyz girl. Of course, they're never as pretty (*khushbrū*) as our Pamiri girls, but I have to say they've improved recently.

Ajmi: Yes, you're right. They've improved.

Till: And whom would you wish as wives for your sons?

Gulnor: I'm going to look for a Pamiri girl from Osh or Murghab. Religion has to be right. And she has to be Tajik.

By a “Tajik with the right religion,” Gulnor meant an Ismaʿili girl. Major obstacles for marriage would be a Tajik with Sunni background or, even more complicated, a non-Tajik Sunni. In Murghab as well as in Osh, inter-marriages between Ismaʿili-Tajiks and Sunni-Kyrgyz rarely occur, and such relationships that do exist are categorized as mistakes from Soviet times when the ideology of “the friendship of the people” (*druzhiba narodov*) took its toll.

Apart from orientation towards ethnic and religious differences, contemporary marriage strategies contribute to the strengthening of people's affiliation with genealogical reference points, and in this context to mobility along the road. There are, for instance, frequent marriages between Murghab and villages in Ghunt and Wakhan that have strong family ties to the Eastern Pamirs. As Sultonsho put it once, "very often Isma'ili girls come from Upper Ghunt for marriage and we send our girls there."

The linkage of religion, ethnicity, and geographical space is an important aspect of the process by which the communities of the Eastern Pamirs became distinct. The example of pilgrimage sites shows that religious belonging and ethnicity are almost inseparable and connected to specific locations. The Isma'ilis of the Eastern Pamirs exclusively orientate towards the many Isma'ili pilgrimage sites (*mazors*) in the Western Pamirs which are defined as Isma'ili heartland. The pilgrimage sites of Murghab (*mazar* in Kyrgyz), on the other hand, are perceived as "Kyrgyz sites" (*mazorhoi qirghiz*) and not considered of particular religious use to Isma'ilis. However, at some sites connected to hot springs, different spheres intertwine. In Madiyan, a small settlement in the Eastern Pamirs, a flourishing pilgrimage site has developed in recent years. The combination of the grave of a local Kyrgyz "martyr" (*sheiit*) and hot springs to which positive healing effects are attributed led to an increase of visitors, both from the Kyrgyz and Isma'ili communities of Murghab. However, there is an ongoing discussion concerning whether the place provides spiritual blessing (*bereke* [*barakat*]) or "just" has a merely medical impact and supports relaxation. While most Kyrgyz visitors do perform prayers in Madiyan and try to receive *bereke* at the grave of the martyr, many Isma'ilis consider the religious part a fraud. A common statement is that such rituals might be useful to Sunni-Kyrgyz but not to Isma'ilis who have their own *mazors* in the lower parts of the Pamirs. The orientation towards *mazors* shows the spatial organization of the ethno-religious categories in the Eastern Pamirs. While there are dozens of pilgrimage sites in the region that are of great importance to Sunni-Kyrgyz, local Isma'ilis exclusively orientate towards the Western Pamirs. The borders of "Isma'ili territory" are therefore defined at mountain passes. To the north, the Koitezek pass constitutes the border to the Ghunt valley, where Isma'ili pilgrimage sites in relation to 'Ali can be found. To the south, the Khargush pass constitutes the crossing to the Wakhan valley which offers a wide range of Isma'ili sites, from hot springs to shrines.¹⁹ Both marriage strategies as well as the realization of ethno-religious categories lead to the

¹⁹ For an excellent study of shrines and their foundational legends in the Western Pamirs, see Gross.

constitution of two separate communities in the Eastern Pamirs. The Ismaʿili orientation to the center of religious life in Khorog creates a sense of diaspora that is connected to the establishment of ethnically and religiously mixed communities at the roadside. Ismaʿilis were first of all brought to the Eastern Pamirs and Southern Kyrgyzstan in order to build, support, and maintain the road. Local economy, such as cattle breeding, remains in the hand of the “native” Kyrgyz. While the Soviet “friendship of the people” was excessively celebrated in modernization projects such as Murghab, little actual effort was made to integrate ethnically and religiously distinct communities.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to show that mobility and the extension of family networks are essential elements of Ismaʿili history throughout the twentieth century in the formerly Soviet-influenced part of the border region of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, and China. In this context, however, it must be mentioned that the identity category “Ismaʿili” has become predominant in comparison to regional (“Pamiri”) or ethnic (“Tajik”) positioning only in recent years. While being Pamiri already in Soviet times implied an orientation towards Ismaʿili faith in most places between Osh and Khorog, the national re-definition of Tajiks as Sunni in post-Soviet Tajikistan has led to a range of overlapping and competing categories of self-description. I argue furthermore that the use of these categories is not experienced as contradictory in everyday life but depends on the specific social context.

Differing social contexts along the Pamir Highway are in large part the result of Soviet modernization policy. The re-structuring of the Pamirs’ landscape through the closing of borders, road construction, and migration led to an enforced re-orientation from Western China and Afghanistan towards Southern Kyrgyzstan. As a consequence, Ismaʿilis from the Western Pamirs settled along “the road” and took employment above all in fields such as transport, army, and infrastructure maintenance. Thus, the formative period from the 1960s onwards is still remembered as prosperous and characterized by a freedom of movement.

The recent years were marked by the establishment of a strict border regime that limits the freedom of movement as it was known in Soviet times. While the transport agencies lost their importance in providing access to the border region of Gorno-Badakhshan, neither the Tajik nor the Kyrgyz state seem interested in maintaining the road connection between Osh and Khorog. This is expressed in the decay of asphalt parts and frequent closing of the road in

wintertime. In a broader Tajikistani context, the trade route between Western China and Dushanbe has gained in importance. Trade from Kashgar to the Tajikistani capital, however, passes through the Pamirs, but for now largely bypasses local communities.

The members of Isma'ili communities along the road currently experience very different political, economic, and cultural contexts. But as I attempted to show, such differences are dealt with by means of reference to the Western Pamirs as place of common origin and center of religious life. Genealogical references to specific mountain valleys, villages, and ancestors are expressed through the fostering of Pamiri dialects and family networks. With increased mobility in the course of the twentieth century, but also in the context of labor migration beyond Tajikistan and Central Asia, these references have provided a distinction between the territory of diaspora and native land.

References

- K. Abdullaev and S. Akbarzadeh, *Historical Dictionary of Tajikistan*, Lanham and London, 2002.
- A.Z. Almazova, ed., *Pamirskaia ekspeditsiia: stat'i i materialy polevykh issledovaniï*, Moscow, 2006.
- M. Baumann, "Diaspora: Genealogies of Semantics and Transcultural Comparison," *Numen* 47 (2000), pp. 313-37.
- Idem, *Alte Götter in neuer Heimat: Religionswissenschaftliche Analyse zu Diaspora am Beispiel von Hindus auf Trinidad*, Marburg, 2003.
- P. Bergne, *The Birth of Tajikistan: National Identity and the Origins of the Republic*, London and New York, 2007.
- F. Bliss, *Social and Economic Change in the Pamirs (Gorno-Badakhshan, Tajikistan)*, London and New York, 2006.
- F. Daftary, *The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines*, Cambridge, 2007.
- D. Dalakoglou, "On the Road: An Ethnography of the Albanian-Greek Cross-Border Motorway," *American Ethnologist* 37.1 (2010), pp. 132-49.
- S.N. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus* 129.1 (2000), pp. 1-29.
- H. Elnazarov and S. Aksakalov, "The Nizari Ismailis of Central Asia in Modern Times," in F. Daftary, ed., *A Modern History of the Ismailis: Continuity and Change in a Muslim Community*, London and New York, 2011, pp. 45-75.
- M. Fumagalli, "Ethnic Minority Mobilisation in Central Asia: The Cases of Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan," *Europe-Asia Studies* 59.4 (2007), pp. 567-90.
- J.-A. Gross, "Foundational Legends, Shrines, and Ismaili Identity in Gorno-Badakhshan, Tajikistan," in M.J. Cormack, ed., *Muslims and Others in Sacred Space*, Oxford, forthcoming.
- F. Hirsch, "Towards an Empire of Nations: Border-Making and the Formation of Soviet National Identities," *Russian Review* 59.2 (2000), pp. 201-26.
- L. Jones, R. Black, and R. Skeldon, *Migration and Poverty Reduction in Tajikistan: Working Paper C11*, Sussex: Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty, 2007.

- N. Khan, "Flaws in the Flow: Roads and Their Modernity in Pakistan," *Social Text* 24.4 (2006), pp. 87-113.
- H. Kreutzmann, "The Karakoram Highway: The Impact of Road Construction on Mountain Societies," *Modern Asian Studies* 25.4 (1991), pp. 711-36.
- M.Y. Liu, *Recognizing the Khan: Authority, Space, and Political Imagination among Uzbek Men in Post-Soviet Osh, Kyrgyzstan*, doctoral thesis, University of Michigan, 2002.
- E. Maanaev and V. Ploskikh, eds., *Na "kryshe mira": istoricheskie ocherki o pamiro-alaiskikh kirgizakh*, Frunze, 1983.
- B.F. Manz, "The Development and Meaning of Chaghatay Identity," in J.-A. Gross, ed., *Muslims in Central Asia: Expressions of Identity and Change*, Durham and London, 1992, pp. 27-45.
- M. Marsden, "Muslim Cosmopolitans? Transnational Life in Northern Pakistan," *Journal of Asian Studies* 67.1 (2008), pp. 213-47.
- R.M. Masov, ed., *Ocherki po istorii Sovetskogo Badakhshana*, Dushanbe, 1981.
- A. Masquelier, "Road Mythographies: Space, Mobility, and the Historical Imagination in Postcolonial Niger," *American Ethnologist* 29.4 (2002), pp. 829-56.
- J. McBrien, *Fruit of Devotion: Islam and Modernity in Kyrgyzstan*, doctoral thesis, Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, 2008.
- Joe Moran, *On Roads: A Hidden History*, London, 2009.
- S. Niyozov, "Shi'a Ismaili Tradition in Central Asia. Evolution, Continuities and Changes," *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 24.6 (2003), pp. 39-46.
- S. Olimova and I. Bosc, *Labour Migration from Tajikistan*, Dushanbe, 2003.
- S. Olimova and M. Olimov, "Migration from Mountainous Areas in the Central Asian Region: Good or Evil?" *Mountain Research and Development* 27.2 (2007), pp. 104-08.
- S.R. Roseman, "How We Built the Road: The Politics of Memory in Rural Galicia," *American Ethnologist* 23.4 (1996), pp. 836-60.
- M.M. Slavinskii, ed., *Sbornik statei o stroitel'stve Pamirskogo i Velikogo Kirgizskogo traktov*, Frunze, 1935.
- J. Steinberg, *Isma'ili Modern: Globalization and Identity in a Muslim Community*, Chapel Hill, 2011.

Author's Query:

AU1 Please supply affiliation