

Khalifa of Pamir, Custodians of Knowledge

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Abstract: This paper explores both social role and spiritual functions of the local religious leaders in Tajikistan sector of Pamir mountains, called Gorno-Badakshan Autonomous Oblast. This remote and isolated mountainous region is criss-crossed by the state borders of China, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan and serves as the abode for several obscure ethnic groups that since long have adopted Ismailism, an esoteric branch of Shia Islam. The leader of Ismaili Aga Khan IV helped local people to survive horrors of civil war that ravaged this region in the 1990s, and now effectively administer Gorno-Badakshan Autonomous Oblast through the network of his local representatives called khalifa. They act as community leaders solving the problems of ordinary villagers of Pamir, yet at the same time they help esoteric Gnostic knowledge of Ismailism to be kept safe in this remotest part of the globe. The paper concludes that this became possible due to innate characteristics of local people, who are not only knowledge-thirsty, but also knowledge-loyal.

Keywords: Ismailism, esoteric knowledge, Pamir, Tajikistan, khalifa

Gorno-Badakshan Autonomous Oblast

Pamir mountains is the land a little bit closer to heaven, especially its central part, the second highest plateau in the world, whose valleys lie at the elevations of 3500-4200 m above sea level. Two thirds of Pamir is confined within the borders of Republic of Tajikistan under the name of Gorno-Badakshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO), while the southern and the eastern parts of Pamir belong to Afghanistan and China respectively, inheriting and reflecting those border agreements signed at the end of the 19th

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century. Initially an artificial creation that appeared on the map mainly due minute political interests of the great powers, over time GBAO, or Russian Pamir, solidified into a distinctive entity. Nowadays, Gorno-Badakshan Autonomous Oblast occupies 64,200 sq. km of mountains in the eastern part of Republic of Tajikistan and accounts for almost 45% of its territory. Rugged and harsh, it is populated by the peoples of numerous Iranian-speaking ethnic groups that are collectively known as Pamiri, or sometimes referred to as mountain Tajiks (Ishkashimi, Shugnani, Yazgulemi, Wakhi, Rushani among others). They differ from lowland Tajik significantly and not only because they speak strikingly different languages². As early as 11th century the peoples of Pamir adopted Ismaili teaching of Shiah branch of Islam and this allowed their Sunni neighbors to stigmatize them as infidels and justify any atrocities towards them. Together, all these peoples make up now only insignificant 3% of the total population of Tajikistan (there were 220,600 people living in GBAO in 2010), but their role in the history of modern Tajikistan is much bigger.

For better or worse Gorno-Badakshan was a sort of showpiece of the Soviet Union development model for the Central Asian region and it was supposed to demonstrate the advantages of the socialist system. For this purpose, this remote backwater, once one of the poorest regions in the entire Asia, was transformed into a model zone. University was founded in Khorog, the capital of GBAO, and peasants descended on there from the obscure mountain hamlets to get their PhD degrees. The education level among Pamiri was one of the highest among the nationalities of the former USSR. There were negative effects of the Soviet rule too, however: *pirs*, or elder-priests, were executed in the 1930s and atheism was imposed, people were not allowed to practice their religion and had to hide their sacred books.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and declaration of independence by Republic of Tajikistan in 1991 GBAO declared independence from Tajikistan and came down on the side of the opposition during the war, Pamiri living in Dushanbe were victimized and many were killed during pogroms, while Pamir

² Tohir Kalandarov, *Puteshestviye v Stranu Rubinovykh Gor* (Moscow: Nauka, 2006).

itself was effectively cut off from supply lines by mining roads that led to this remote region. As local people had lost their survival skills³, the winter of 1992/1993 turned especially disastrous for them as GBAO itself could provide only small percentage of what it needed and at the same time had to accommodate refugees from the plains. The full-scale humanitarian catastrophe was averted by Aga Khan, the spiritual leader of Ismaili, who didn't leave his followers in despair during those troublesome days and managed to arrange convoys with humanitarian aid into Pamir via the neighboring Kyrgyzstan. Later he also was one of those who managed to persuade both Tajikistan government and the opposition to sign a peace agreement, so that by 1997 the civil war was over and fragile peace ensued.

As Dushanbe had no reason to show sentiments towards the former enemies, GBAO was almost left abandoned and all post-war rehabilitation efforts were loaded onto the shoulders of the numerous international NGOs. They did make a significant contribution and helped Pamir economics start moving in the direction of self-sufficiency, but the outlook remains bleak till nowadays as some authors argue that "that development was no guarantee of sustainability, but rather led GBAO into a position of dependency"⁴. Ever since, it is Aga Khan global network of different NGOs that are both political authority, economic hope and social skeleton of GBAO⁵, and at the heart of this highly sophisticated system of religious management stand local communities leaders that link the head of Ismaili sect with common people on the ground.

³ Hermann Kreutzmann, "Ethnic Minorities and Marginality in the Pamirian Knot: Survival of Wakhi and Kirghiz in a Harsh Environment and Global Contexts," *The Geographical Journal* 3 (2003): 224.

⁴ Frank Bliss, *Social and Economic Change in the Pamirs (Gorno-Badakshan, Tajikistan)* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 330.

⁵ Ali Akbar Pesnani, "The AKDN: Tajikistan's biggest development implementation agency," *The Wordfolio* (2015), <https://theworldfolio.com/interviews/the-akdn-tajikistans/3421/>.

Khalifa

Those people are also entrusted to supervise “trade” between worlds of humans and world of gods, and as such they can’t be ordinary persons as they must be endowed with special qualities. People shall trust them and seek their advice as they believe those mediators are able to help them in difficult situation; they are also the ones looked for when it is necessary to conduct a ritual or make a talisman; sometimes they are even believed to be able to cure sickness, although in such case they usually forwards those in need to a local hospital. In Siberia they would be called *shaman*, but in Pamir there’s another word for such spiritual community leaders – *khalifa*. Such people existed in Pamir since times immemorial and even under communist rule they didn’t disappear, albeit those days they had to perform their activities unofficially.

These days *khalifa* are very much institutionalized as they are being approved and supervised by the office of Aga Khan in GBAO along administrative lines resembling that of Soviet bureaucratic system. Sometimes they even appoint former communist cadres to act as village *khalifa*. Yodgur from Langar, a remote settlement in Wakhan Corridor, is a good example of this tendency: before being appointed as the representative of Aga Khan he had been working in the local committee of the Communist Party for many years. Neither himself, nor people in the village recognize any controversy in this situation, however, as to their understanding the representatives of Aga Khan in Tajikistan are doing the same job and often under the same pretext as Communist Party used to do during the Soviet Union times. In the eyes of the laymen, the concerns of both the Soviet government and Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) are pretty much identical and, subsequently, they enjoy similar respect and popularity. Indeed, it seems that only the names of the dominating ideologies changed with time and with them the titles of the representatives, while the style of work and the social status of modern *khalifa* do remind those of the local party leaders, even if the scriptures they read and the rituals they perform differ. Unlike the latter, however, *khalifa* do not receive any remuneration, and as such it is rather a responsibility than a job, even if in return they yield respect of the fellow villagers and a higher status within community.

Officially approved *khalifa* of GBAO are normally elected at the village gatherings according to personal qualities of the candidates that can include model behavior, high social status, sound knowledge of Koran and Ismailism doctrine, and deep understanding of local traditions. After being elected and approved by the office of Aga Khan, they become seen as the representatives of local communities in the higher strata of religious hierarchy and in the same time are supposed to inform the laymen of the new guidelines and directives. Their work often reminds that of apparatchiks of the communist era as they have regular meetings and seminars held in Khorog, where *khalifa* receive and discuss recent instructions from the central office of Aga Khan and where they work together on standardization of the rituals that still have significant regional variations in Pamir. With those freshly acquired guidelines they return to their districts and inform laymen of recent political trends and up-to-date interpretations of religious dogmas. The local meetings are normally held on Thursdays inside the district *jama'at khana* ("house of meetings"), and are attended by everyone in the community including women and children.

The *jama'at khana* in Langar is, probably, the most elegant and impressive in the entire GBAO looking like a gingerbread cottage decorated with carved beams, frescoes, bas-reliefs and occasional sables hanging on the wall. It is really well-kept as local youth under Yodgur's son's command make it sure that it remains tidy. Those living in remoter villages that can't attend the gathering at district *jama'at khana* send there their delegates, who return home the next day and spread the word from the center to their fellow villagers. Generally speaking, these days Aga Khan's authority and his guidelines penetrate deeply into the every corner of GBAO through this hierarchical and highly effective network of *khalifas*, who represent the only source of trustable authority now, as they not only guide spiritual life of the villagers, but shape their social and economic activities too working as an effective conduit for implanting ideologies developed by that supra-government structure that the office of Aga Khan actually is these days. It would not be an exaggeration to say that *khalifas* took the role of the local government in Pamir.

Ismailism

Situation, when Ismailism in many ways substitutes the state in GBAO, is worthy of investigation and requires serious elaboration considering the fact that for the most part of its history it has been a sectarian clandestine movement that has been tightly associated with all kinds of anti-structural activities, and whose esoteric doctrine was supposed to be known to the initiates only. Ismailism traces its origin to the turbulent times of early Islam and has long and indeed often obscure history of being marginal yet powerful underground movement that challenged authorities as its structures were elusive enough to survive persecutions thanks to the fact that it recognized and encouraged practice of religious disguise. As far as its mission, Ismailism was more about keeping concealed wisdom for the benefit of the chosen ones than it was about supervising communities and guiding daily lives of its followers.

It was only from 909 to 1171, when Ismaili succeeded in setting up their own Fatimid Caliphate and from its capital in Cairo ruled over a large portion of Northern Africa and Middle East that they were involved in the large scale secular projects, while for the rest of the time they preferred clandestine existence, often being unscrupulous in methods, including assassinations and mimicry, that they applied for protecting their anti-structural identities. This earned them bad reputation both among Sunni Muslims that sometimes even painted them as Jewish *magi* that intend to corrupt Islam from within ⁶ and Christians that retold horror stories about the “The Old Man of the Mountain” that through his network of suicide attackers and spies holds in awe entire countries. During the so-called Alamut period (1090-1256) that followed the break-up of Fatimid Caliphate Nizari Ismaili indeed managed to put the fear of God into their neighbors by ruling independently over their network of interconnected mountain strongholds in Iran and Syria. Those days, however, were ended by Mongols in 1256, and for many centuries after the fall of Alamut Ismaili lived clandestine, yet largely peaceful lives, keeping their

⁶ Farhad Daftary, *The Ismailis. Their History and Doctrines* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 8.

esoteric knowledge and even their imams concealed. It was only in the 19th century that they decided to re-emerge, as in 1848 their forty-sixth imam and the first one to be known as Aga Khan, found refuge in Bombay under the protection of the British authorities in India.

In the world of global capitalism Ismailism discovered its own niche and proved to be very successful as its adherents not only managed to generate significant wealth, but converted it also into political capital by paying more attention to education and to establishing social connections than to armed struggle. Their renaissance resulted from the farsighted policy and global approach introduced by Aga Khan III that held the imamate for impressive 72 years from 1885 to 1957. He was succeeded by his son, a Harvard graduate, prince Shah Karim al-Husayni Aga Khan IV that from his secretariat located at Aiglemont outside Paris guided lives and minds of his followers in more than twenty-five countries of Asia, Africa, North America and Europe till 2025.

Judging by outward appearance and public speeches, modern Ismaili leaders have nothing in common with Alamut assassins as they since long become part of the British establishment and prefer post-modernism discourse advocating religious tolerance, market economy and human rights through their impressive network of institutions. AKDN as development arm of Ismailism is indeed engaged in many humanitarian initiatives as well as a wide range of purely commercial projects, its interests stretching from hospitality industry and insurance business to healthcare, rural development and awards in architecture. These well-publicized activities are indeed often driven by enlightenment and distinguished by high-level inclusiveness as Aga Khan strictly adheres to the principles of religious tolerance that imply enabling followers of other denominations benefit from Ismaili programs. This approach not only earns him recognition in Europe and North America, but improves also often hostile relationships between Ismaili and their Sunni neighbors, and as such makes life of his followers safer by integrating them into environments⁷.

⁷ Johan Steinberg, *Isma'ili Modern: Globalisation and Identity in a Muslim Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 177.

One should not be totally blindfolded, however, by these fervent secular activities as in the search for the reasons lying behind Aga Khan recent penetration into the daily lives of his followers in GBAO a brief examination of its doctrine and the knowledge of its history can provide better clues. It may be suggested that all this post-modernist development “ballyhoo” is just yet another cloak that has been put on by Ismaili spiritual leaders to draw public attention away from their real aims as they had done it already several times throughout the history. The matter is Ismailism is a religion of wisdom and there is no reason to doubt that it remains as such in the information age, while the esoteric knowledge it claims to possess has always been kept unavailable to outsiders that were aimed to be distracted by all possible means. It is quite possibly that it is still the case now, and as such it is neither more nor less than protection of the knowledge that in reality defines politics of Aga Khan.

According to Ismaili doctrine, there exists open exoteric knowledge *zahir* that is given in the form of law to common people by the successive line of prophets, who aim at helping laymen to chose and follow the right path in life, and there exists also esoteric knowledge *batin* that is revealed through the prophet to its silent follower, the *Wasi-Imam*, who further entrusts with it a limited circle of his direct apprentices that he chooses in accordance with their capacity to be the bearers of such knowledge. The law defined by *zahir* is changing as every new epoch needs its own prophet, while *batin* remains the same always. *Batin*, however, can be understood only through elaborating on that ever-changing *zahir*. This process involves *Wasi-Imam*, who is entrusted by the previous prophet to represent unquestionable authority for those seeking and those allowed seeking for the current interpretation of *zahir* and thus the essence of eternal *batin*. He is, however, eventually replaced by the next prophet that appoints his own *Wasi-Imam*, and these cycles repeat until the final Resurrection *Qi'yama* comes that reveals all knowledge to everyone, both exoteric and esoteric.

As the direct descendant of the last Prophet Muhammad and the repository of the esoteric meaning, Ismaili Imam is in fact none other than that *seventh* Silent One that doesn't proclaim the law, but liberates the initiated ones by disclosing symbols. The idea of esoteric knowledge concealed in Koran and the need for its

interpretation through the perfect authority is something that distinguishes Shiah from Sunni in general, but Ismailism goes further and includes into its doctrine prophets and teachings of Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and other ancient Iranian cults⁸. It also bears a lot of similarities with Sufism, as these two mystic teachings of Islam both combine mind and divine revelation under one roof, value concealed knowledge and apply poetic language for its expression, but as Ismailism doesn't recognize individual interpretations of the epiphanies and place all knowledge onto Imam shoulders endowing him with exclusive authority, for Ismaili he represents the entire microcosm being the repository of all meanings of the revelation. In other words, he is saving Gnosis and as such brings salvation to his followers, as salvation according to Ismaili teaching can be achieved only through learning of the meaning of life and the meaning of God.

Rural Gnostics

How then could it happen that this esoteric and clandestine cult that emphasizes importance of learning was adopted *en masse* in remote Pamir and how could it happen that its mystical and profound teachings that are supposed to be revealed only to the chosen ones elsewhere became so widespread here? In other words, how could it happen that keepers of wisdom take care of village administration at the fringes of Islamic world? It perhaps has something to do with the original beliefs of Pamiri people that are immanently confident too that the way to salvation goes through learning and that the meaning of life is none other than Gnosis. *God is knowledge; it is hidden in the book. God is respect, justice and freedom, and the Prophet is the one who has been told the knowledge of God.* Such opinions one can hear everywhere in Pamir and this native philosophy is something that made Ismailism teaching sound too much familiar to the people here and as such it was easy for them to adopt it. And then there is another point, and it is as much important.

⁸ Henry Corbin, *Cyclical Times and Ismaili Gnosis* (London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: Kegan Paul International, 1983), 97.

These people are not only knowledge-thirsty; they are also knowledge-loyal. While most of the original sources on Ismailism thought have been lost in Iran or elsewhere during turbulent events of the last millennium, many of the sacred books had been preserved in Badakshan⁹. Pamiri indeed happened to be both the best students and the best custodians and with this in mind it doesn't sound strange that they have been initiated into this elitist group of the adherents of the Gnostic Ismailism *en masse*. As we remember, *batin* is revealed only to those chosen according to their capacity to comprehend it and to carry it over to the people of next epoch, and the fact that the inhabitants of remote Pamir villages were let into its secrets proves, that these people are both capable of comprehending and preserving *batin*. This ability and their unique competence resulted from both history and geography of their land make them chosen for the special role of the keepers of wisdom that had been passed to them by the ancients. As custodians of knowledge, they both have more than deserved the care that Aga Khan is providing them now and require daily involvement and supervision by the one whose mission is to preserve *batin* for future generations.

Pamir is an anthropological open-air museum and a treasure box of culture diversity, a refuge area for the ethnic groups that since long disappeared from the world map. It is true, but it is only half of the truth. Not only people and their genes, but the philosophies and worldviews of the ancients were also carefully preserved by these responsible, diligent, inquisitive, inclusive and modest custodians of the past who preferred secluded yet harsh life among high-altitude deserts and dramatic gorges of the Roof of the World to the temptations of the royal courts. They were destined to become keepers of wisdom that has been concealed from the horrors of war at the Earth's most hidden corner, that is, at its roof.

"When Arab armies took over Pamir, its people adopted tolerant Ismailism that encourages learning and teaches the implicit knowledge known only to the initiates, because by assuming its aspects the magi, those protectors of the ancient wisdom, could save it. When marauding Afghans brought an intolerant breed of Sunni Islam too close to our borders and

⁹ Daftary, *The Ismailis. Their History and Doctrines*, 29.

threatened our survival, pirs of Pamir asked Russians to come and save them from extermination, because they saw them as people who could assist in protecting the knowledge". These words told in a private conversation in Khorog by an influential local businessman sound as if being borrowed from the new bestseller. Mysticism aside, however, modern Pamiri did inherit wealth of ancient spirituality and managed to preserve it largely intact in their secluded land thanks to their inclusiveness, love for learning and innate responsibility.

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