

**2012 -2013 TITLE VIII RESEARCH SCHOLAR PROGRAM
FINAL REPORT**

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Sacred Narratives and Communal Identity among the Ismailis of Tajikistan, 1700-1924

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Research Abstract:

My research explores the history of the Ismailis of Central Asia, a minority community of Shia Muslims who reside primarily in the Badakhshan district of eastern Tajikistan. Although the Ismailis constitute the largest Muslim minority in Central Asia today, the history of the community has been widely neglected in scholarship until very recently. The community traces its origins and conversion to the renowned eleventh-century poet and philosopher Nasir-i Khusraw. While the life and works of Nasir-i Khusraw have been relatively well-studied, the subsequent history of the community remains largely unexplored. My research focuses particularly on the era from the early eighteenth century down to the Soviet period. This is a critical era in the history of the region, one in which Badakhshan shifted from a marginal position to become closely integrated into the political and social framework of Eurasia. As a consequence, the Ismaili community of the region came to face much greater political pressures and persecution, as well as pressures towards assimilation and conversion to Sunni Islam. It was during this same period that a key body of literature began to take shape and circulate within this community, one which presented various legendary accounts of Nasir-i Khusraw and other figures associated with the community's foundation. This genre has undergone a continuous

**2012 -2013 TITLE VIII RESEARCH SCHOLAR PROGRAM
FINAL REPORT**

process of development and circulation down to the present, but remains virtually unstudied. My research explores this body of literature, focusing particularly on one distinct lineage of texts known as the *Silk-i guhar-riz*, and addresses three fundamental questions. First, how did the Ismaili community and its leadership formulate its response to the social and political challenges of this era? Second, why did the community and its leadership choose to maintain a distinctive religious identity in this period, rather than pursuing a strategy of assimilation that would have seemingly brought greater political and economic benefits? And third, what role these did these legendary narratives play in the formulation of that response and in the development of a unique communal identity? In exploring these questions, my research aims to present new insight into critical questions of social history and religious identity in pre-Soviet Central Asia.

Research Goals:

My research in Tajikistan focused on four primary objectives:

1. My first and most immediate objective was to obtain access to and study the available manuscripts of the *Silk-i guhar-riz*, the text which I choose to make the primary focus of my research. I knew that there were several copies of the text held at the Institute of Oriental Studies in Dushanbe and that a number of additional copies were held in private archives and collections in the Badakhshan region. Identifying and obtaining access to these texts was the first objective of my research.
2. My second objective was to review as much as possible of the broader manuscript tradition associated with the Tajik Ismaili community, in order to better understand the context and background of the *Silk-i guhar-riz*. This entailed extensive work in the archives of the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London and the Institute of Oriental Studies in Dushanbe, the collection of the Research Unit of the Institute of Ismaili Studies in Khorogh, as well as texts in private collections.

**2012 -2013 TITLE VIII RESEARCH SCHOLAR PROGRAM
FINAL REPORT**

3. My third objective was to identify and collect oral histories from interview subjects, particularly from representatives of families who have been associated with the preservation and transmission of the *Silk-i guhar-riz* texts.

4. My fourth objective was to investigate a number of shrines and sacred sites in the Badakhshan region, in order to determine and understand their connections with the textual and familial traditions discussed above.

Research Activities:

My research was conducted from January to October 2013. I began my research in London with work in the library of the Institute of Ismaili Studies. This is a research institute run by the Ismaili community which holds a large collection of Ismaili manuscripts from many parts of the world. The collection includes a number of manuscripts collected from Central Asia by the Russian scholar Vladimir Ivanov in the pre-Soviet period. These texts were donated to the forerunner of the institute in the 1970s but have remained uncatalogued and largely unstudied to date. My work there at the institute focused primarily on this manuscript collection, as well as a number of other rare texts held in the institute library. My reception there was very positive and I was granted access to all of the materials I required without trouble. A few of the manuscripts I had requested were not available at the time of my visit, but fortunately I had scheduled a return visit after the conclusion of my work in Tajikistan, so I was able to access these materials at a later time. In the course of arranging my visit to the institute I was invited to give a presentation there on my research. This provided me a great opportunity to discuss my research with some leading scholars in my field and provided a basis for further discussions during the remainder of my time there.

I left London and arrived in Tajikistan on February 1st. I planned to spend 8 months in Tajikistan and to roughly split my time between the capital Dushanbe and the Gorno-Badakhshan region. I had a number of contacts in Dushanbe from my previous visit there so I was able to get an apartment arranged and get settled in rather quickly. My foremost research objective in

**2012 -2013 TITLE VIII RESEARCH SCHOLAR PROGRAM
FINAL REPORT**

Dushanbe was to work in the manuscript archives of the Institute of Oriental Studies. I made contact prior to my visit with several of the key scholars at the institute, including Dr. Lola Dodkhudoeva, who at the time served as the director of the manuscript collection, and Dr. Qudratbek Elchibekov, one of the leading scholars of Ismaili history in Tajikistan. Dr. Dodkhudoeva was very helpful in arranging my access to the manuscripts necessary for my work. For the next 4 ½ months I worked most days in the institute. Dr. Elchibekov generously allowed me to share space in his office and in addition provided me with access to a number of texts and materials in his own private collection.

My primary focus in my work at the institute was on a manuscript collection assembled by Andrei Bertels and Mamadvafo Baqoev in the 1960s. These texts were collected during a series of expeditions carried out in Badakhshan between 1959 and 1963. During these expeditions the scholars took photographic films of the manuscripts and left the original texts in the possession of the owners. The printouts of the images are currently held there at the Institute of Oriental Studies. In total the collection includes over 100 individual manuscripts and about 350 texts in total. The printouts for the most part are of decent quality, although a few were of very poor quality and difficult to work with. The majority of the works in the collection date from the 19th and 20th centuries, but some date from as early as the 16th century. The collection is well-described in a catalogue, which I was able to review prior to my visit; however, in the course of my research I discovered a number of additional texts not included in the catalogue descriptions.

The Bertels and Baqoev manuscript collection has remained almost entirely unstudied since its assembly. A selection of five texts from the collection was later published by Bertels, and several other works have been cited in a handful of studies, but the large bulk of the materials has remained unexplored to date. This posed a challenge to me, as I had little prior information, aside from the catalogue descriptions, with which to determine which texts would be important for my research. Moreover, much of what I was looking for in these texts was information that in some respects was incidental to the texts themselves, such as marginalia or other information which may indicate the history of the texts and its social importance. My objective was to not

**2012 -2013 TITLE VIII RESEARCH SCHOLAR PROGRAM
FINAL REPORT**

only understand the content of these texts, but to understand the role and importance they held for the communities in which they circulated. This required that I had review as many of the texts from the collection as possible, in order to get a sense of the broader patterns of the textual record. In total I had an opportunity to review a little over half of all the texts in the Bertels and Baqoev collection, and I was permitted to make copies of those sections which were particularly important for my research. Unfortunately a number of items in the collection seem to have been lost or were otherwise not available to me at the time of my visit, but nonetheless I was able to review a relatively large number of works and to obtain a great deal of valuable data for my research. In addition to the Bertels and Bakoev collection I explored a number of additional research avenues in Dushanbe. I studied a number of texts in the main library of the institute and obtained materials from a number of old Soviet-era journals in the national library. I also had the opportunity to conduct interviews with a number of Ismaili leaders in Dushanbe.

At the end of June I shifted from Dushanbe to Khorogh and conducted the remainder of my research in the Gorno-Badakhshan region. This portion of my research agenda encompassed several aspects. First, I conducted research in a manuscript archive in Khorogh run by a local branch of the Institute of Ismaili Studies. This archive contains images of many texts collected by local scholars over the past decade from both Tajik and Afghan Badakhshan. The collection is still in the early stage of its formation and has not yet been subject to a proper cataloguing effort. A partial hand-list catalog of the collection was made available to me, from which I was able to identify and access several important texts for my research.

The bulk of my research work in the Badakhshan region consisted of interviews and field visits to various sites in the region. I hired a research assistant, a recent college graduate from Badakhshan, who assisted me with translation with the Pamiri languages, as many of the older people in Badakhshan are not comfortable speaking Tajiki. In addition to translation, my research assistant also provided me valuable help in identifying and contacting informants. I had several objectives in this portion of my research. First, I sought interviews with informants from families who had preserved the textual traditions which were the focus of my manuscript

**2012 -2013 TITLE VIII RESEARCH SCHOLAR PROGRAM
FINAL REPORT**

research. From these interviews I sought to obtain information not only the history of the texts and their contents, but also to understand the significance of the texts within the families and their community. I made the decision early on to focus my interviews and oral history collections in the Shahdara valley, to serve as a sort of “case study” which may point to some larger trends and broader conclusions for the region as a whole. This proved to be a very fortunate and useful decision. I will discuss the results of these investigations in the section below.

Important Research Findings:

While this study focused primarily on the period from the 18th century to the present day, I sought also to undertake a wider survey of the development of the biographical traditions concerning Nasir-i Khusraw dating back to the time of his death in the late 11th century. Initially I had envisioned that this work would serve merely as a sort of background to my study, but in fact this research uncovered some very significant conclusions for understanding the context and history of the Ismaili narratives which emerged in the 18th and 19th century. To put it briefly, I found that a major shift occurred in the biographical narratives of Nasir-i Khusraw in the second half of the 15th century. Previous to this time, Nasir was described in Islamic sources almost exclusively as a heretic. Suddenly, beginning in the second half of the 15th century, Nasir begins to appear in the sources in a radically different form – not as a heretic, but as an orthodox Muslim and as a Sufi saint, with no connection to the Ismaili sect. My hypothesis is that this development was related to the Timurid conquest of Badakhshan in 1453 and the incorporation of the region as a province in the Timurid Empire. It is likely that some family or constituency connected to or proximate to the shrine of Nasir-i Khusraw in Badakhshan saw a new opportunity for patronage from the Timurids, on account of their renowned patronage of Sufi shrines throughout their empire. This would entail, of course, a rewriting of his biography to present him as a properly orthodox Sunni Muslim, in order to attract patronage. The biographical narrative of Nasir which emerged in this period continued to dominate understandings of Nasir-i Khusraw in the Muslim world down to the 19th century.

**2012 -2013 TITLE VIII RESEARCH SCHOLAR PROGRAM
FINAL REPORT**

This is a significant fact for the reason that the biographical narratives concerning Nasir-i Khusraw which were produced among Ismaili communities in Badakhshan beginning in the 18th and 19th centuries, to include the *Silk-i guhar-riz*, are essentially versions of the Timurid-era, Sunni narrative of Nasir, in which Nasir has been “re-Ismailicized.” I believe this demonstrates that the Ismaili authors of these texts were not operating in some isolated domain, but rather were engaged closely with, and indeed competing with a broader array of communal and political claims on the figure and legacy of Nasir-i Khusraw. Through a close study of the manuscript record of these Ismaili narratives of Nasir I have been able to point to their origin in a series of towns in modern-day Afghan Badakhshan, particularly Jurm and Munjan, which are located close to the shrine of Nasir in Yumgan, and which have historically been major centers of Ismailism in Central Asia. Changing political conditions in Central Asia in the mid-18th century granted this region a greater degree of political autonomy, which I believe gave space for local Ismaili leaders to assert a greater degree of authority. Hence, I argue that the development of these narratives may be understood as part of this process of the legitimation and expansion of the political and social authority of Ismaili leaders in Afghanistan in the late 18th century.

It was this environment which formed the background to the composition of the *Silk-i guhar-riz* in the city of Jurm (today in Afghan Badakhshan) in 1829, by a local Ismaili author who wrote under the pen-name Kuchak. The text, of which I have identified at least 8 manuscripts throughout the Badakhshan region, traces the author’s spiritual and genealogical lineage to a disciple of Nasir-i Khusraw name Sayyid Suhrab Vali. In the decades following the composition of this work there appears to have been again a major shift in the fortunes of the Ismailis of the region, as changing political conditions in Afghanistan led to increased pressures and persecutions against the community there. It is from this period, beginning in the 1850s and 1860s, that I believe we can trace a significant migration of Ismaili leaders northward, into the more remote areas of what is today Tajik Badakhshan, as a response to the increased pressures from the Afghan state. My research focused in particular on the Shahdara region of Tajik Badakhshan, where for the past century and a half the Ismaili community has come under the leadership of a family descended from Kuchak. Members of the family migrated there from

**2012 -2013 TITLE VIII RESEARCH SCHOLAR PROGRAM
FINAL REPORT**

Afghanistan in the 1880s and played an instrumental role in the establishment of a more centralized spiritual hierarchy for the Ismaili community of the region. Through the use of local manuscript sources, oral histories, and shrine records I will demonstrate the means by which this migration was connected with the establishment of a more normative sense of Ismaili identity in the Shahdara region, which was accompanied by the development of a narrative tradition tracing the conversion of the region to Nasir-i Khusraw, and hence granting greater religious and political authority to particular leaders who traced their lineage to this figure.

Policy Implications and Recommendations:

My research aims to provide a deeper understanding of the historical role of religious pluralism and diversity in Central Asian society. In particular, my work addresses the history and position of religious minorities in the region, topics that remain understudied and poorly understood in discussions of religion in contemporary Central Asia. This research will inform on-going concerns among U.S. policymakers regarding the state of religious freedom and religious pluralism in Tajikistan today. These concerns are clearly reflected in the U.S. Department of State's 2010 International Religious Freedom Report on Tajikistan, which states: "The government's level of respect for religious freedom in law and in practice was poor and declined during the reporting period." In a direct echo of Soviet-era practice, the Tajik government under Emomali Rahmon in recent years has placed tight restrictions on religious practice. Men under the age of 18 and all women are forbidden from attending mosques. Religious education remains tightly controlled by the state. A law passed in late December 2010 levies heavy fines on the "production, export, import, sale, and distribution of religious literature" without government permission; this law could potentially be applied directly to the body of texts I discuss in my research. The 2009 Law on Religion in Tajikistan gives precedence to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam in the state, placing religious minorities, such as the Ismailis, in a potentially precarious decision. Tensions have emerged between the government and the Ismaili community in recent years. To date, there remains no officially registered house of worship for

**2012 -2013 TITLE VIII RESEARCH SCHOLAR PROGRAM
FINAL REPORT**

the Ismaili community in Tajikistan. The State Department Religious Freedom Report states that street vendors and bookstore owners have been reportedly banned from selling Shi'i and non-Hanafi Islamic literature. President Rahmon insists that these policies are necessary to prevent the spread of religious extremism in Tajikistan. Studies by various scholars and NGOs, however, suggest that his policies may be having the precisely opposite effect. Restrictions on religious practice, coupled with the continuing lack of economic opportunities in the country, present ideal conditions for the radicalization of frustrated youth. Currently, the global Ismaili community is working to develop a standard curriculum for religious education, but the leadership has faced major obstacles in instituting the program in Tajikistan, due to government restrictions.

My research will also help to inform policies and priorities towards development work in Tajikistan. Since 1991, the Aga Khan has invested heavily in the development of mountainous communities in Tajikistan, constructing a vast network of educational and civil society institutions, as well as developing basic infrastructure projects such as bridges and hydro-electric power plants. The persistent weakness of the Tajik state since independence has ensured that many Badakhshanis and other Tajiks have come to rely upon these institutions at times to provide the most basic services and functions of civic life. The Aga Khan has also been instrumental in building economic conduits between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, such as border markets, which provide valuable economic opportunities and resources to both countries. In recent years, the Tajik government has moved to curtail the activities of NGOs in the country, particularly NGOs affiliated with religious organizations, such as those managed by the Aga Khan. Thus far, however, there is little indication that the Tajik state is prepared to resume the services provided by these agencies or to fill the gaps that would be rendered by their absence. These developments and processes hold important implications both for the religious life of Tajikistan and for U.S. foreign policy and development efforts in the region today. My research provides a stronger insight into the context and historical depth of these debates and issues in contemporary Tajikistan.

**2012 -2013 TITLE VIII RESEARCH SCHOLAR PROGRAM
FINAL REPORT**

These issues have taken on a renewed sense of urgency in light of the violence which erupted in the city of Khorogh in the summer of 2012, approximately 6 months before my research in Tajikistan began. The Aga Khan played an instrumental role in implementing the cease-fire to this conflict, but since that time the government has largely sidelined the Ismaili leadership of the region in its efforts to resolve the greater underlying issues at stake. A feeling of resentment and anger at the government is widely evident among the residents of Badakhshan, particularly among the youth, and so far there is little indication that the government is taking active steps to address these issues. Further instability in this area should be a matter of great concern to the U.S. at this time, particularly given the drawdown underway from Afghanistan. The U.S. is in a unique position to wield significant influence over the Tajik government in the areas of human rights and religious freedom, given current levels of military aid. Improvements in the Tajik government's positions towards religious freedom would be a significant factor in helping to defuse tensions in the Badakhshan region and would reduce the likelihood of further conflicts in this area.

Co-Curricular Activity:

In Dushanbe I organized and led an English discussion group at the Ismaili Center. The group included about 20 college-age students. The group met for four months, from mid-February to mid-May. Each week we would read together a short article and discuss the topic, allowing the students to practice both their language and critical-thinking skills while expanding their vocabulary and knowledge of grammar. Some of the students from that group have already gone on to apply successfully for various national and international fellowships and programs, and have credited the discussion group with helping to prepare them for these positions. While in Khorogh I became involved as a volunteer teacher at the Khorogh English Program. In addition to leading some reading and discussion classes, I helped the students to prepare their individual research projects which they undertake as part of the program. As I discussed above, I gave a public lecture on my research in London which was attended by over 50 people. I was also invited to give a lecture at the National Museum in Dushanbe, as part of a newly-inaugurated

**2012 -2013 TITLE VIII RESEARCH SCHOLAR PROGRAM
FINAL REPORT**

public lecture series. Unfortunately, the only time they were able to schedule my talk came while I was in Badakhshan, and hence I was not able to give the lecture.

Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications:

As a result of my research in Tajikistan I now have more than enough material to complete my PhD dissertation, which I plan to write over the next year. As mentioned above, I have already submitted one article for possible publication in an edited volume on religious studies. I am also preparing several additional articles which I plan to submit over the next 6 months. I have been accepted to present on my research at the annual conference of the International Society for Iranian Studies in Montreal next summer, and I am planning to apply for several additional conferences next year, including the annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association. I have also been invited to give a talk at the University of Chicago as part of these lecture series on Shi'i studies, although the date has not been set yet. I hope to continue and to expand on this research agenda in the future in several aspects. I am working now with several Tajik scholars to develop a project to collect and digitize more of the manuscript materials held in private home collections in the Badakhshan region. This is a present a very valuable contribution to our knowledge of the religious history of this region and will enable us to better understand the ways in which religious traditions have been passed down and preserved through Soviet and post-Soviet times. In addition, I plan to work on completing editions and publications of several hitherto unpublished Badakhshani manuscript works, in order to make these texts more widely accessible to other scholars.