

**Being Yagnobi:  
Expressions of Identity, Place, and Revitalization as a Minority in Tajikistan**  
Dushanbe, Tajikistan May 26 – September 8, 2014

**Introduction:**

Through the support of American Councils and the Title VIII program I was able to conduct ethnographic research on Yagnobi constructions of identity and the vitality of their endangered language and culture between May 6<sup>th</sup> and September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015. This research experience was the continuation of a pilot field study I was able to initiate as an undergraduate while participating in American Councils Eurasian Regional Language Program.

The Yagnobi are a small minority of Tajikistan. The total number of speakers of their native language totals approximately 13,500 (Paul, et al.: 2009). Their native Yagnob Valley is located high in the mountains between Dushanbe and Khujand, between the Hissor and Zarafshon ranges. Both international researchers and the Yagnobi themselves consider the ancient Soghdian civilization to be the forerunner of the Yagnobi, largely due to the genetic relationship between the Soghdian and Yagnobi languages (Sims-Williams: 1989). Prior to the establishment of the Soviet Union, several villages were additionally settled by the Yagnobi in what is now the Varzob district north of Dushanbe and south of the Yagnob Valley. In 1970, the population of the Yagnob Valley was forcibly relocated to the lowland Zafarobod district to work at a collective farm there. The resettled Yagnobis suffered from famine and disease in their first years there. The Yagnobi today are now scattered in isolated communities and a systematic shift from the Yagnobi language, and the cultural practices associated with it, is occurring, with more and more Yagnobi speakers becoming primarily speakers of Tajik Persian.

## Research Objectives and Methodology:

Figure 1: The village of Zumand, Varzob District:



My research was concerned primarily with two topics: the construction of a Yaghnobi identity, and efforts towards revitalization of the language and the community. Previous research on the Yaghnobi have not focused on either the topic of ethnic identity practices or revitalization efforts within the community itself. My main thesis question is stated as: How do the Yaghnobi construct an ethnic identity despite their marginalized status in Tajikistan, and how do constructions of identity relate to

efforts towards revitalization?

The research was ethnographic, supplemented by readings of Tajik Persian collections of Yaghnobi folklore and other literature written by Yaghnobis in Tajikistan concerning their language, culture, and revitalization efforts. I used a method of chain-referral sampling, branching out from key interlocutors who introduced me to others within their networks of peers. I interviewed my interlocutors using ethnographic interviews designed to illicit narratives. My interviews focused on historical narratives, the state of village life and the Yaghnobi language, education, and efforts towards revitalization. In the process, however, I touched on other issues, including popular religion, poetry, and agriculture. In total, I conducted thirty-nine interviews at five different field locations. My interlocutors included a diverse range of individuals, both within and outside of the Yaghnobi community, including herders, village school teachers, researchers and intellectuals, members of international organizations, and others.

I conducted my research at five field sites. Tajikistan's capital, Dushanbe, was where I stayed with my primary consultant and interlocutor, Taghoymurod Yorzoda, an ethnic Yaghnobi folklorist who conducts research at the Rudaki Institute of Language and Literature. He introduced me to other Yaghnobi intellectuals and members of the community living and working in Dushanbe. He also led me to my other field sites, assisting me in meeting members of their communities. His home village of Kukteppa, just south of the Yaghnob Valley, served as my primary field site, which I visited a total of ten times during both my pilot research as an undergraduate and during my Title VIII research. I also visited the villages of Zumand and Safedorak in the Varzob region, north of Dushanbe. I also visited the Yaghnob Valley itself, driving into the valley as far as the road would allow and traveling to several of its villages by foot. Finally, I visited the Zafarobod Region in the northwest of Tajikistan, where the majority of the Yaghnobi continue to live on collective farms.

My analytical methods include identifying common tropes expressed by my interlocutors which express themes that constitute a construction of Yaghnobi identity. I have especially focused on how

my Yaghnobi interlocutors articulate themselves through expressions of time and space, creating ethnicized histories and places. An important theory I used to analyze these narratives was Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of *chronotope* or “time-space” (Bakhtin: 1981). This concept was important to my understanding of how my interlocutor's narratives construct a Yaghnobi time and space through these tropes. This theory allows me to not only consider my interlocutors' narratives and discourses as linguistic identity practices, but also as spatial practices (Lefebvre: 1991; Liu: 2012; Mostowlansky: 2012). This is key to unpacking the Yaghnobi's sense of history and space as being integral to their ethnic identity, as my interlocutors persistently insisted.

### **Textual Research:**

My principal Yaghnobi consultant, Taghoymurod Yorzoda, and his colleagues were able to introduce me to Tajik Persian texts which are important to understanding how Tajikistanis understand their history and multitude of ethnicities. An important text for understanding the Soviet and post-Soviet intellectual assemblage of ethnicity and nationalism is Josef Stalin's (1913) “Marxism and the National Question,” the text that established Stalin as a Marxist theoretician. Stalin puts forth the thesis that “A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.” It was this very philosophy that established the individual Soviet Socialist Republics, and in doing so, created Soviet and non-Soviet nationalities (Hirsch: 2005). The Yaghnobi were left out of the group of Soviet nationalities, and were considered to be Tajiks in the Soviet censuses, thereby ontologically erasing them from the ethnic makeup of the Tajikistan Soviet Socialist Republic and the Soviet Union at large.

During the early years of the Soviet Union, the Tajiks were not granted a republic at the SSR level. The early Soviet-era Tajik orientalist Bobojon Ghafurov set to argue the Tajiks' nationhood, as an effort towards the establishment of a Tajik SSR, largely according to the guidelines set by Stalin in his

1913 treatise. Ghafurov (2008) considered the ethnogenesis of the Tajiks to be the adoption of Tajik Persian by the largely Soghdian and Bactrian population of Transoxiana. Ghafurov claimed that, due to their ancestral relationship to these historical civilizations of Central Asia, the Tajiks were a distinct nation, differentiated through their common history in Transoxiana, psychological make-up, and language from other nations and ethnicities.

Tajikistan's president, Emomali Rahmon has also written his own treatise concerning the nationhood of the Tajiks. In his work, "The Tajiks in the Mirror of History," Rahmon (2001) reiterates Ghafurov's work. He argues that the Tajiks are a unique civilization, alongside the great civilizations of antiquity. His work, also like Ghafurov's before it, argues the nationhood of the Tajiks, and their right to a territory of their own. He places the Tajik's historical relationship with ancient civilizations such as the Soghdians as a main factor in their distinctiveness from other nations, especially other Persian-speaking ethnicities.

Yaghnobi intellectuals have also engaged in their own articulations of ethnicity. Their efforts include documentation of their language and folklore. They argue that the distinct nature of their language, their secluded homeland, commonly-held values as expressed in folklore, and their history as the last "true" descendents of the Soghdian civilization establish themselves as a nation in their own right. The Yaghnobi researchers, like Rahmon and Ghafurov, are in the Soviet tradition of ethnicity and nation construction first defined by Josef Stalin. These identity practices create a history where the Yaghnobi are seen as a people distinct from Tajiks and all other ethnic identities. These are not only identity practices that ethnicize history, but also spacial practices that create distinctly Tajik and Yaghnobi spaces, which are contested in intellectual discourse.

### **Being Yaghnobi:**

As a result of my ethnographic interviews with Yaghnobi interlocutors, I was able to identify constructions of Yaghnobi identity that constitute identity practices which ethnicize history and place,

creating Yaghnobi histories and spaces. These expressions of Yaghnobi identity are contested within the community, however. There is no single meaning of being Yaghnobi held in common by all members of the community. Rather, a multiplicity of expressions constitute an assemblage of ideas that make up a map of how to express an identity in the disputed discourse of ethnicity.

Multiple interlocutors expressed to me that their Yaghnobi ethnicity does not come first to their identity. I can sum this trope as “Being a Muslim is most important, being Tajik is second, and being Yaghnobi is third.” These individuals did *not* necessarily consider being Yaghnobi distinct from being Tajik. Rather, they considered their common Sunni religion and values to be synonymous with those of Tajiks. They consider Yaghnobis to be among other Tajik regional groups (sometimes referred to as “clans” in Western literature on Tajikistan), such as Gharmis, Kulobis, and Leninobodis. Their regional group, however, speaks a language distinct from Tajik Persian, rather than a regional dialect.

Other Yaghnobis, however, do consider themselves to be a distinct ethnicity, emphasizing that they are the last of the great Soghdian civilization of the pre-Islamic silk routes. These interlocutors often told me that “the Yaghnob is just a valley, we are Soghdian.” They therefore refer to both their ethnicity and language as *sughdi*, or Soghdian. These individuals contend that their identity *is* their language and lineage. Many of the same interlocutors also claim that Tajiks are invaders (usually from modern Iran or even Arabia), and that they are the original inhabitants of Central Asia. Their ancestors only came to the Yaghnob Valley for its remote location in an effort to avoid attacks from outsiders. One interlocutor also contested the etymology of the very word *tojik*. While Rahmon and most Tajikistani intellectuals contend the word is derived from *toj*, “crown,” he claimed it was derived from *tozi*, the Soghdian and Early Modern Persian word for an Arab, and more generally all Muslims.

Regardless of whether individuals considered their ethnicity distinct from Tajiks, there were still other common tropes that expressed what being Yaghnobi meant to them. One expression I often heard was that “Being Yaghnobi is being from the Yaghnob.” These interlocutors claimed that it was being from the valley that made you Yaghnobi. They were quick to point out that there are Tajik-speaking

people from the valley that were also resettled and came back their homes. As they lead the same lifestyle as the other mountain Yaghnobis, they can be considered Yaghnobi as well.

Many of these same informants also stressed to me that “*Hashar* for your community makes you Yaghnobi.” *Hashar* is an obligation to do community work for a village. One example I witnessed was *alaf darrav*, the collection of dry, late-summer grass for livestock to eat in winter. Relatives of families in the village of Kukteppa who lived throughout the year in Dushanbe would come and send themselves and/or their sons to cut the grass in the open pastures to store over winter. Doing this obligation signifies that somebody, even if they have moved from the remote village to the city, is still a member of the community and participates in local village practices. Some of the very same informants claimed that as less people participate in *hashar*, villages – and therefore the Yaghnobi community as a whole – are withering away.

These expressions of what it means to be Yaghnobi are ethno-spatial practices. They define ethnic identity through a relation with space, be it with existing villages or the lands of distant and ancient ancestors. While the spaces may have different borders, be it the Yaghnob Valley, or the ancient Soghdian cities of pre-Islamic times, being from – and *of* – a certain place is a deciding factor in each of these constructions of identity.

### **Narratives of Resistance:**

Yaghnobi oral history, as recorded by Yorzoda and as expressed by some of my informants, express a common pattern of resistance to outsiders and martyrdom, which in turn makes the land more sacred. Written early Islamic history also documents the resistance of the Soghdians. These narratives span an impressive length of time, from the arrival of the Muslims, to semi-mythic wars with China for trade routes, to the arrival of Turkic herders, the onset of the Soviet Union, and finally the era of independent Tajikistan.

Yaghnobi intellectuals and elders knowledgeable of oral history relate the founding of their

valley to the historical king of Panjikent, Devastich. The king, who is a historical figure in Al-Tabari and also features in Yaghnobi oral histories and songs, fled from Panjikent to the mountains of the Zarafshon watershed in the late 8<sup>th</sup> Century (Granet, et al.: 2002). The village of Shohveta in the Yaghnob Valley is considered by the Yaghnobi to be the place where he re-established his court. Al-Tabari also recorded history of another folk hero featured in Yaghnobi oral history, Al-Muqanna (“The Veiled One”). Muqanna was a Soghdian religious figure who practiced a syncretic form of Islam and led a revolt against the Abassid caliphate (Crone: 2012). These Soghdian resistance figures are featured in early Islamic history, and are well known to modern Yaghnobis. While it may be impossible to know if they entered Yaghnobi folklore before or after influence from Soviet historians and ethnographers, their narratives feature the theme of resistance found throughout Yaghnobi oral history.

The Yaghnobi also remember two different resistance heroes from historically distant eras through epic songs and pilgrimage to their gravesites, or *mazors*. Damavant Dehbalandi led a semi-mythic war against the Chinese in the centuries after the Yaghnobi had moved from the cities of Pre-Islamic Soghdia to the Yaghnob Valley. The Chinese, who believed the Yaghnobi had killed a trade party traveling through the mountains in winter, sacked Dehbalandi's home, leading him to fight with basic weapons against their retaliating forces. The burial sites of both his and his sisters are *mazors* which some Yaghnobi continue to make pilgrimage to. His sister's *mazor* in particular, is known for allaying ailments.

Like Damavant, Jum'a Oqsaqol is remembered through both epic song and a *mazor*. Jum'a was accused of being a *bosmachi*, a group of insurgents that fought against the early Soviet government. While accused of being a *bosmachi*, his song adamantly states that he was not. Rather, he was simply defending the honor of his family and community. The sites of both Jum'a and Damavant's *mazors* were important stops during my two trips to the Yaghnob Valley. The individuals I was traveling with stopped to recite the Quran and pray for the well-being of family members.



The narratives I have outlined here, in addition to several others found in both my field recordings and collections of Yaghnobi folklore, express a consistent theme of resistance that is interconnected with not only the defense of the Yaghnobi people, but also the spaces they inhabit. Their history expresses a consistent chronotope across the eras they describe. One that centralizes the Yaghnobi against outsiders, and where the blood of martyrs literally replenishes the land they defend. This is also a theme of pre-Islamic and early Islamic Iranian literature, such as the stories of the martyrdom of Zoroaster, his sons, and the prince Siyavash as found in the Avesta and the Early Modern Persian epic, the Shahnameh. The narratives of these resistance heroes, and the practice of pilgrimage to their *mazors*, constitutes an ethno-spatial practice which ethnicizes spaces through both the recounting of both written and oral history and pilgrimage to the places where these events took place.

### **Revitalization:**

While there is currently no civil society organization or group specifically devoted to the interests of the Yaghnobis, local leaders and powerful individuals within Yaghnobi society pressure government officials to meet the needs of the community. My interlocutors consistently named three areas where they most desire improvements that they believe would revitalize their language and culture: education, infrastructural improvements, and increased economic opportunities. Most of my interlocutors, but especially those living in the Yaghnob Valley or in the resettled communities in Zafarobod, believed that these potential development projects should be focused in the Yaghnob Valley itself. They related to me that they believe that improvements to the valley would bring revitalization to their language, and therefore their culture, because if they were to return to their remote homeland they would not be as pressured to adapt to Tajik language and culture.

The topic of language endangerment was an interest of mine during these interviews, and I therefore asked almost all of my interlocutors about the subject of Yaghnobi-language education. The Tajik Language Law in Tajikistan's constitution provides for the protection of Yaghnobi and the Pamiri

languages. In practice, however, this has rarely been implemented. The linguist Saifiddin Mirzozoda has led the efforts towards Yaghnobi-language education and has had small successes in the past. He has published schoolbooks in Yaghnobi for the first four grades of *maktab*, or grade school. These books contain folklore and history in the readers' first language. While they do teach the Yaghnobi Cyrillic alphabet, they do not teach grammar, as it is assumed that the students reading them will already speak Yaghnobi. Due to the publication of these books, from 2004-2009 there were schools where two hours a day, Yaghnobi language education was practiced. These schools were confined to the semi-formal schools of the Yaghnob Valley and the formal schools in Zumand and Safedorak. This program was reversed by the Ministry of Education, however, due to a lack of funds and an inability to publish books for all of the settlements that requested the program. The books, in fact, were published, sold, and distributed by Mirzozoda and teachers interested in the program, as I learned through an interview I conducted with him.

Many residents of the Yaghnob Valley simply wanted formal schools with trained teachers. Several schools with basic dormitories have been constructed in the valley, however teachers, who are largely recruited from other regions in Tajikistan, are unwilling to leave their homes and live at the schools. In addition, parents do not wish to send their students to a school that their children likely cannot come home from in the winter due to the extreme weather conditions of the valley. It is for these reasons that while several schools with dormitories have been constructed with money from both *hashar* and international donors, these schools largely remain empty.

Figure 2: The village of Gharmen in the Yaghnob Valley. A school (the large building with the green roof) has been built there, however it remains unused.



Roads and paths are an important part of life in upland Tajikistan. Many Tajikistanis in both the cities and the country make a living as drivers, as demand is high to buy and sell at urban bazaars and visit family in either the village or the city. In most of my field sites, roads were in place that were maintained by local governments. In the Yaghnob, however, all roads and foot paths are maintained through *hashar*. That is, local residents have to communally pay through cash or agricultural goods for the labor involved in maintaining roads and foot paths. An example of how payment through *hashar* became evident to me while I was driving into the Yaghnob on its only road leading into the lower part of the valley. The car that my guides and I were riding in was stopped on the way up to the valley by a small rock slide that blocked the path of the road. A private bulldozer was clearing the path, however I

had to pay the workmen with a fifty Somoni note as a contribution to pass through the roadway. Such circumstances are a way of life in the valley, where snow-lips annually wash out sections of roads and paths. Yaghnobi political leaders and revitalizationists, however, have repeatedly petitioned for a more permanent road to the valley to be paid for by the local or central government. All money to the *jamoat*, however, must be sent from the president himself, and these petitions are common in many communities in mountainous Tajikistan. These community leaders and politicians therefore petition the government, and often president Emomali Rahmon himself, for the construction of a permanent road, however they are usually met with the same response: that the government is unwilling to pay for construction of a road into a valley with a very small population.

My interlocutors also frequently mentioned that cell phone connectivity was also an important infrastructural improvement. The Yaghnob and other remote villages are not well connected to cell phone or 3G towers. Almost all Yaghnobis, however, do own cellular phones. In many villages, making a phone call requires a walk up a hill, however in the Yaghnob, some people walk for as much as two days to receive reception to call family or arrange the sale of livestock or agricultural goods. Cell phone towers, like roads, are considered an important infrastructural improvement, as Yaghnobis living in the lowlands do not have an incentive to move back to their homeland if doing so means giving up participation in Tajikistan's economy.

My Yaghnobi interlocutors also stated to me that they believe many more Yaghnobi would move back to the valley if there were better economic opportunities there. The valley's former inhabitants now largely live in Zafarobod, Khujand, or Dushanbe and have salaried jobs. These returnees to the valley do not have the abilities necessary to establish a large herd of livestock, there is little incentive to return to the valley. As the Yaghnob valley is rich with gold, tungsten, and granite, many Yaghnobi consider the opening of mines as an opportunity for their people to return to the valley and also receive salaried jobs. I asked them if they were concerned with the environmental effects of the mines, however they claimed that having a salaried job in their homeland was more important, comparing the

unemployment of today with the Soviet past.

My interlocutors also wish for increased tourism to the Yaghnob Valley. The government of Tajikistan has declared several areas of Tajikistan “National Ethnographic Parks,” in an effort to promote tourism. In the Pamir mountains region in Eastern Tajikistan this has led to officially registered and advertised guest-houses (usually parts of private homes of well-to-do individuals who are willing to take on foreign guests), however in the Yaghnob no such efforts have come to fruition.

Efforts towards revitalization are organized around ethnic Yaghnobis in positions of authority. The leaders and politicians I was able to interview complained of the red-tape, lack of funds, and misappropriation of funds – both from the Tajikistani government and international donors – as a leading factor in the failure of these basic development efforts taking place. In addition, these goals have focused on the Yaghnob, which is a large and rugged area with a very small population. In the minds of officials in the central government, there must first be people in an area for these efforts to be worth the money, not the other way around. We see in these revitalization efforts that issues of space and regionalism are the main challenges to achieving these goals. The modest goals of revitalizationists focus on the most quintessentially “Yaghnobi” spaces, as they believe that their people's return to them is the most important step towards the preservation of their language and society. It is evident that ideas of ethnic space shape the Yaghnobis efforts towards revitalization.

### **Conclusions and Reflection:**

The Yaghnobi construct their identity within the post-Soviet discourse of nationality in Central Asia. Identity is defined by space, language, religion, and common practices held by members of the community. Their narratives and discourses constitute distinct chronotopes which are imbued with their history and common tropes, such as resistance and renewal. These are ethno-spatial practices, which “Yaghnobize” spaces in a similar manner to how the Pamir Kyrgyz of Tajikistan in Mostowlansky's (2012) work “Kyrgyzize” their space, socially constructing both a history and a homeland.

Revitalization efforts are shaped by this practice as well, as revitalization efforts focus on improving life in the rugged homeland of the Yaghnobi. While outside specialists may wish for Yaghnobi-language schools and other spaces for revitalization in the places where most of the community live, to many Yaghnobi, there is no future for them outside of their home villages.

As a result of my research, funded by American Councils for International Education and the Title VIII program, I was able to find new insight and conduct original ethnographic research with a community that does not often receive attention from Western researchers. In doing so, I was able to better understand and provide new information on the ethnic politics of Tajikistan and post-Soviet Central Asia more generally. The experience I was afforded allowed me to connect with Tajikistani intellectuals and political figures interested in the rights of this – and other – minorities in Tajikistan. My research provides new insights into how a small minority such as the Yaghnobi imagine themselves in the ethnically sensitive politics of Central Asia. The insights I gained in this research will be utilized in my Master's thesis project, and I plan to develop journal articles on the topics I have outlined above.

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