



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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Tajikistan

The Muslim Shrines of Tajikistan: Mapping the Religious Landscape

Topic of Research:

The purpose of this project was to examine the previously unstudied history and contemporary situation of the Muslim shrines of Tajikistan through a combination of archival and field research. Islamic shrines in Central Asia are connected with prominent Sufi (spiritual) masters, eminent Muslim religious figures, and sometimes, rulers.

Approach and Research Methodology:

My methodology consisted of a combination of archival research, fieldwork, and secondary literature review. Archival research was carried out mainly in the libraries of Dushanbe, specifically the manuscript collection in the library of the Institute of Oriental Studies and Written Heritage, the manuscript and book collection of the National Library named Firdowsi, the book collection of the Library of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Tajikistan named Gandhi, the Institute of History Semenov Manuscript Collection, and the library of the National Museum named Behzod. I also visited the libraries and museum collections of Penjakent, Ayni, Isfara, Khojand, and Khorogh where I was able to examine local sources on shrines. In addition, I was able to read, and in some

cases, photograph, manuscripts and documents in private collections in villages across Tajikistan.

During the course of my fieldwork I visited a total of 130 shrines in the region of Dushanbe (Hisar, Varzob, Karatogh); Regar (Akhun Bobo, Naqsharon); Kofarnikhon; Faizabad; Khoja Obigarm; the region of Kulob (Dangara, Langar, Muminobod, Kulob, Shurobod); the region of Khovaling (Khovaling, Kangurt, Baljavon); Shaartuz, Kabodiyon, Jilikul, Vakhsh; the Penjakent and Ayni region of Zerafshan (Penjakent, Shingak, Revad, Urmetan, Iskodar, Ayni, Zosun, Rarz); Istaravshan (including the villages of Rugund, Sufi Orif, and Pojingak); Isfara (including villages of Kala-chai, Zumrad, and Chorkukh); Khojand; Badakhshan (including the regions of Khorogh, Rushan, Rushtqala, Parshnev, and Bartang; Khorogh, Sokhcharv, Buni, Yomj, Medinshokh, Tem, Rivak, Kushk, Vir, Bodom, Boghev, Kushk, Tavdem, Tusiyan, Sejd, Nimoth, Vamar, Yemz). During my fieldwork I took digital photographs of the exterior and interior of the shrines, the local settings of the shrines, and shrine administrators and local elders. In addition, whenever possible I conducted interviews about the history of the shrines, drew maps of the geographical setting, and made drawings of the architectural structure and layout of the shrines and shrine complexes. Finally, I made every attempt to gain a complete understanding of past and current research (in Russian, Tajik, and Persian) on the archaeology, architecture, and religious history of each shrine through the acquisition of genealogical charts, land endowments, and studies done by Central Asian and Russian scholars.

Research Findings:

I have been conducting research in Central Asia for over 25 years, mostly in Uzbekistan until 4 years ago when I began working in Tajikistan. This was one of the most extraordinary research experiences in my professional career. Scholars in Dushanbe and virtually across the country enthusiastically reached out to help me in whatever way they could to provide me with the best possible resources. My expertise and interest in the local culture of shrines and Sufi lineages was met with deep appreciation and respect, within academic circles as well as among villagers. To date, there has been practically no western scholarship on the history of Islamic shrines in Tajikistan, due to limited access during the Soviet period, the protracted civil war that followed, and a prevailing emphasis by scholars on the well known and documented urban centers of Samarqand, Bukhara (present-day Uzbekistan), Balkh and Herat (present-day Afghanistan), among others. During my 5 1/2 months of research I visited a total of 130 Islamic shrines, and examined approximately fifty manuscript sources dating from the 14th to the 20th century (including biographies of Sufi shaykhs and *imams*, shrine manuals, land endowments, local histories, Qur'anic commentaries, correspondence, and Sufi treatises). I was able to photograph 8 complete manuscripts (in addition to sample folios from others), and 25 documents. In addition, I photocopied a total of 46 secondary sources in the form of books, articles, and lithographs, including rare books dating from the 19th century.

My findings are as follows. First, the presence of shrines, some of which pre-date Islam, was and continues to be an important feature of the urban and local landscape of Tajikistan. Pilgrimage is common outside the capital of Dushanbe. Although Soviet policy dramatically interrupted the communal and religious life embodied in shrine culture, caused the complete dissolution of Sufi leadership and communities, and in some cases destroyed the shrines themselves, shrines dot the landscape of Tajikistan.

Second, Islamic shrines cannot be viewed as frozen in time. They are living monuments that have developed and undergone change over the course of historical time. Islamic shrines have been continuously rebuilt, and/or renovated, and that process is particularly poignant in the post-Soviet period in Tajikistan (and throughout Central Asia), when Islamic shrines may reflect religious, ethnic, or national identity.

Third, local knowledge about the history of the shrines is limited, but within certain families that knowledge has been passed on and proudly maintained. My analysis of the many hours of interviews will be especially important in this regard. The architectural history of all but the most well known shrines is little known in the west, and will be particularly valuable when published.

Fourth, there is strong evidence from the 15th-19th-century that reveals the existence of local networks of Sufi communities which, while maintaining contact with the more well known urban Sufi communities of Bukhara and Samarqand (in present-day Uzbekistan), created their own important and quite successful local communities through the ability of their leaders to establish their own religious authority, social identity, and material support. Although thorough analysis of my sources is necessary to make any final conclusions, my research thus far reveals the simultaneous existence of multiple and nuanced relationships between local religious elites in Tajikistan during the 15-19th centuries (and in some cases, between those elites and local political leaders) and between religious elites across and beyond Central Asia. Local networks of shrines and spiritual leaders played a central role in the communal and religious life, while interregional networks resulted in a rich exchange of ideas and practices. Such relationships make it incumbent upon the historian to move beyond the nationalist borders of modern nation states to consider the shrines of Tajikistan within the broader Islamic culture and history of Central Asia.

Fifth, my research has yielded a rich assortment of sources that will enable me to establish social, religious, political, and genealogical links over time, and, in some cases, to trace the history of prominent religious families that continue to exist to this day, despite the fact that, in most cases, their traditional religious roles were effectively undermined during the Soviet period. With regard to the latter history, the period of greatest impact, from the Russian conquest in the 19th century, through the Soviet period, and into the present-day post-Soviet period, is of special interest given the unprecedented changes to the religious landscape that tsarist and especially Soviet rule brought.

Finally, my survey of Islamic shrines in Tajikistan provides further evidence to the already well established fact that Sufism has played a central role in the religious and communal life of Central Asia, through institutionalized Sufi orders (*tariqas*), Sufi shaykhs, legends, and especially shrines. Given the significant interest in pilgrimage today, the current reclamation and restoration process, and the vibrant new interest in the history of Sufism and shrines expressed by Tajik scholars with whom I interacted, the climate in Tajikistan is ripe for such research.

Relevance, Scholarly Significance, and Impact on the Field:

Much recent attention has focused on the development of politicized Islamic groups in Central Asia, to the exclusion of the more prevalent, long-established cultural aspects of religious life that are rooted in the history of the eastern Islamic world, including Central Asia. Historians of Iran and Central Asia are familiar with the importance of Sufism and shrines in Central Asia, although most research has focused primarily on the urban centers of activity. My research indicates the need to consider the local religious geography of Central Asia, and particularly, of Tajikistan, and demonstrates the rich potential for further research in Tajikistan, both in the archives and in the field. The publication of my book survey of the Islamic shrines of Tajikistan will serve as a necessary baseline for future research on the social, economic, and spiritual history of Sufism and shrine culture in Tajikistan and will fill a void in our understanding of Central Asian history. The forthcoming articles that I plan to publish, particularly on the history of Ismaili shrines and families of Badakhshan, and on the history of the shrine of Muhammad Bashara in Penjakent (Zerafshan valley), virtually unknown to Western scholars, will be of great interest to scholars and students of Central Asian and Islamic history whose knowledge of this region has been so severely limited. My interdisciplinary approach to the history of Islamic shrines, which utilizes documents, life history, correspondence, biographies, archaeological data, architectural drawings, historical narratives, hagiography, photographs, and interviews will, furthermore, demonstrate the value of using such a wide range of sources to gain a full and multidimensional understanding of the history of shrines, shrine communities, and shrine families.

Suggestions for Future Research Agendas and the Scholarly Community:

Research opportunities in Tajikistan are rich and varied. Tajik scholars are eager to take part in an exchange of ideas, libraries are, for the most part, accessible, and travel, although challenging in more remote areas, is possible. There is a broad range of research topics in the humanities that might be pursued by scholars, from ancient to modern history, anthropology, numismatics, literature, linguistics, religion, archaeology, art history, political history, and philosophy, among others. I would especially encourage scholars to consider collaborative research, which is mutually beneficial and fosters an important long-term exchange of ideas. Given the severe limitations under which Tajik scholars work, such arrangements are critically important to the development of research in

Tajikistan. With respect to the history of Islamic shrines, Sufism, and religiosity, here too, Tajikistan presents a strong case, particularly since it is so understudied in comparison with other regions of the Perso-Islamic world.