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## **Islamic Shrine Culture and History in Tajikistan**

### **Topic of Research and Countries Visited**

The purpose of this project was two-fold: 1) to collaborate with Tajik scholars to open a traveling exhibition of my photographs of Islamic shrines from different regions of Tajikistan, accompanied by historical information posters; 2) to conduct field and archival research on shrines in the Ishkashim region of Badakhshan, Tajikistan that will be the subject of one chapter of my book project entitled, *Mapping the Religious Landscape: The Islamic Shrines of Tajikistan*. This book is intended to provide a baseline for future research on the social, economic, and spiritual history of Sufism and shrine culture in Tajikistan, and to fill a void in our understanding of local religiosity in Central Asia.

### **Relevance and Contribution to the Field**

The photographic exhibition, which opened at the National Museum named Bihzad in Dushanbe, was designed to bring visual and historical expression to this important and dynamic aspect of Tajik culture and society, and to provide a link between local culture, social development, and historical memory.

Unlike the better known shrines in the eastern Islamic world, the Muslim shrines of Tajikistan are relatively unknown and barely, if at all, studied. One of the most remote and least studied regions of Tajikistan is that of the autonomous oblast of Gorno-Badakhshan. The shrines of Badakhshan are of particular significance since the majority of them are connected to Ismaili (the primary religious affiliation in the Pamir region) rather than to Sunni religious figures, and, as in other mountainous regions of Central Asia, they often display both Islamic and pre-Islamic symbols and practices. This project raises important theoretical and substantive issues regarding the relationship between local authority and religious prestige in the Ismaili mountain communities of Badakhshan, the historical legacy of Sufism in the Badakhshan region and developments in the post-Soviet period, the architectural style and structure of shrines in the Ishkashim region, and genealogical and spiritual lines of descent among local and regional shrine families.

### **Approach and Research Methodology**

I worked collaboratively with the Institute of History, the Institute of Language and Literature, the National Museum of Tajikistan on the preparatory work, execution, opening day activities and travel schedule of the exhibition. The exhibition included 66 photographs printed on vinyl poster-size panels (for ease of transportation across Tajikistan), 16 panels of explanatory texts, an exhibition brochure and a calendar. The text posters described the location, date, brief history and significance of the shrine, along with excerpts of oral history collected in previous interviews with local shrine administrators, village elders, and spiritual leaders. The exhibition, which was sponsored

by the Swiss Cooperation Office in Dushanbe, has since traveled to the regions of Badakhshan, Soghd, and Khujand, and is presently traveling in Khatlon.

The methodology for my research on the shrines of Badakhshan focused primarily on field research and secondarily on archival research since there are relatively few written sources available on shrines of the Ishkashim region of Badakhshan. Scholarly literature review was accomplished in Dushanbe in the book collection of the Library of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Tajikistan named Gandhi and the manuscript collection in the library of the Institute of Oriental Studies and Written Heritage, and in the private library of Dr. Umed Mamadsherzodshoev in Khorogh, Badakhshan. I also found and photographed important documentary sources in private collections in several villages. During the course of my fieldwork I visited a total of 20 shrines in the Ishkashim region: Ostoni Shokhburkhon in the village of Shambedekh); Ostoni Zanjiri Ka'ba in the village of Rin; Ostoni Piri Fokmamad in the village of Darshay; Ostoni Bobo Khoki in the village of Shitkharv; Mazari Shokhisomiddin in the village of Pitu; Chashmai Fotimai Zakhro in the village of Pitup; Osorkhonai Sufi Muborakkadam in the village of Yamg; Osorkhonai Abdullo Ansori in the village of Vrang; Shasti Murtuzo Ali, Osorkhonai Pir Saidkaramalishokh, Mazori Pir Saidkaramalishokh, Mazori Khoja Bekhzod, Ostoni Khonai Khudo, Ostoni Murodgokhi Murodoson, and Ostoni Gesuv in the village of Zong; Ostoni Panjai Shokh in the village of Zugvang; Mazori Shokhkambari Oftob in the village of Langar, Ostoni Nuri Mukhammad in the village of Khisor, and Ostoni Shokhi Mardon in the village of Namadgut.

I took digital photographs of the interior and exterior views of the shrines and portraits of shrine administrators, local religious leaders and village elders. I recorded interviews about the history of the shrines and relevant life history of the interviewees and made drawings of the architectural structure and layout of the shrines and shrine complexes. I filmed interviews and shrine sites and photographed genealogical charts, correspondence, and Persian documents.

### **Research Findings and Preliminary Results**

The museum opening in Dushanbe was attended by scholars, members of the diplomatic community, teachers, students, and artists. The exhibition received a very positive response, and was aired on Tajik television and radio. The exhibition was an important milestone in print production since it was the first exhibition produced entirely in Tajikistan in collaboration with Tajik artists and using Tajik print technology.

Based on field research carried out in the Ishkashim region, together with my previous research in Shughnon, Roshtala, and Rushan, I have visited and documented a total of 96 shrines in Badakhshan. The only region I have not been able to visit thus far, due to time limitations is Gund. I have found that the shrines of Badakhshan may be broken down into the following categories: sacred places associated with nature, including hot and/or mineral springs, large or unusual trees, caves, and rock formations; shrines where eminent religious figures are buried (Ismaili pirs, khalifas, or Sufis); shrines where eminent religious figures are believed to have visited in the past (including figures from early Islamic history such as 'Ali or Muhammad Baqir); sacred places where animals carrying early Islamic figures passed or are believed to left footprints in the ground or rock. Prominent at most shrine sites are collections of animal horns and special stones, which also have sacred properties. In general, rituals associated with sacred places are reserved for special holidays such as Nowruz or Eid-e Qurbon, rather than the previous practice of weekly Friday village gatherings.

Interviews with local villagers, religious leaders and shrine administrators reveal the persistence of prominent dynastic families as holding positions of prestige in villages and towns in Badakhshan. Most such families are able to trace their ancestry, either orally or through written genealogical charts. Soviet policies concerning national identity, religious practice, and collectivization left their mark on Badakhshan society, and post-Soviet economic dislocation has made life extremely difficult for most villagers. However, despite these challenges, shrines remains a key element in the sacred landscape and a symbol of identity, and many have recently been restored or rebuilt. It is also clear that religious elites within Badakhshan communities are aware of one another, even though they may live quite far away and are unable to visit one another due to the scarcity and expense of cars or trucks.

### **Suggestions for future Research Agendas in the Field**

The social, cultural and economic history of Tajikistan is seriously understudied, yet there are so many opportunities for fruitful archival and field research. Regarding research specifically on Islamic shrines, I suggest several avenues of research. The social aspects of shrine culture are significant. For example, women and men gather (at separate locations) at sacred spring for medicinal treatment. The interplay between religiosity and healing would be rewarding topic of research. Ethnographic studies of specific villages in which prominent shrines are located would further our understanding of shrine culture. Oral history is a very worthwhile approach to understanding the perceptions of and ritual practices associated with specific shrines over the course of time, particularly in the pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet period. Relationships between religious prestige, social status, and charismatic leadership is aspect of research that would be conducive to field research.

Archival collections of manuscripts and documents, in Dushanbe and Khorogh, are rich sources for understanding specific Ismaili rituals associated with shrines. An important aspect of research would be the relationship between Islamic and pre-Islamic practices, and sedentary and nomadic practices. Equally promising is historical research on the networks of connections between Sufi figures in other regions of Central Asia (India, China, Afghanistan), and the economic and political status of such figures.

### **Recommendations for the US Policy Community**

Tracing the sacred landscape of Islamic shrines in Tajikistan promotes an historical understanding of their meaning in relationship to past and present-day Tajik identity and culture. Shrines in Badakhshan, for example, are an integral aspect of Ismaili religiosity. They serve as objects of pilgrimage, sources of spiritual energy, meeting places, hospices, and places of prayer. The traveling exhibition of my shrine photos and background texts has attracted a great deal of attention. The openings have been extremely well attended, and the comments of visitors reflect a genuine interest in learning more not only about the shrines in their own regions, but about those in other regions as well. 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, such as the importance of shrines. US policy community would benefit from considering this important cultural aspect of Tajik identity.