Diasporas of Empire: Ismaili Networks and Pamiri Migration

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Abstract

In this chapter, based on ethnographic and historical research, I explore the coming together of post-Cold War mobility, humanitarianism and religion. Using the example of the Pamiris, an ethnically and linguistically diverse group with links to Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan region, I examine how a people that was already highly mobile in the Soviet Union became part of global Shia Ismaili networks in the post-Cold War period. While this process has built on long-standing historical interactions, it also involves different and sometimes conflicting visions of contact, connectivity and communal relations. I ground my argument in more than a decade of fieldwork in Tajikistan and Pakistan as well as my research in centres of education and economy in Asia and Europe. I argue that the case of diasporic Pamiri communities, scattered across the former Soviet space and beyond, tells the story of their becoming part of the 'pluralistic' Ismaili world under asymmetric power relations that persist to the present day.

Introduction

Over the past decade I have conducted anthropological research with families in the town of Murghab in Tajikistan. The town is located in the country's easternmost region, and people in Murghab live lives influenced by connectivity to faraway places, including Qumsangir in south-west Tajikistan, the capital Dushanbe, Moscow, and cities in Siberia as well as in Europe and North America. Some of them have established business connections via transnational networks, travelled for education, employed kin relations to pursue temporary labour migration, or managed to raise funds to visit their relatives living abroad. Yet the

majority stays put in terms of physical mobility and engages in differently mediated forms of interaction: news about relatives and friends in other places often reach them through visitors and increasingly via mobile technologies that were first introduced to Murghab in the late 2000s. The specific places to which people are connected have radically changed in the course of the past century, but it is important to stress that connectivity as such is not simply the outcome of present-day globalization and technological innovation.

My interlocutors in the town of Murghab are part of a minority population of around 2,000. They are Shia Ismaili Muslims who speak Pamiri languages, while the majority of people in Murghab – a settlement with around 7,000 inhabitants – are Sunni Muslims and speakers of Kyrgyz. In the broader context of eastern Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region, or simply 'the Pamirs' (*Pomir*), in which speakers of Pamir languages and, more importantly, Ismailis are dominant, this minority status stands out. It points to complex relations between people having different linguistic, religious and ethnic identities, and between places considered 'central' and 'marginal'. It also speaks to modes of internal migration that people in the area have experienced over the course of the past century.

The women and men in Murghab who refer to themselves as 'Pamiris' (*Pomiri*) largely trace their origins back to two mountain valleys in the vicinity, Bartang and Wakhan, where mutually unintelligible languages, Bartangi and Wakhi, are spoken. They do, however, share the common religious identity of Ismaili Islam. In the following, I investigate the broader historical and political processes that have enabled the emergence of complex forms of subjectivity on a variety of scales, ranging from the individual level in small towns like Murghab to the broader post-Soviet space, transnational institutions, and aspirations of a global community. I thereby suggest that we can observe an ephemeral, yet historically persistent mode of contact that is the result of regimes of political and economic

transformation, the creation of global borderlands, war and oppression, humanitarian intervention, and religious mobility.

For the analysis of the lives of Pamiris in Murghab and their wider networks of mobility and connectivity, the concept of 'diaspora' usefully frames the fragmentation that is inherent to both the social landscapes of the Pamirs and related spaces outside the region. In this context, it is important to look beyond the classical notion of diaspora as a movement from homogeneity to mobility and dispersion (Brubaker 2005: 2). Rather, I propose that the Pamiri diaspora is characterized by two distinct interpretations of the concept that shed light on the contradictory forces that many people in and from the Pamirs have had to navigate in recent decades. In doing so, I work with Ho's (2004: 14) distinction between diaspora as 'the notion of a people who were originally homogeneous, then moved' and, conversely, diaspora as people 'who moved, and as they did so became homogenized politically'. In the first case, which Ho calls the 'Jewish model' that has dominated much research on diaspora, sociality develops in a particularistic way: dispersion starts from a 'bounded' social or spatial entity, for instance an ethnic group or a country. In the latter case, however, which Ho dubs the 'British model', diaspora is a composite and 'mobility is a process which reshapes the basic units of sociality'. In his study of Hadrami diaspora across the Indian Ocean, Ho shows that the 'British model' involves belonging to an empire across space and time in which composite, genealogically rooted identities span vast geographical distances. In the case of Hadramis, the religious mission also played a formative role in articulating universal ambitions that went beyond those envisaged by the British Empire.

Building on these insights, in this chapter I explore how both readings of diaspora contribute to an understanding of how Pamiris in and outside the Pamirs make sense of being ethnically particular *and* globally Ismaili. I develop the chapter's argument in three steps: in the first section, I delve more deeply into the discussion of diaspora and its specific meanings

in the interaction between Pamiris and the (Soviet) state, particularly in historical perspective. In the second section, I analyse transnational Ismaili institutions as having emerged out of imperial networks in the British Empire and as having established early twentieth-century links with the Pamirs from this vantage point. In the third section, I shed light on the processes of integration and alienation that these two models of diasporic existence encapsulate. I conclude by returning to Murghab as a microcosm of both Pamiri and Ismaili diaspora.

Multiple diasporas

In his study of transnational Ismaili institutions and their relations with Ismaili subjects around the globe, Steinberg (2011: 15) distinguishes between a diasporic, mobile Ismaili elite with origins in the Indian subcontinent, on the one hand, and autochthonous, 'less-mobile', Ismaili populations in, among other places, the 'borderlands' of the Himalayas, on the other hand. In this framework, the Pamirs are part of the Himalayas, and Steinberg looks at Pamiris primarily as global Ismailis *in the making*. While he notices processes of alignment and resistance in the relationship between ordinary Pamiris and transnational Ismaili actors that have unfolded since the end of the Cold War, Steinberg's gaze is ultimately an institutional one that emphasizes globality over locality. This approach is useful for sketching an Ismaili globalization that, Steinberg (2011: 16) argues, 'can, in sum, be seen as a process in which scattered marginal populations are socialized to the values of modernity, capitalism, rational individualism, and modern discourses of rights and membership'. This process, Steinberg suggests, tells us 'the story of the gradual incorporation of those remote communities [e.g. the Pamiris] into the global polity' in an attempt to achieve 'consolidation into a single global structure' and 'inculcation with enthusiasm for prescribed Ismaʿili ideals'.

While I generally agree with Steinberg's interpretation of the relations between transnational institutions and local subjects, I argue that this particular view also hides the longer history of mobility and diasporic modernization that Pamiris have experienced over the course of the twentieth century. Rather than limiting our analysis to the dichotomy 'mobile diaspora vs. less-mobile autochthonous community', I propose to think of Pamiris as defined by multiple forms of diasporic existence that derive from very different types of globalization. These different forms are, from a historical perspective, marked by socialism and the Cold War as much as by wealthy trading networks and neoliberalism. In the following I turn to my ethnographic data to make these abstract historical processes, which come together in contemporary everyday life in the Pamirs as 'entangling modernity' (Mostowlansky 2017), more palpable.

As for many Pamiris in Murghab, tracking and remembering genealogy and history are important to Murod and his family. Sadly, Murod, who was in his late sixties when I first met him in 2010, passed away a few years ago, but I was fortunate to enjoy his and his family's company whenever I visited Tajikistan between 2010 and 2016. During this period, I learned a great deal about Murod's view of the world as a place in motion that is marked by constantly emerging 'homelands' (*vatan*) with different 'homes' (*khona*). In my conversations with Murod, origin seemed rather unimportant even though he described himself as having lived in Murghab since 'ancient times' (*qadimi*). By 'ancient times' he meant the 1960s, when he moved to Murghab from the village in the upper Ghunt Valley where he was born. Earlier, his grandparents had moved to his place of birth after a massive earthquake struck in the neighbouring Bartang Valley in 1911, resulting in the formation of Lake Sarez. During the years of my research in Murghab I met several families who referred to this incident in their biographies.

One time in 2011, feeling quite sure that I had figured out where Murod 'originated' from, I said to him, 'So you're really from Bartang, right? A Bartangi?' Murod did not seem impressed with my conclusion and replied, 'Well, this is what they say today – Bartangi, Wakhi, Shughnoni…. Back when I was a child nobody used these words.' As our conversation progressed, Murod explained that, according to his parents, before their ancestors settled in Bartang they had lived in Iran. How and when they left Iran and moved to Bartang seemed unclear. Murod saw this as part of a genealogy that was transmitted through stories full of superhuman beings and actions, but which nobody had cared to write down. While Murod knew exactly what had happened during this period, it seemed hard to find words to describe and categorize the people who lived then. Who were they? How did they refer to themselves? '*Panj tan*', said Murod. '"Five people", they told others, because they were Shia and revered the progeny of Prophet Muhammad.' By 'five people' Murod meant the Prophet's family and its elevated status in Shia Islam, which was, as it is today, dominant in the Pamirs. But were there other categories that they would use? 'Perhaps *Tojik* [Tajik], I don't know. It's still unclear.'

Discussions of this kind with Murod, and in fact with many other people in Murghab, were often circular. They were in part influenced by the fact that we could not escape the spectre of the twentieth century in which the Soviet experience, and its afterlives in independent Tajikistan, had so fundamentally shaped how people think and talk about themselves, their relations to the state, and the multiplicity of selves that they display in different contexts. While this is the case for much of Central Asia, people in the Pamirs were subjected to liminal forms of categorization throughout the Soviet period and beyond that have resulted in a high degree of uncertainty with respect to linguistic identities, minority status, and citizenship (Bliss 2006; Mostowlansky 2017).

In the 1920s the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic was established, and the titular nationality (here read 'ethnic group') was officially declared to be 'Tajik'. However, in order to come up with a coherent and large enough population of 'ethnic Tajiks' to make the new republic a viable polity within the Soviet system, several quite distinct groups had to be conflated under the umbrella term 'Tajiks' on the basis of shared language and religion. In this regard, the status of the area encompassing the Pamir mountains was defined as special and declared an 'autonomous region'. This decision was based on linguistic diversity, as the Pamir languages were recognized as distinct from the Persian languages and dialects that were spoken in other parts of Tajikistan, and on religious difference, as most people in the Pamirs appeared to be Shia Muslims, which distinguished them from the majority of Sunni Muslim in the rest of Tajikistan (Bergne 2007: 32). This new usage of the term 'Tajik' conflicted with earlier understandings that were prevalent in the Pamirs (Dagiev 2019). Thus, in the course of the twentieth century a range of alternative, overlapping categories – referring to elevation ('Mountain Tajiks'), local varieties of Pamir languages (e.g., 'Bartangi', etc.), territory ('Pamiri'), and religion ('Ismaili') – emerged so that people could maintain the distinctions among the various groups making up the newly defined titular nationality 'Tajik'.

The dispersal of people from the Pamirs to places where they are considered strangers began soon after the foundation of the Tajik SSR in 1929 and continues, under different circumstances, today. Mobility from contexts of perceived homogeneity to diasporic settings, like Murod's family with their voluntary move from Shughnan to Murghab in the 1960s, is just one of many forms of migration that Pamiris have engaged in since the 1930s. For instance, a significant number of so-called 'Mountain Tajiks' (*gornye tadzhiki*) were forcibly resettled from the Pamirs, including the Bartang Valley, to Qumsangir in south-west Tajikistan prior to 1937. The Soviet government framed this resettlement as reversing pre-

Soviet ‘feudal’ policies that had allegedly forced people into mountainous areas. However, Soviet-era resettlement was actually implemented to facilitate the construction of irrigation systems and cotton production in a sparsely populated region (Nourzhanov and Bleuer 2013: 71). As a result of these resettlement programs, Murod and many people in Murghab and other parts of the Pamirs still have close relatives in places like Qumsangir. Other forms of mobility throughout the Soviet period – for education, work and marriage – also led to temporary and permanent migration from the Pamirs to the Tajik capital Dushanbe, to various places in Central Asia, and to economic centres across the Soviet Union. As the financial and cultural centre of the Soviet Union, Moscow in particular achieved an elevated status as an economically and aesthetically desirable destination among people in the Pamirs, and continues to host a large community of Pamiris from a wide range of migratory backgrounds, professions and citizenships. Thus, the patterns of labour migration that we see today from the Pamirs abroad – largely to wealthier places in Russia and Kazakhstan – follow the networks that were established over decades of intra-Soviet mobility (Sahadeo 2012, 2016).

If we can speak of a common Pamiri identity among people who now live scattered across vast expanses in Tajikistan, Central Asia and the former Soviet Union, it is largely a reference to geographical space. Even if people refuse to use the name ‘Pamiri’ to describe themselves – for instance, to avoid undermining their sense of overarching solidarity and unity as Tajik citizens – being ‘from the Pamirs’ (*az Pomir*) is often still an important marker. Living outside, but being from the Pamirs and maintaining connections to people and places there – physical, virtual, ideational – is thus a form of diasporic existence that corresponds to what Ho (2004: 214) calls the ‘Jewish model’ of diaspora that now characterizes ‘almost every ethnic group, country, or separatist movement’. However, people in the Pamirs, and especially those who are part of the region’s majority Shia Ismaili community, make manifest

an entirely different concept of diaspora. Transnational Ismaili institutions have been promoting the idea of a shared diasporic existence without a homeland since the days of the British Empire. While these institutions were not able to maintain links to people in the Pamirs during most of the Soviet period, the end of the Cold War led to an immediate surge in connectivity that has fundamentally transformed people's lives in the Pamirs and in places that host the Pamiri diaspora.

Imperial networks, humanitarian aspirations

There is a dearth of sources on how exactly people from the Pamirs engaged with Ismaili institutions prior to and during the Soviet period. Yet, looking at the broader region, we find traces of Pamiri people's presence within these contexts. For instance, a local history from today's northern Pakistan, written by a man called Qudratullah Beg (1967), describes the establishment of Ismaili institutions in Hunza and Gilgit between the 1930s and the 1950s (Mostowlansky 2020). Qudratullah Beg's involvement in this process entailed multiple journeys from the so-called British northern frontier to Bombay, where the Aga Khan III – then the Ismaili Imam of the Time – was periodically based.

On one of his journeys in 1933, as he reached the Aga Khan III's court in Bombay, Qudratullah Beg met co-religionists from the northern borderlands covering parts of Afghanistan, China and Soviet Central Asia, whom he subsumed under the umbrella term (in Urdu) 'Central Asian community' (*Sentral Ashya ki jama'at*). He thereby referred to geographical commonalities as well as common, regionally specific Ismaili traditions and practices going back to the eleventh-century missionary and philosopher Nasir-i Khusraw (Beben 2015). As we learn from Qudratullah Beg, this distinct 'Central Asian community' in Bombay, embedded in the larger framework of Ismailis from across Asia and Africa, dated

back to the influence of another, much more recent Ismaili missionary and envoy who had visited the Pamirs and surrounding areas a decade earlier.

In 1923, this man – Pir Sabzali – travelled from India to the Pamirs as well as to parts of today's Afghanistan, China and Pakistan (Remtilla 2012: 46; Steinberg 2011: 53; Tajddin Sadik Ali 2016). Sent by the Aga Khan III, Pir Sabzali was given the task of gaining more knowledge about the Central Asian Ismailis, a group that seemed remote and distant from Bombay at a point when the Aga Khan's power and influence was on the rise. The loyalty of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ismaili imams to the British government, alongside a decisive victory in a Bombay court case involving the Aga Khan's right to collect tithes and taxes, had strengthened their standing vis-à-vis followers in different parts of the British Empire. By the time of the reign of Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III (1885–1957), even far-flung pockets of Ismailis had become connected to institutions in Bombay (Daftary 2007: 463–496; Green 2011: 155–178; Mukherjee 2017).

Steinberg (2011: 39) argues that the British Empire's 'concert of forces and moments' in the Indian Ocean world was crucial to the creation of an Ismaili diaspora that brought together and profoundly changed previously 'scattered communities' under a single infrastructure. This infrastructure entailed the Aga Khan's status as prince, a ruler over a political subdivision within the empire that came with a population but without a territory. It is at this point that the 'British model' of diaspora (Ho 2004) became relevant for Ismailis – first in a trans-imperial sense and then in a global perspective. Ismaili elites and the entourage of the Aga Khan became immersed in the categories and classifications of the British Empire in India. In this process, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Khojas, a trading caste navigating economic networks between India and East Africa (Akhtar 2016), emerged as a dominant Ismaili group. The 'composite' nature of Ismaili diasporic existence, a result of the interaction between pre-colonial identities and practices, on the one hand, and colonial

classification, law and economy on the other, became a blueprint for the imagination of an Ismaili community across Asia and Africa, and later – as a result of post-colonial migration – in Europe and North America.

During the Soviet period, people in the Pamirs remained excluded from this particular process of diasporic incorporation that came with the idea of a de-territorialized Ismaili polity (Mostowlansky 2018). While Pamiris followed Soviet patterns of mobility – as described in the previous section – central Ismaili institutions began to build large-scale charitable organizations that followed the dominant Western post-WWII development and relief paradigm. Still under the Aga Khan III, an expanding set of institutions emerged in the European post-war context that aimed at supporting but also religiously administering Ismaili communities that were largely situated in decolonizing settings in Asia and Africa.

The Aga Khan III's perception of the situation in the Soviet Union makes it clear that his disconnection with people of Ismaili conviction in the Pamirs derived, on the one hand, from a lack of political opportunity. Correspondence and the collection of even symbolic 'tribute' from Central Asia were simply impossible under Soviet rule. On the other hand, the Aga Khan III's (1954: 183) overriding rationale – that Ismailis had to be a good citizens of the state in which they resided – led him to publicly reiterate the official Communist Party line that Ismailis in the Soviet Union were 'not persecuted' and were 'quite free in their religious life'. However, as the divide in economic orientation and emerging ethnic and religious identities between Ismailis in the Soviet Union and the rest of the world grew over the course of the Cold War, central Ismaili religious and humanitarian institutions' access to the Soviet realm became ever more strictly curtailed.

Many of my Ismaili interlocutors in Tajikistan who are old enough to remember the 1970s and the 1980s told me that – while they venerated and prayed to their imam – they had virtually no knowledge of change outside the Soviet Union. This included not only

developments in global Ismailism and changes in rituals, but even the transition from the Aga Khan III to the Aga Khan IV in 1957. As Remtilla (2012: 149) describes in her study of post-socialist Ismailism in the Pamirs, only occasional news about the new imam made it into the region. For instance, Remtilla notes that people in the Pamirs learned from a magazine photograph that Prince Shah Karim Al Hussaini Aga Khan IV, grandson of the Aga Khan III, had become the forty-ninth Ismaili imam. Prayers, however, often continued to address the previous Aga Khan until the dissolution of the Soviet Union brought an influx of new institutions, ideas and diasporic organization under the pressure of the Tajik civil war.

The Tajik civil war ravaged the country from 1992 to 1997 (Epkenhans 2016; Nourzhanov and Bleuer 2013: 323–335). In the winter of 1992–93 in the Pamirs, approximately 180,000 inhabitants and several tens of thousands of refugees were cut off from other parts of Tajikistan (Bliss 2006: 4; Middleton 2016). Facing starvation after the Soviet system of provisioning had collapsed, people were dependent on alternate support lines from the outside (Keshavjee 2014). The first and most important actor to enter the region at that stage was the Aga Khan Foundation, which developed links to Gorno-Badakhshan both through Ismaili ties and against the backdrop of development work in northern Pakistan. In the war years, the Aga Khan Foundation partially fulfilled the role of the Soviet state by provisioning people, even to the point of emulating the paternalistic relationship that had characterized Soviet state–citizen relations in the Pamirs. Remtilla (2012: 82) calls this relationship an ‘economy of grace’ in which citizens received and were made to feel that they could never do quite enough to match what the state provided to them. In the context of independent Tajikistan, Remtilla observes that this relationship of ‘grace’ shifted from a link between the state and its citizens to an emerging bond between Ismaili institutions and the people in the Pamirs in which the Aga Khan, representing the Ismaili imamate, featured as a new ‘master’ (*soheb*).

The relationship of dependency between wealthy Ismaili institutions with global aspirations and people in the Pamirs is a specific one in the sense that it developed in the context of an extraordinarily bloody civil war and a looming famine. However, the relationship also reveals more general processes in global Ismailism in which poor, underprivileged pockets of Ismailis become the subjects of a complex of religious and humanitarian institutions under the auspices of the Aga Khan in a way that is reminiscent of a polity. This status receives symbolic expression through a formal constitution, a flag and a large administrative apparatus. Ismaili institutions also enact statecraft in actual diplomatic interventions, infrastructure projects, educational institutions and a quasi-welfare system. Throughout the twentieth century, sustaining and expanding this polity was dependent on identifying historically validated Ismaili communities and teaching them how to practise and embody 'modern' Ismailism (Steinberg 2011: 59). Contemporary Ismaili proselytizing has remained restricted to the incorporation and transformation of already existing Ismaili 'diasporas'. The composite nature of this expanding and transforming polity has thus resulted in a diasporic organization that allows multiple homelands, citizenships, traditions and ethnicities to be subsumed under a widely propagated ideology of pluralism.

In the following section – based on historical material and ethnographic data – I discuss the encounter between this composite, networked and increasingly global sense of Ismaili existence and the Pamiri notion of territorialized diaspora that developed in the Soviet Union.

Territorial temptations in a diasporic world

People from the Pamirs involved in Ismaili institutions often navigate seemingly contradictory forces, interests, economic rationales and historical legacies between the Aga Khan IV's headquarters in Europe, Tajikistan's increasingly repressive political system, and

calls for Pamiri allegiance to or emancipation from both. The career of Yodgor Faizov, currently the governor of Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region, which encompasses the Pamirs, encapsulates this complexity in a nutshell. It also indicates the extent to which Ismaili composite diasporic forms have managed to incorporate individuals and groups with diverse and sometimes opposing backgrounds and aims.

When I met Faizov in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, more than a decade ago as a PhD student conducting fieldwork, he was the CEO of the Aga Khan Foundation in Tajikistan. Before rising to this position, he had worked for the foundation starting in the midst of the civil war in 1993. Prior to this, Faizov had led Gorno-Badakhshan's *Komsomol*, the youth division of the Communist Party in Soviet times. In 2018 – a year of major political tensions between Pamiri militia leaders and the central government – Yodgor Faizov was appointed governor of Gorno-Badakhshan through a presidential executive order. This career path leading from Soviet party positions to Ismaili institutions and back to government is not uncommon in Tajikistan. One of my interlocutors, Manzura, a woman in her thirties, was working in an Ismaili institution in Khorog, the capital of Gorno-Badakhshan. When I spoke with her in 2016 she told me, 'Everybody here knows that if you want to be successful in the imam's [i.e. the Aga Khan's] institutions or in government, you should have been in the *Komsomol*, or be a child of someone who was.'

Working through and gaining access to resources via 'cadres' and the centres of political power has been a hallmark of Ismaili institutions since their rise in the course of the twentieth century. Their emergence in lockstep with British imperial institutions emphasizes this, as does the Aga Khan Foundation's firm embedding in Geneva, the capital of the international humanitarian and development world. This mingling with diplomats, heads of state and billionaires has also worked in favour of those Ismailis who were in vulnerable minority positions in many settings of the post-colonial world. The most striking example of

the effects of these connections is perhaps the 1972 expulsion of so-called Asians from Uganda under Idi Amin, among them thousands of Ismailis who were rendered stateless and had to leave the country. The Aga Khan IV's close relationship with then Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau opened the possibility for permanent refuge for many of these Ismailis in Canada (Mohammedi 2017: 3).

In the case of the Pamirs, Ismaili institutions have faced a considerably more ambivalent situation, operating in a region where many people were openly at war with Tajikistan's central government in the 1990s and where tensions, surveillance and militancy continue to define everyday life. In this context, Ismaili institutions have had to speak to a heterogeneous mass of people from the Pamirs who often adhere to opposing political stances and have conflicting territorial claims, not only in the region but in diasporic settings across the post-Soviet space.

The Aga Khan IV's first visit to and encounter with Ismailis from the former Soviet Union happened in Moscow in 1995. This occasion was celebrated in the city's storied 1980 Olympic Stadium, an impressive and fitting venue given Moscow's lasting political and cultural impact on the geographically distant Pamirs. There the Aga Khan pronounced that, despite 'the spiritual bond that links each Murid [i.e. member of the Ismaili community] – through time, across history, across geography – with the Imam-of-the-Time', this visit to Moscow was his first contact *in person* with his community 'in Central Asia' (Al Hussaini 2009: 921). This first physical encounter between the Aga Khan IV and parts of his lost 'Central Asian community' (as first labelled by Qudratullah Beg [1967]) was thus not only an occasion of post-Cold War reconnection; it was also the meeting of two diasporic systems – one of the Soviet kind and the other born in the British Empire, reimagined to fit post-colonial, liberal pluralism (Dewji 2018).

Looking at the Aga Khan's *farman*, or decree, presented to his audience during the meeting (*mulaqat*) in Moscow, it becomes evident that he must have been keenly aware of the delicate nature of the encounter. Parts of the speech, published for Ismailis who did not participate in the meeting, remind post-Soviet Ismailis that they are now part of a larger community of *murid*s that consists of people from many different places:

> Today you will realise that there are Murids here from many different parts of the world. You are all brothers and sisters. For the Imam you are all brothers and sisters, wherever you come from. And it is My deepest hope and prayer that you will put this relationship into effect in your lives every day. And remember that if you come from different countries, with different languages, with different traditions that is a strength, because there is strength in pluralism. There is strength in societies of different backgrounds coming together. And therefore, if in due course, there are matters to be interpreted, and particularly matters of faith, it is the Imam who will make those decisions. It is the Imam who will guide the Jamat so that, more and more, in time, it comes together in the interpretation of its faith, in the quality of its life, perhaps, one day, in a nearly common language. (Al Hussaini 2009: 922)

This utopia of a new unity in the post-Cold War era – delivered in a top-down, hierarchically structured setting of religious governance – reflects the 1990s liberal discourse of social encounters in a free and borderless world, but it could not be further from lived realities of people in the Pamirs. Pamiri militias were part of the United Tajik Opposition during the civil war, and Pamiri civilians were subjected to targeted killings in Dushanbe during that time. This legacy continues to rise to the surface in conflicts between militias and the central government (most recently in 2018), and the aspiration of the Pamirs, or Badakhshan,

becoming a territorially defined homeland of Ismaili Pamiris has not lost its hold on people's imaginations. Particularly since a period of open warfare in Khorog in 2012, the sense of the region as an *ethnically* (Pamiri) and *religiously* (Ismaili) defined territorial entity has been enshrined in popular culture. For instance, to this day, Pamiri musicians both in the diaspora and locally promote this powerful, affective image of resistance. Employing local idioms and word-of-mouth publicity that are harder for security services to trace, they thereby influence how young Pamiris situate themselves in the world, the state, and vis-à-vis Ismaili institutions (Mostowlansky 2019).

Despite the official representation of harmonious and unified relations among Ismaili institutions, people from the Pamirs, and Ismailis from all over the world, everyday encounters as well as internal communications have long shown otherwise. For early development specialists, the socialist legacy constituted an obstacle to societal improvement in the Pamirs (AKF 1993); changes in Ismailism intended to align the ritual practices of Pamiris with those of other Ismailis were met with discontent and occasional resistance (Haqnazarov 2008; Lashkariev 2016); and the Pamiris' forced integration into a hierarchical system of developmental and religious administration normalized their position as needy supplicants, always on the receiving end of these transactions (Devji 2009).

In this hierarchy, historical legacy and current socio-economic status are of great importance. In my conversations with Ismailis who hail from places outside the Pamirs and reside in North America, Europe or economic centres in Asia, Pamiris – along with Ismailis from bordering parts of Afghanistan, China and Pakistan – featured as poor, rooted in local 'traditions', and 'backward' in a rather romanticized sense. In the case of the Pamirs, this perception sometimes also included views of the Soviet legacy as a hindrance to their integration in a capitalist system.

While conducting research in Southeast Asia in 2016 I met Zahra, a middle-aged woman who was an Ismaili and a citizen of Singapore. Of Indian origin, Zahra's family has been residing in the former colonial port cities of Southeast Asia, such as Singapore and Hong Kong, for generations. Being part of this former British world of maritime trading networks gave her family a privileged position in the diasporic imagination of global Ismaili institutions. Via these institutions she paid the 'tithe' (*dasond*) to the imam, intending to contribute to the Aga Khan Development Network's humanitarian and development initiatives and thereby ultimately to 'give' to underprivileged Ismailis in Central Asia and war-torn Syria. She herself also offered free, Internet-based English lessons and educational guidance to Ismailis in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. These people from the 'northern frontier', as Zahra called the region (in keeping with the British colonial gaze), were in need of constant support and charity. Like many other comparatively wealthy Ismailis residing in economically privileged settings around the world, she followed a development logic that constitutes a key component of global Ismailism today and defines selected diasporas as in perpetual need of assistance and improvement.

Conclusion

In Murghab, the small town high up in the eastern Pamirs, the coming together of Pamiri migratory pathways and global Ismailism manifests itself in many situations. As a minority in Murghab, Pamiris – with their different genealogies and identities – have always had to navigate a number of different forces simultaneously – coming from within as well as from the outside. In Soviet times, job opportunities (rather than forced relocations, as in other parts of the Pamirs) enticed them to move to the high-altitude town, where they encountered a diverse, Russian-speaking environment comprising, among others, Kyrgyz, Russians, Ukrainians and Uzbeks. In this context, as my interlocutors who could remember the 1960s

and 1970s told me, being Ismaili was subordinated to being Soviet and being 'from the Pamirs'. As Ismaili institutions physically entered the Pamirs in the wake of a humanitarian crisis – the Tajik civil war – a powerful historical legacy of religious connectivity could be accessed and adapted. People did not cease to follow the connections that they had established in the Soviet Union, and in fact the majority of Pamiris continue to navigate within this space. In Murghab, transformation and change came gradually: in the 1990s the Aga Khan Foundation opened a local branch that offered employment in development projects. The Ismaili religious specialist – the *khalifa* – while remaining a car mechanic, gave up drinking and became incorporated in the chain of command leading up to the imam. Young people aspired to learn English and follow the Ismaili educational programs situated around the globe in several different diasporic contexts.

Ho's (2004) distinction between two models of diaspora – one depicting movement from assumed homogeneity to dispersion and the other bringing disparate peoples together in a composite social formation – sheds light on the different forces at work in the Pamirs. Nevertheless, these two models should not be understood as mere static reflections of reality. Rather, they are useful tools that provide orientation in reading the complexity of everyday encounters in Tajikistan and other places where Ismaili institutions and Pamiris intersect. At these points of intersection, distinct historical legacies – from the colonial Indian Ocean world to the Soviet Union – meet and nurture new social formations whose individual parts were previously deemed to be separate and disconnected.

Epilogue

Academic publications often take a long time to see the light of day. I wrote this chapter in 2020 and finalized editorial work on it in early 2021. My ethnography is therefore limited to the period leading up to 2019, the year in which I last visited Tajikistan. Much has happened

since then in the Pamirs. The pandemic has given way to a state of war between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and the Tajik government has doubled down on its repressive measures against dissent in the Pamirs (Mostowlansky 2022). Hundreds of activists, as well as ordinary people, have been arrested and disappeared. Beyond that, taking steps unimaginable after the civil war, the government has also begun to push Ismaili institutions out of Tajikistan. These violent interventions have directly impacted people's everyday lives. They can no longer express their Ismaili-ness beyond private spaces. Public expressions of Ismaili Islam are no longer permitted and the pursuit of Ismaili education abroad is banned (Roof-Top.info 2023). Taken together, the persecution of Pamiris on political, ethnic and religious grounds has consequences for how to read this chapter. While I am confident that my analysis of the coming together of two different models of diaspora still provides an accurate picture of social processes in the Pamirs, the relationship between Pamiris and global Ismaili networks is rapidly changing. How this change will play out exactly remains to be seen. However, as Pamiris continue to be under heavy assault by the Tajik state, both as ethnic and religious others, we will likely, and sadly, see more forced displacement, violence and the formation of new diasporic communities.

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