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### **The life and career of Haji Rahmanqul Khan, 1913-1990**

In this presentation, I focus on some key factors - familial, kinship/communal, national, transnational and global - which have helped shape aspects of Haji Rahmanqul Khan's life and career as one of Central Asia's, arguably, last traditional *khans* of the twentieth century. More specifically, I discuss the trajectories of his life and career as the leader of the Kirghiz/Kyrgyz of the Afghan Pamirs by drawing attention to the implications of his life and career upon the common misunderstandings and regular characterisations of widely diverse traditional Central Asian local leaders - *beg/bey*, *aqsaqals* and *khans*. Conceptualisations and constructions of local leadership traits currently in use about Inner Asia are produced and reproduced for over a century within the context of oppressive centralising states, beginning with the tsarist colonial occupation of much of the region culminating into Soviet Russian and later Chinese Communist rule in Central Asia, as well as, the establishments of postcolonial and more recently post-Soviet nation-states with arbitrary borders in South-western Asia as well as former Soviet Central Asia affecting inhabitants of the Pamirs ever since the turns of the twentieth century.

Many Central Asian *khans* and *begs*, together with local influential religious leaders, mobilised and led resistances against foreign colonialists masquerading as forces of modernisation or revolution and liberation of the toiling masses. Local leaders in Central Asia also resisted penetration of autocratic postcolonial modern nation-states intent on internal colonialism in the name of nationalism. Not surprisingly, such local leaders/*khans* and *begs* were condemned categorically both by foreign Communist imperialists as well as nationalist ethnic/tribal hegemonies, as oppressive local tyrants, feudal lords and even "scorpions", as was the case in Afghanistan, targeted for elimination, incarceration or exile. Such characterisation and condemnations of local leaders raises the questions of, if such charges were true, how and why were these local leaders able to mobilise people against the Communist revolutionary governments and the self-proclaimed reformist national states? Countless *khans* and local notables in Turkistan - Russian, Afghan and Chinese or Western, Southern and Eastern - and the Pamirs perished because of their efforts to preserve their communities' integrity against the encroaching Communist Russian and Chinese government policies and practices. The life and career history of Haji Rahmanqul (1913-1990), the Khan of a small community of Kirghiz pastoralists who took refuge in the Afghan Pamirs from both Soviet and Chinese Communist giants, therefore, offers an important window to the re-examination of the role of traditional Central Asian *Khans* and the concept of *khanhood* during the rise, establishment and demise of major colonial and revolutionary em-

pires (British India, USSR & China) as well as ethnic/tribal-based autocratic nation-state of Afghanistan and Islamically inspired Pakistan during the twentieth century.



Rahmanqul<sup>1</sup> was born in 1913 to the prosperous family of Haji Jabbarqul Khan in the Osh/Murghab region of modern day Kyrgyzstan at the eastern end of Fergana (Farghana) Valley. His father and paternal uncle, Ming Bashi Haji, had taken refuge to the heights of the Pamir plateau in response to the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, most likely as part of the Revolts of the Begs and Khans (*Beglarden Qozghaleshi*) which had begun in Fergana Valley against the 1916 tsarist policies of conscription of Central Asians to serve as combat support in their WWI fronts in Russia and Europe. The Revolt of Begs (local leaders/dignitaries) and *Ishans* (Naqshbandi Sufi leaders) then continued as a popular opposition to Bolsheviks overthrow of the Kokand Autonomous Government and its after-

math in the Fergana Valley and beyond. A movement which the Soviet media then popularised as the Basmachi Movement (resistance of the highwaymen, oppressors and plunders). Thus, Rahmanqul's childhood had begun an environment of anticolonial revolt, violence and self-imposed exile by his family elders to the safety of the Afghan Pamirs.

When he was not yet ten years old, General Nader Khan, Minister of War of King Amanullah of Afghanistan (reign 1919-1929) had visited the Little Pamir, and memorialised the event in *Sangi Nawishta* (a rock inscription in the eastern most part of the Little Pamir Valley). Rahmanqul's father and powerful uncle, Ming Bashi Haji together with Tokhtasun Khan Haji, the then recognised and famous leader of the Kirghiz in the Afghan Pamirs, had negotiated with General Nader Khan the exemption for the Kirghiz from serving in the Afghan military draft, which had been newly instituted by independent Afghanistan. This celebrated event may have been the first most direct claim of domain by a high ranking Kabul government official in the Pamirs in the twentieth century. However, one that invited occasional inroad to the Pamirs by local officials of the Kabul government from its Wakhan district administrative unit thereafter.

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<sup>1</sup> The photograph is reproduced from Rémy Dor and Clas Naumann 1978: *Die Kirghisen des afghanischen Pamir*. Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt: Frontispiece

By early 1929 when Amanullah's reign had come to an abrupt end due to the civil war headed by Habibullah Kalakani and subsequent claim of the Kabul throne by General Nader Khan becoming Nader Shah (reign 1929-1933), relations with Afghan officials had become more problematic. That is, after the passing of much admired Kirghiz leader, Tokhtasun Khan Haji in late 1930s, one of his clansman, a Sartbai Khan assumes the leadership of the Kirghiz. The infamous Sartbai Khan begins, in collaboration with the Wakhan district government officials of which Pamirs are a part, to initiate drafting the Kirghiz men to the Afghan army as pretext for extraction and extortion of goods from the Kirghiz. Rahmanqul, now in his mid-20s with help from his father and uncle successfully challenges Sartbai Khan's decision by insisting that the Kirghiz are exempt from draft based on agreement reached in 1921 with General Nader Khan. This important successful challenge on behalf of the Kirghiz and protecting them against a self-serving Sartbai Khan, raises young Rahmanqul's stature in the eyes of his community, eventually assuming the leadership of the Afghan Kirghiz for decades to come.

By the time Rahmanqul reached his early 30s, he had engaged in his own fight with, and flight from, Soviet aggressions against the Afghan Kirghiz during and following World War II. In an incident in 1945/1946 while Soviets attempted to capture his father, who fearing Soviet aggression had left for Eastern Turkistan Pamirs, abducted Rahmanqul and his older brother taking them as prisoners to Soviet territory. He was released after six months and his brother a year later, who died shortly thereafter. Once back in the Afghan Pamir, Rahmanqul led most of his kinsmen out of the Afghan Little Pamir into the relative safety of the Qara Chuqoor in Taghdumbash Pamirs in the Tashqurghan Region of Eastern Turkistan. Within about two years of residing in the Pamirs of Sharqi Turkistan, Rahmanqul Khan had to fight the Chinese Communist Revolutionary forces of Mao who subjugated Sharqi Turkistan and turned it into the Xinjiang Autonomous Region of PRC in 1950.

Indeed, Jean and Franc Shor, arriving in Little Pamir within days of Rahmanqul Khan's triumphant return from Chinese Pamirs to the Little Pamir with his people, documented the event in a *National Geographic* magazine article<sup>1</sup>. Rahmanqul Khan helps the international guests of the Kabul government, the Shors to the safety of British India, across the passes he himself would lead his own Kirghiz tribesmen some 28 years later in 1978 to Gilgit, Pakistan. The news of Rahmanqul Khan's heroic fight and flight from Communist China back to the safety of Afghan Pamirs spread quickly throughout northern Afghanistan and reached the notice of the Royal Government of Afghanistan.

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<sup>1</sup> Shor, J. & Shor, F. 1950 "We Took the High Road in Afghanistan", *National Geographic Magazine* 98 (5), pp. 673-706; and also in a book Jean Bowie Shor 1955: *After you, Marco Polo*. New York, Toronto, London: McGraw-Hill.

Rahmanqul Khan's escape from China, also effectively marked the closure of Chinese border for trade and commerce ever since. A fact which also marked closing of one of the main corridors of the ancient Silk route over the Wakhjir Pass in the Pamir which connected China with Afghanistan and Western Asia. The closure of Chinese border also sealed the Afghan Pamirs from all other countries in the region, forcing them to reorient their trade relation towards Wakhan and Afghanistan and to deal with Kabul government in an unprecedented intensity from then on. Hermitically sealed in the Afghan Pamirs and sandwiched between USSR to the north, PRC in the east and Pakistan to the south, Rahmanqul Khan faced the realities of having to manage the small extremely vulnerable Kirghiz community through social, political and economic uncertainties of the high Pamirs. For almost three decades Rahmanqul Khan helped manage wellbeing of his Kirghiz community before facing yet another Communist revolution in Afghanistan (1978), which forced him to lead most of the Kirghiz to another self-imposed exile to Pakistan and eventual resettlement in Van province of Eastern Turkey in 1982. It is to brief narrative account of the making of Rahmanqul Khan's legendary leadership style and substance in managing the welfare of his Afghan Kirghiz community, in a marginal frontier zone in the Afghan Pamirs facing very serious local, national and international uncertainties, to which I wish to turn now.

Kirghiz community after 1950 faced a number of critical challenges, among them were: management of pasture resources within the confines of the Afghan Pamirs year around by adopting new seasonal migration pattern for effective use; new herd management system (*amanat* and *saghun*) appropriate to the unpredictable microclimatic uncertainties within the Pamirs; ensuring access to agricultural food stuff from their Wakhi neighbours through complex trade and exchange; management of trade relations outside the Wakhan Corridor especially with itinerant traders from Afghan towns and cities who frequented the Pamirs with supply of non-agricultural commodities, especially large quantities of black tea and opium in exchange for livestock and animal products; and most importantly managing relations with the distant Afghan government and in Kabul and its outlying avaricious provincial and district branch officials in Badakhshan and especially Wakhan. These important challenges called for skilful frontier leader and Rahmanqul Khan fully rose to the challenges.

Rahmanqul Khan pioneered improvement of pastures on their winter camps on the northern/sunny side of the valley (*kongay*) by introducing irrigation of wide areas of pastures reserved for winter use. This led to Privatisation of pasture grounds especially in the scarce resourced winter camps and strict regulation of the short seasonal migration movement between the sunny and shady or southern sides (*terskay*) of the Pamir's valleys. Privatisation scheme resulted in serious loss of livestock in some parts of the valley due to

unpredictable snow fall or early spring *joot* (freezing ice after a rain storm). In order to assist the unfortunate herders affected by such losses, Rahmanqul Khan again pioneered the introduction of new herd management scheme, the *amanat* or lending animals to the long-term year around care of the herders so that they could live off of the livestock products and have access to fuel from the caked animal dung in their winter corrals. This involved considerable risk to the lender, but for those willing to take the risk to lend animals widely throughout the Pamir valleys, the *amanat* system did not only reduced the lenders overall risk of ever losing all of their herds but ensured chances of substantially increasing their herds in a short time. Indeed, Rahmanqul Khan had taken this risk before any other herder and spread his animals through *amanat* system among more than one hundred families, by early 1970s, all over the Afghan Pamirs. A risk which had made him owner of more than 17,000 sheep and goats out of some 40,000 in the Afghan Pamirs and 700 yak (out of about 4,000). Majority of the animals were loaned to those who were members of his own Teyet clan (*oruq*) and then to the poorest of other *oruqlar*. His generosity and care for the welfare of his people earned him the respect, trust and loyalty of his people and spread his fame and name far from the Pamirs in northern Afghanistan and even the capital, Kabul. He became the sole arbiter of local conflicts with help from the *beys* (camp leaders) and *aqsaqals* (lineage and clan leaders) and the true link to outside world, both traders and government officials and in many instances host to important international guest of the Royal family and even King Zahir Shah himself during a Marco Polo Sheep hunting trip to the Pamirs.

Arguably, Rahmanqul Khan's most successful role as a leader was the management of relations with government of Afghanistan in Kabul. After his return from the Chinese territory in 1950, there seem to have been mutual suspicion and concern between him and the Kabul government officials. Suspicion on the part of Kabul regime regarding a powerful tribal leader in politically sensitive frontier zone where Kabul had no presence at all; and fear on the part of Rahmanqul Khan as to what the government's intention might be regarding his fame and power as a local leader in the Roof of the World. In about 1953-1954, during the beginnings of Sardar Daoud's Premiership, Rahmanqul Khan made the bold decision to go to Hajj with a small group of wealthy and influential Kirghiz which included his sister Maryam Haji, via Kabul. Upon his return from the Hajj, now Haji Rahmanqul Khan, paid his homage reportedly with valuable gifts of Chinese silver ingots called *jambu* and other undisclosed valuables, to King Zahir Shah and met many of his courtiers and high level government officials, including Dr. A. G. Ravan Farhadi, then Deputy Foreign Minister for Diplomacy. This strategic move resulted in Kabul government sending occasional high profile international guest who wished to visit this remote frontier zone of the country and Haji



Rahmanqul Khan hosted them royally. In return, the Kabul government bestowed upon him the title of *Pasbani Pamirat* (The Guardian of the Pamirs). With increased confidence in his warm relations with Kabul government he began to send a few thousands sheep and goats annually to Kabul on a two month long trek to be sold for much higher prices than in Pamir. A bold initiative in which some of the other wealthy and notable Kirghiz also took part, and Rahmanqul and his entourage travelled annually or semi-annually by public transport to Kabul to oversee the sale of their herds.

During these visits Haji Rahmanqul Khan made strategic gift of sheep to important contacts in the government and enjoyed state hospitality for the duration of his stay in the Kabul guesthouse of the High Office of Frontier Affairs, normally reserved for the Pashtun tribesmen along the Pakistan borders in the east. Haji Rahmanqul Khan used his strategic ties with Kabul as a frontier leader to keep the potential abuse of his people from the corrupt and avaricious Badakhshan provincial and Wakhan district officials of which Pamirs were a part. These close relations with the Royal court and high government officials became Haji Rahmanqul Khan's trump card in managing the Kirghiz relations with the itinerant traders as well as their interdependency with Wakhi peasant neighbours from whom they obtained all their cereal grain and various pulses to complement their normally rich diet in meats and milk products. In a few occasions when drought and poor harvest afflicted the Wakhan, he sought and received considerable food and medicine from Kabul government via Soviet Union.

These remarkable strategic decision by Haji Rahmanqul Khan to engage the central government in Kabul to protect his own economic and political interests as well as those of the entire Afghan Kirghiz community against the threats from both Soviet and Chinese Communist empires and re-routing trade and economic ties due to Soviet and Chinese closed borders speaks volumes about the skills and wisdom of this late twentieth century khan in the Pamirs. To achieve his legendary leadership career, he also had support of large and successful family of at least nine very talented sons and two daughters, and the backing of his Teyet clan, the largest among the Afghan Kirghiz. Haji Rahmanqul Khan was also, minimally schooled in traditional Islamic curriculum and read both the Qur'an and Persian and Turkic (Chaghatai) text which were available in fair amount among the Kirghiz, including his own collection of books, even newspapers he received from Faizabad, the provincial capital of Badakhshan. He maintained written accounts of all his herds distributed as *amanat* or *soghun* and expected annual accounting of the state of his lent animals from the herders. Rahmanqul Khan had also bought transistor radios very early when they became available in Afghanistan and was regular listener of news broadcast from Radio stations both national, regional international such as the BBC and VOA among others. He

was also extremely inquisitive about national and international events and asked questions of all his frequent outside visitors and official guests incessantly, including this ethnographer. His knowledge of the animals care, local pasture and ecology of the Pamirs were vast and deep. Although of quick temper when crossed, Haji Rahmanqul was a devout and fair minded local Muslim leader who tried to resolve local problems via consensus of the community leaders but with reference to their understanding of Islamic shari'a. Traits which enabled him to retain the loyalty, trust and respect of his people especially in moments of crisis.

In April 1978, when he heard the news of the Soviet inspired Communist coup in Kabul on his transistor radio, he immediately dispatched his eldest son, Abdul Wakeel, to Faizabad, the provincial capital of Badakhshan to ascertain the nature of this new government. Affirming the Communist and Soviet supported nature of the "Revolution" in Kabul, he told the elders of the Kirghiz in Little Pamir that because of his close and friendly ties with the previous regime, he felt unsafe and that he wished to leave for safety of Pakistan. He urged the rest of the Kirghiz to stay on and keep his animals if they wish. But if they wanted to join him in his exodus with his family they are welcome to do so. The entire Kirghiz of Little Pamir numbering some 1,200 souls joined him in their self-imposed exile to Pakistan. Only about 10 families opted to stay behind and they were left alone. Once in Pakistan, he became an object of suspicion by the Pakistan's infamous Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) during the first year of their refugee life scattered in the Northern Areas of Pakistan. Through his international contacts, Haji Rahmanqul Khan secured UNHR assistance to his community in Gilgit and then launched his efforts to find a new home for the Kirghiz in Alaska, the United States of America. That unlikely projects, despite much local interest on the part of Alaskan government, did not work out. However, the plight of the Kirghiz with Haji Rahmanqul Khan's capable leadership was heard by the then President of Turkey, General Kenan Evren, during his official visit to Pakistan in 1981. After four years of refugee life in northern Pakistan, Haji Rahmanqul Khan and his people were airlifted to Adana, Turkey and from there to their resettlement place in Van province of eastern Turkey in summer of 1982.

The Turks, upon arrival assigned last/family name to the Kirghiz, and now "Agha" rather than Khan/Han of the Kirghiz he became Haji Rahmankul Kutlu, the leader of the Afghan Kirghiz. He ably negotiated and oversaw the construction of their new village in Altindara, in a picturesque valley about 20 km inland from the town of Ercis on the western shore of Lake Van. The village was given the name of Ulupamir Koyu (Great Pamir Village) and the Kirghiz were moved from their temporary shelters in Karakunduz near the city of Van and the city of Malatya in 1987/88 to their permanent new homes. The Kirghiz youth who had

begun attending UNHR School in Gilgit continued their schooling with great enthusiasm in Turkey, and within a year most of the Kirghiz adults, both men and women, also completed adult literacy courses in modern Turkish. Haji Rahmanqul Kutlu died peacefully in the new village of Ulupamir Koyo in 1990 and is remembered with considerable admiration by his grateful community who have thrived in Turkey, and some of them have been making annual summer visit to the Afghan Pamirs, especially after the fall of the Taliban government in Afghanistan in 2001. Their older generation continue to recount their difficult but heroic times and lives in the Pamirs, and the youth, now for the most part well educated and urbanites in Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, take pride in their Turkish-Afghan Kirghiz identities, thanks to efforts of their fondly remembered and trusted Khan, Haji Rahmanqul Han Kutlu.

The case of Haji Rahmanqul Khan Kutlu suggests that traditionally monolithic characterisation of local leaders based on wealth alone and characterising them as feudal, oppressive, exploitative etc., is misleading and detracts from the complexities of the existence of different styles and substance of khanship in Central Asia and especially in the Pamirs. We must explore the ecological and sociopolitical circumstances resulting extremes of wealth and poverty in traditional Inner Asian frontier societies. As the Kirghiz case shows, the reason for economic inequalities may not be outright exploitation and abuse by the rich, especially in traditionally kin-based societies. It is also important to explore how such inequalities leading to massive loss ownership to property are mitigated by insuring access for the poor to productive resources, such as herds of animals. We also need to move on from relying on Weberian ideal types of “traditional” form of leadership based on categorical loyalties based on customs of eternal yesterday as such. Haji Rahmanqul Khan represents a particularistic form leadership based on acquired loyalties buttressed by mutual obligations, trust and support. Indeed, his career history as a late twentieth century khan exemplifies co-production of local leadership giving rise to distinct style and substance within the changing political ecologies of local, regional, national and international environments during a volatile and violent century. *Pasdaari* Pamirs, as a frontier leader, lived his life as the first among equals and saw himself as the guardian of the Kirghiz of Afghanistan, in the tumultuous twentieth century Central Asia. He fulfilled his role with care and compassion, leaving behind a grateful community thriving in their new homeland, in Ulupamir Koyu, in eastern Turkey.