

Knowledge generation and heritage preservation in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAR)¹

I would like to start with the observation that for a long time our German friends have shown interest in the investigation of the nature and society of the Pamir Region. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the German geographer Karl Ritter studied the people of the upper parts of the Syr Darya and Amu Darya Rivers, i.e. the Pamirs, the Hindukush, and western Tibet. German (M. Humbach), Italian (G. Neole), and British scientists (M. Miller) confirmed Ritter's findings in the end of the nineteenth century. The latter added the idea that Pamirian people migrated southwards to India, and from the fifteenth century onwards even to Europe. Currently, new hypotheses about the migration from the Pamirs are being discussed. In 2009, Bulgarian scholars from the University of Sofia visited my museum with the aim to detect traces between the Wakhan Region and a people living in Bulgaria naming themselves 'Wakhandar'.

In 1928, the participants of the Soviet-German Complex Expedition gathered rich material about natural resources of the Pamirs and their economic utility. During the hard time at the end of the twentieth century, Germany offered humanitarian aid to Pamirian people. Since 2000, German organisations have supported the development of the regional economy and nature conservation in various ways. Most visitors to my ten year old museum are coming from Germany and France.

1 Importance of communication corridors

Mutual contact between neighbouring and distant peoples and boundary-crossing exchange are important for the generation and development of knowledge. Communication corridors such as roads have a specific meaning for mountain regions; they enable the contact with the outer world. The Pamirs being the very centre of Asia historically represented a cross-roads of communication between the West (Europe), the East (China), the North (Russia), and the South (India). In ancient times, the most southern branch of the so-called Silk Roads led through the Pamirs. In the thirteenth century (1271-1295), the European explorer Marco Polo passed on his way to China, travelling along the historically year-round traversable Wakhan Section running on both sides along the Panj River. Besides being a trading route, this branch of the Silk Roads Network was also used by Chinese pilgrims on their way to and from India. Books were transported on these roads and were seen as especially remarkable goods. It is said that the caravan of the Chinese traveller Xuanzang passed the

¹ Translated by Andrei Dörre.

Wakhan Region in the seventh century transporting twenty-two horse loads of books from India to China. During that time, Buddhism had spread out in the region of the upper Panj River. There were several Buddhist monasteries, like the one that was discovered by archaeologists in 1970 in the settlement of Vrang. In 1729, the Chinese pilgrim Hoi-Chao noted that Buddhism had completely replaced Zoroastrism in the Wakhan.

2 Knowledge generation

In the course of the arrival of Islam in the Pamirs, Arab and Persian script, religious literature, and written poetry subsequently proliferated. When the conditions were suitable, a couple of passes over the Hindukush enabled the inhabitants of Wakhan and Ishkashim to travel to India to obtain commodity items and books. Some of these travellers received some education in Badakhshan (today Afghanistan) and opened their own schools after returning to the Wakhan and Ishkashim. In the eleventh century, the Tajik poet Nasiri Khusraw spent the last fifteen years of his life in Badakhshan. He visited Ishkashim, Wakhan, Shugnan, Rushan, and Darwaz and disseminated Ismaili thoughts and literature-based philosophical knowledge amongst the people. In the same century, several religious leaders like Shokhi Koshon, Shokh Kambar, and others visited to the Pamirs to spread the Ismaili interpretation of Shia Islam. In the course of time, more and more schools were established and subsequently the first native religious leaders, authors, and poets emerged. Muboraki Wakhoni from the eighteenth century was one of them.

However, the literacy rate in the Pamirs remained very low until the 1920s. There were no schools offering courses in the basics of modern science. The first Soviet school in GBAR was opened in the regional centre of Khorog in 1923. The subordinate districts received their first schools one year later. The objective of the Soviet Cultural Revolution in the 1930s was the elimination of illiteracy amongst the Pamirian population. Two strategies were pursued: first, the number of elementary schools for children was increased, and second, writing and reading classes were offered for people up to fifty years old. In 1949, an obligatory seven-year school education program was introduced, which was systematically extended in the following years. From 1970 onwards, eleven years of school education were made compulsory. The Soviet education system promoted the continuous raising of the individual education up to an age of fifty years. In the course of time, Pamirian people born in the 1920-1930s continued to attend evening and other schools after finishing their elementary education.

In the 1970s, the Pamirian population had the highest share of people with middle and high education degrees (525 out of 1,000) in the whole Soviet Union (483 out of 1,000). After Tajikistan gained independence in 1991, the Research Institute of Humanities of the Acad-

emy of Sciences, a State university, and a vocational training centre of the University of Central Asia were established in Khorog. Since 1969, the Pamir Biological Institute has been in charge. Nowadays, a remarkable share of academics in Tajikistan have Pamirian origins.

3 Heritage preservation

At the present time, considerable work is being done in Tajikistan for the preservation of historical monuments. Sixty-nine archaeological objects can be found in Ishkashim District including ancient fortresses such as Qala-i Qakh-Qakha and Qala-i Yamchun from the third or second century B.C.E., settlements, watchtowers, monasteries, petroglyphs, and others. Since 2009, Yamchun Fortress has been listed on Tajikistan's tentative list for possible UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

There are three museums in Ishkashim District, one of them is the Namadgut Museum. It was opened in 2005, and is focused on seventeen historical monuments and consists of three rooms. Its largest monument is the Qakh-Qakha Fortress located right above the Panj River in the middle of the valley. The fortress is 650 meters long, up to 250 meters wide, and has 56 watchtowers. A sacral place called 'Shokh-i Mardan', which is dedicated to Islam's victory over Zoroastrism is located right across the fortress. 'Hiding-caves' and stone inscriptions dated from the same period are located not far away. Petroglyphs from the eighth century are located some three km away. Graves from the fifth century can be found seven km away from Namadgut. Additionally, ancient irrigation installations, an old Pamirian house, orchards, and other things can be visited. Etymologically, the name of Namadgut comes from the old-Persian word for 'worshipping place'. The settlement used to be the centre of the Wakhan, the centre of the Zoroastrian religion. After the spread of Islam, Namadgut became an Islamic centre. At the beginning of the twentieth century, there were three religious schools and a mosque in Namadgut. This rich heritage formed the basis of the museum.

The museum also exhibits semiprecious stones, national dresses, ceramics and metal dishes, musical instruments, jewellery, portraits of important religious and secular persons, books about local beliefs, customs and activities, and other things. The information presented in this paper was published in 2010 in my book 'Wakhan. A scientific, historic and ethnographic study'. Another book with historical pictures from Namadgut will be published.



Kishwar Abdulishoev explains imaginations of heritage preservation in the newly built cultural centre of Khorogh
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