# ISMAILI REVIVAL IN TAJIKISTAN: FROM PERESTROIKA TO THE PRESENT*

Tacikistan'da İsmaili Uyanışı: Perestroyka'dan Günümüze

**Abdulmamad ILOLIEV****

**Abstract**

This paper explores the changes and challenges that the Tajik Ismaili community faced during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Focusing primarily on the role and significance of internal and external forces of Ismaili religious revival in Tajikistan, which were inspired by Gorbachev's Perestroika in the last decade of Soviet rule, it advances a broader argument concerning modern Ismaili developments in the country in terms of transformation of religious ideas, institutions and values.

**Keywords:** Aga Khan, Ismaili, Tajik, Pamir, Perestroika, Soviet Union.

**Öz**

Bu makale, Tacik İsmaili topluluğunun Sovyet ve Sovyet sonrası dönemlerde karşılaştığı değişiklikleri ve zorlukları araştırmaktadır. Sovyet yönetiminin son on yılında Gorbaçov'un Perestroyka'sından esinlenen Tacikistan'daki İsmaili dini uyanışının iç ve dış güçlerinin rolü ve önemine odaklanarak, dini fikirlerin, kurumların ve değerlerin dönüşümü açısından ülkedeki modern İsmaili gelişmeleriyle ilgili daha geniş bir tartışmayı ilerletmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Ağa Han, İsmaili, Tacik, Pamir, Perestroika, Sovyetler Birliği.

## Introduction

The Ismailis constitute a minor religious group within the Shiʿi Islam guided by a single authoritative leader, whom his followers call *hazar* ('present') Imam and who is believed to be from the progeny of Prophet Muhammad through his cousin and son-in-law ʿAlī b. ʾAbī Ṭālib – the first Shiʿi Imam and fourth Muslim caliph – and his daughter Fāṭima. Driven from the name of the eighth century Shiʿi Imam Ismāʿīl b. Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, the term *Ismaili* was originally applied to the early supporters of Imam Ismail by their opponents, and later was used to identify the followers of the Fatimid Imam-Caliphs of Egypt, the Nizari Imams of Iran and finally the Aga-Khans. Originally coming from North Africa, Iran, Central Asia and Indian subcontinent, the followers of the Ismaili Imams were known by various names such as *Khojas* ('the pious people'), *Muʾminīs* ('the faithful ones'), *Panjtanīs* ('the fivers') and in some places simply Shiʿis. Although it took some decades for a common identity to be shaped under the 'Ismaili' umbrella, the term was officially recognised as the name of a religious community by the High Court of Bombay in 1866, when the first Aga Khan successfully defended his court case against a group of wealthy *Khojas* (Purohit, 2012; Akhtar, 2014).

In the twentieth century the Aga Khans, especially Aga Khan III (d. 1957) and later his grandson Aga Khan IV had embarked on a large scale of reforms aimed at standardisation of traditional Ismaili beliefs and practices on the one hand and

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** Dr., University of Central Asia, Director of Aga Khan Humanities Project, abdulmamad.iloliev@ucentralasia.org, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-7593-6503

improvement of the quality of life of the Ismailis and their neighbours on the other hand. In the process several institutions were established to tackle religious, socio-economic, cultural and academic issues faced by the Ismailis (Nanji, 1974 ; Villani, 2001 ; Steinberg, 2010). Gradually a new Ismaili Muslim identity took shape based on a transformed *Khoja satpanthī* ('a true path') values (Asani, 2010). As Nanji (1974, 137) asserts, for the *Khojas* "flexibility was a historically conditioned, built-in trait … and the concept of Imamate made it easy for them to accept the changes introduced by the Imam." Yet their coreligionists in Central Asia, especially the *Panjtanīs* of Tajikistan had largely remained uninfluenced by those reforms and were practically autonomous until the last decade of the twentieth century due to their political circumstances.

Examining primarily religious changes and challenges that the *Panjtanīs* experienced on the eve and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, this paper focuses on two important aspects of modern Ismaili history in Tajikistan, which are largely overlooked by the scholars of Ismaili studies, namely the role and significance of the internal and external forces in Ismaili religious revival in Tajikistan. Inspired by the Perestroika – a set of political and economic reforms introduced in the final decade of Soviet rule by Gorbachev – both forces of change shared a common agenda of restoring the role of religion in society, but with different perspectives. The internal or local movement, which emerged soon after the collapse of the USSR, strived for the revival of the indigenous *Panjtanī* beliefs and practices suppressed by the Soviet policy of atheism. The external forces aimed to restore the lost link between the Tajik Ismaili community and the Ismaili Imamate on the one hand and the Ismaili communities worldwide on the other hand by establishing new religious institutions, values and standards.

This paper draws on the author's several fieldworks in Tajikistan and Afghanistan (Badakhshan Province), included archive research in Khorog and Dushanbe, personal observations and semi-structured interviews conducted with the locals on both sides of the Panj River. The regional archive of the GBAO[1] (the former archive of the Communist party in the oblast), the Institute of Humanities in Khorog, the Tajik State Archive and the library of the Academy of Science of Tajikistan in Dushanbe were invaluable in accessing original sources (minutes from meetings, manifestos, court cases, military dossiers, instructions and letters) on the subject matter. This study also deployed dozens internal Ismaili materials, local collective memories (stories, anecdotes, devotional literature) and private archive materials.

## 1. Literature Review

The literature on modern Ismaili developments in Tajikistan, thought very scant, is controversial in nature, especially when it comes to works composed during Soviet rule from the Marxist-Leninist and atheist points of view and in most of the cases for propaganda purposes. They include topics such as 'the harmful nature of religious dogmas', 'espionage against the Soviet government', 'religious practices as remnants of the feudal society' and other polemical topics. For instance, in 1943 a propaganda

1. Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast

manual was prepared by 'the Propaganda and Agitation Unit' of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Tajikistan entitled, *Ob Ismailizme* ('On Ismailism'). Although the author or authors of the book are not named, one may assume that it was probably written or at least supervised by Bobojon Ghafurov (also spelt Gafurov) – the famous Tajik scholar and national hero of Tajikistan, who from 1941 to 1944 was the Unit's Secretary of Propaganda. The manual claims that 'Ismailism originally emerged as an anti-feudal movement, but in the nineteenth century changed into a reactionary anti-people's movement and that its counterrevolutionary leaders wanted to restore the rule of Bukhara emirate' (1943, 23, 34). This claim does not reflect the reality of late nineteenth century Pamir. For when the 1895 Anglo-Russian agreement gave the Ismaili populated regions of Pamir (the right bank of the Panj River) to Bukhara emirate, the Ismailis of the region revolted against the ethnic and religious harassments committed by the Sunni Bukharian authorities and begged Russia to take them under its direct control. Three years prior to the manual's publication, Ghafurov defended his candidate of science dissertation on the topic of the *History of the Ismaili sect from the early XIXth century until the first imperialist war.* This dissertation, however, is not available and its current location and reasons for concealment also remain unknown. Years later in his famous monograph *The Tajiks: Pre-Ancient, Ancient and Modern History* (edited by the famous academician Boris Litvinsky), which was originally written in Russian (1972) and then translated into Tajik several times, Ghafurov defines the Ismaili creed as *bidʿah* ('innovation'), which, he claims, drew its doctrine from the Greek philosophy, and stood against Islamic traditions (2008, 401, 402). The other polemical critic of Islam in general and Ismailism in particular was Lutsiyan Klimovich, a well-known Soviet orientalist, who in his article *Ismailizm i ego reaktsiyonnaya rol* ('Ismailism and its reactionary role') published in *Antireligioznik* (1937), an atheist journal, claims that Ismaili movement was a reactionary form of Islam and stood against the establishment.

In addition, there were various newspapers and magazines published by the 'Union of Militant Atheist' (*Soyuz voinstvuyushikh bezbozhnikov*) including *Bezbozhnik* ('Godless'), *Antireligioznik* ('Antireligious'), *Voinstvuyushiy ateizm* ('Militant atheism'), most of which functioned until the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union (Metel, 2013). Tajikistan's branch of the union was led by Ghafurov, who also served as the chief editor of *Bekhudoyoni Tojikiston* ('Godless of Tajikistan') magazine published in both Tajik and Russian languages (Khaydarov, 1993). The main purpose of these publications was to challenge Islam as a religion by any means available and demonize it in the eyes of the ordinary believers.

The Soviet atheist literature, however, is not overwhelmed by anti-Ismaili sentiments; it also includes some valuable information, facts and data on Ismaili history and traditions in Pamir. Among them is a report called *Ismailizm na pamire*: 1902-1931 ('Ismailism in Pamir') prepared by a Soviet intelligence officer and researcher Andrey Stanishevskiy (his Tajik name was Aziz Niallo).[2] The original document is kept in his private collection in the General State Archive of Uzbekistan in Tashkent. In 1930s the GBAO branch of the Communist party of Tajikistan requested this report

2. For more information on Stanishevskiy's works on Pamir, see Abaeva (1975)

and other documents related to late nineteenth and early twentieth century Pamir to be photocopied and brought to Khorog.[3] They included reports, military dossiers, Aga Khan's decrees and government meeting minutes. This collection is kept in the Institute of Humanities of Khorog, abbreviated here as 'IHK.'

An important contribution to the study of medieval Ismaili philosophy is made by a Soviet-Tajik scholar Khayolbek Dodikhudoev, who in his major work *Filosofiya krestyanskogo bunta* ('the Philosophy of Peasants Revolt', 1987) presents a Marxist-Leninist approach to the study of Ismaili movement. However, in 2014 he publishes another book called *Filosofskiy Ismailizm* ('Philosophical Ismailism'), where he rethinks his previous approach by focusing on Ismaili theological topics such as kalam, unity, truth and mystical path.

Recent studies on Ismailis during Soviet rule focus primarily on themes such as Soviet militant atheism, the relationship between the *pīrs* and Soviet government, internal challenges and other aspects of life (Kharykov, 1985 ; Shokhumorov, 2006 ; Hojibekov, 2006 ; Iloliev, 2013 ; Mastibekov, 2014 ; Aksakolov, 2014 ; Zoolshoev, 2018 ; Dagiev, 2022).

**2. A Brief Note on the Panjtanī**

The *Panjtanī* typology drives from the Persian phrase *panj tan-i pāk* ('the five pure figures') – an equivalent of the Arabic *ahl al-bayt* (the household of Prophet Muhammad) – to describe a set of esoteric traditions in Central and South Asia associated with the Shiʿi and to some extent Sufi understandings of Islam based on the five key religious figures: Muhammad, ʿAlī, Fāṭimah, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn – the archetypes of religion and the symbolic expressions of the Shiʿi identity.[4] It should, however, be noted that *Panjtanī* is not a specific branch within Islam in general or Shiʿism in particular; it is rather a set of beliefs and practices professed by certain Shiʿi and Sufi communities. Similarly, it is hard to argue that the practical application of this typology is equally observed in all Shiʿi traditions. In other words, not all Shiʿis refer to themselves as the *Panjtanīs*, except for some religious groups, such as the Ismailis of Badakhshan, in whose accounts the role and significance of those five religious personalities are strongly emphasized. The key doctrinal principle, upon which its philosophy in Badakhshan stands, is the belief in the authority of the Prophet's household and their progeny, the Shiʿi Ismaili Imams. Each of the five members of the Prophet's household had historically played a role in the classical period of Islam on which later stories and legends were composed to dwell in the

3. The original manuscript in Tashkent is numbered as P-2464. The 1930s photocopy was previously house in the archive of the Communist Part of Tajikistan in Khorog, but after the collapse of the Soviet Union was given to the Institute of Humanities of Khorog, where the author of this article had the privilege to examine it.

4. To be sure, the term *ahl bayt* is used twice in the Qur'an (9:73, 33:33), but it does not clearly indicate any members of the prophet's household. Some Sunni traditions, for instance, include here the prophet's wives, daughters, and dependents; some even apply it to the Ṭālibids and ʿAbbāsids – the most powerful families within the Hāshim clan. The Shiʿis, nevertheless, strongly believe that 'the people of the house' are those who were in a close blood relationship with the Prophet; that is his daughter Fāṭimah, his cousin and son in law ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, and his grandchildren Ḥasan and Ḥusayn from ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib. They justify this claim on the basis of the Qur'an (33:33) and the famous Shiʿi version of the prophetic ḥadīth of *thaqalayn*, where Muhammad is believed to have declared the Qurʾān and his *ahl al-bayt* as the two important elements of his legacy to be followed after his death. For the ḥadīth see, Nuʿmān (1951: 28).

hearts and minds of the believers. In addition to what is commonly known about the Prophet's life and prophecy, these legends also elaborate on ʿAlī as 'the King of mankind' (*Shāh-i Mardān*) and the source of divine secrets and love. I have dealt with this topic elsewhere (Iloliev, 2015), but for now it suffices to mention that there is an enormous number of stories, including imaginary ones, about ʿAlī, his wife Fāṭimah, and his sons Ḥasan and especially Ḥusayn – the martyr of Islam – which inspire the lovers of *ahl al-bayt* in their quest for physical and spiritual salvation. The uniqueness of the *Panjtanī* tradition in Badakhshan is reflected in the ways in which the Ismaili faith has been practiced in the region since its establishment. Its strong inclination towards esotericism and mysticism are clear in the local religious rites and rituals and in the philosophy attached to them. The key rites and rituals include *Charāgh-Rūshan* ('illuminous light') – a rite of lighting candles and offering special prayers at funeral ceremonies, *ʿĀshūrā or shada* (local usage), *ziyārat-i mazār* (shrine visitation) and *madḥiyah-khānī* (singing devotional songs).

### 3. Ismailism During Soviet Rule

During the Soviet times, the Ismailis of Tajikistan became known as the 'Pamiris' (ref. the Pamir Mountains) distinguished from the rest of the Tajiks (Persian speaking Sunnis) by their linguistic, cultural and most importantly religious affiliations as the followers of the *Panjtanī* tradition. The Pamiris share a common Eastern Iranian ancestry, but linguistically vary into the Shughnī-Rushānī, Wakhī, Ghārānī (Pārsī) and Ishkāshimī groups. Ismaili ideas may have reached Badakhshan as early as in the eleventh century, when Nāṣir-i Khusraw (d. 1088), a Persian poet and philosopher, began his teachings as the Fatimid missionary in the region, however the term *Ismaili* had been rarely used in the local oral and written materials up until the twentieth century. Instead, the locals used to call themselves *Panjtanī*, a de facto element in defining *Pamiriness* in the larger context of Tajikistan. The key distinguishing elements of the *Panjtanī* tradition – a mixture of Shiʿi, Sufi and local cultural elements – are shrine visitation, veneration of saints, cult of spirits, performance of *qaṣīda* and *madīḥa* ('praise songs') and the funeral ceremony of *Charāgh-Rawshan* ('luminous light'). The community was led by its local religious masters (*pīrs*) and their deputies (*khalīfas*) until the recent takeover by the ITREB Tajikistan.[5] I have provided a detailed account of the institution of *pīrs* in Badakhshan elsewhere (Iloliev, 2013), but for now it suffices to say that this institution played a crucial role in the control and organisation of religious and social relationships between the masters (*pīrs* and *khalīfas*) and their disciples (*murīds*).

Until the late nineteenth century the Pamir principalities of Darvaz, Shughnan, Wakhan and other districts were de facto semi-independent, though time to time had to pay tribute to the kingdom of Badakhshan and other regional powers (Iskandarov, 1983). However, the situation dramatically changed with the Anglo-Russian 'Great Game', which in 1895 divided these principalities between the Bukhara Emirate (a protectorate of Tsarist Russia) and Afghanistan (Postnikov, 2000).[6] It is argued that

5. ITREB – Ismaili Tariqa (path) and Religious Education Board – is a new institution of religious education and organisation launched in Tajikistan by the Aga Khan after the collapse of the Soviet Union.
6. In 1925 the Russian Pamir became GBAO within the USSR, and since 1991 as an administrative division within Tajikistan.

Tsarist Russia did not directly intervene in the religious affairs of its subjects, and that it showed tolerance and respect towards Muslim beliefs and practices (Bethmann, 1958, 4). As true as it may be, however, Russia was cautiously concerned about the influence of Aga Khan III, and his local representatives (*pīrs* and *khalīfas*) among the local population. The fact that the Aga Khan lived in India and had close ties with the British authorities, rose Russia's suspicion about him and his *pīrs* as British collaborators. They therefore tried to diminish the Aga Khan's influence among his Pamiri followers by any means possible, even plotting sectarian tensions between the Ismailis and the Sunnis of Afghanistan and Bukhara. For example, in February 1904 Klemm, a Russian diplomat/spy in Bombay, sent a telegram to the Governor-General of Turkestan in Tashkent suggesting such a plot. He argued that disclosing the Aga Khan's social lifestyle, or 'bad European manners', as he claimed, was not enough to discredit him. Instead, he proposed to encourage either Shiʿi or Sunni propaganda to create chaos in the region and then step in as the 'rescuer' (IHK 51, 322). It was probably due to such tactics that after the 1895 demarcation of Pamir, regardless of the native's pro-Russian sentiments, the Russian authorities gave the occupied Ismaili territories to the Sunni Bukhara Emirate. The left side of the Panj River left under Afghan occupation. Both the Afghans and Bukharan authorities harassed the locals, fostered them towards opium addiction and tried to impose the Sunni *sharia* law on them. Local collective memory is still fresh about this atrocity. It was widely reported by the foreign travellers such as Putyata (1884, 26-27), Morgan (1892, 21), Grombchevskiĭ (IHK 7, 37-38), Cherkasov (IHK, 236) and many others. The Russians, thus, tried to keep the Ismailis in a state of constant fear of future under the Sunni authorities, which could lead to further religious discriminations. This policy continued until the coming of the Bolsheviks, who took a radically different stand on religion and inter-ethnic relationships.

In 1918, a year after the October revolution in St. Petersburg, Bolshevik rule, though still fragile and weak, was established in Khorog – the administrative centre of Russian Pamir, while most of the territories of modern Tajikistan (then Easter Bukhara) were still under Bukhara Emirate. The new political regime adopted militant atheism as a state policy to diminish the role of religion in the society. However, the implementation of this policy had always differed depending on certain political cataclysms in the seventy-four years of the Soviet history, which could be divided into five periods. First, from 1917 to 1920s, when the government was fighting the 'white army' (fractions of the Tsarist army) and the Basmachi movement – an anti-Soviet resistance group in Central Asia. This period was characterised by a reluctant approach to religion aimed at gaining support from the Muslim religious leaders. Second, from 1930s until the beginning of the Great Patriotic War in June 1941; it was the peak of religious repressions, the triumph of militant atheism. Third, from June 1941 until the late 1940s, when the regime had to show compelled tolerance towards religion due to the pressures of the war. Fourth, from the early 1950s to 1986, was a time when the government tried to 'intellectualise' its anti-religious policy by providing 'scientific' arguments to disprove religion as a deceitful understanding of the world, but there was not pressure on religious practices. Fifth, from the 1986 Perestroika until the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was characterised by religious revival on the one hand and the emergence of new radical Islamist movements on the other hand.

One of the key events in the history of Pamiri Ismailis during the early years of Soviet rule was the 1923 religious mission sent by Aga Khan III from India. The mission was led by Ramzānalī Sabzalī (d. 1938), an Ismaili missionary who was later honoured with the title of *pīr* by the Imam. His group travelled through what is today Gilgit-Baltistan region of Pakistan to Afghan Wakhan and crossed the Panj River into Soviet Wakhan and from there to other districts of Soviet Badakhshan.[7] The main goal of the mission was to establish contacts with then isolated Ismaili communities in the region (Nizarali and Virani 2008, 77). The Ismaili Imam took the risk of sending his missionary to the Soviet Union knowing that religion there was officially reduced to the 'opium of the masses', but the Bolsheviks regardless of their suspicions about foreign agents reluctantly welcomed them. To understand this, one needs to look for the potential outcomes that both sides anticipated from the visit. In other words, the Aga Khan aimed to keep his channel of communication open with his Soviet devotees, who now lived under different political circumstances, while the Bolsheviks expected him to guide his followers to obey the communist regime. For the latter it was a part of their general policy to seek loyalty from Muslims of Central Asia in their fight against the Basmachi movement. From the early years of their rule, the Soviets took several measures to establish working relationships with the Muslims of mainland Russia, the Caucuses and Central Asia. They publicly appealed to all Muslims to support the new regime by promising them freedom of religious expression. First such an appeal was made in December 1917 by the first Soviet leaders Vladimir Lenin and Josef Stalin (Spector, 1959). Soon after, in January 1918 the Commissariat for Muslim Affairs and local Muslim commissariats were established to deal with Muslim issues.

Hence, during his mission Sabzalī, while preaching the Aga Khan's decrees (*farāmīn*, sing. *farmān*) to the communities, he also recommend them to follow Soviet rules and be good citizens. Yet, some local anecdotes assert that the *mashnarī* (missionary) also told them that they should tolerate the Soviet government, and that one day 'it will melt like a snow in the sun'.[8] Some *farāmīn* dated between February and March 1924 explicitly demonstrate how the Aga Khan was keen to emphasise the importance of implementing his instructions in Badakhshan; he orders his *pīrs* to follow the new laws that were disseminated by mashnarī Sabzalī.[9] Two important points emerge from these *farāmīn*. First, they demonstrate the willingness of the Ismaili Imamate to reform the local religious practices and institutions by introducing new changes, for instance, establishing councils (*anjuman*) to deal with the community's religious and social affairs, which concerned regulation of rites and rituals and transparency in dispatching *zakat* (religious taxation) to the Ismaili headquarters in Bombay. Second, the *farāmīn* explicitly indicate that not every *pīr* in Badakhshan was fully aware of and reluctant towards accepting the changes promoted

7. I obtained some information about Sabzālī's visit to Wakhan from an eyewitness Jumaqul Davlatqadamov in the summer 2006. He remembered how his grandfather Korvonbek, then a khalīfa of *pīr* Shah Abdulmaʾānī, took him to the village gathering with Sabzālī in the house of *pīr* Shah Safdar in Yamg. According to him the missionary was accompanied by Russian officers and Shughnī translators.

8. From an interview conducted with Jumaqul Davlatqadamov in 2006. Similar stories were recorded by other scholars in Shughnan and Rushan.

9. See Kawahara and Mamadsherzodshoev (2005), Decree No. 110 (p. 25), and Decree No. 263 (p. 28).

by Sabzalī. Addressing the selected *pīrs*, the Aga Khan asks them to fully implement the new changes and guide the *murīds* 'to rid themselves of envy and hypocrisy.'[10]

Sabzalī's mission was one of the first attempts to clear the grounds for the future religious reforms in Badakhshan or as Shokhumorov argues, 'to upgrade the Pamiri school of *Nāṣiriya* [the followers of Nāṣir-i Khusraw] to new Nizārī Ismaili standards' (2008: 89). Having said this, however, one should bear in mind that reformist ideas came to Pamir well before Sabzalī's mission. In the early twentieth century some local religious clerics, who had previously visited Bombay, withdrew from the *pīrs*' constituencies, and organised a group called *panjabay* in Shughnan and Rushan. Among the prominent *panjabays* distinguished Sayyid Munīr and Haydarshāh[11]. This group tried to introduce new religious institutions and regulations based on the Indian *Khoja* Ismaili tradition such as community houses (*jamāʿatkhāna*) and rituals associated with it. The *panjabays* adopted a constitution, which openly challenged the traditional patriarchal and autocratic authority of the *pīrs* and advocated for new councils and advisory boards to be established in the region.[12] They accused the *pīrs* and *mīrs* (rulers) of abusing their authority, a claim which has also grounds in local collective memory, especially when it came to the cruelty of the latter. In fact, there are many stories, which assert that some *pīrs* and local administrators often abused their positions and exploited the commoners.[13] This subsequently served as a pretext for the further reforms, both religious (inspired by Bombay) and political, catalysed by two Russian revolutions in 1917 (the February Bourgeois and the October Bolshevik). The *panjabay* movement, however, was merely limited to a small circle of intelligentsia in Shughnan and Rushan and could not gain popular support. It is evident from the correspondences between Aga Khan III and the rivalry groups in Badakhshan that the *panjabays* and the *pīrs* could not agree on many issues related to religious practices, for instance, on collecting and dispatching religious taxation to Bombay. The *panjabays* decided to take over this task from the *pīrs* and their *khalīfas*. Aga Khan III, as some of his decrees indicate, favoured the *panjabay* transparency in dealing with religious taxation, however he was concerned about the power struggle between the two groups of his followers. He knew that the rivalry could jeopardise community's cohesion and concord in Badakhshan.[14] Inviting both sides to reconciliation, he nevertheless had to credit the *pīrs* and outlaw the *panjabays*, for the voice of the latter was not echoing with those of the majority of the local Ismailis. In 1928 several decrees were sent to the local leaders regarding this matter.[15]

The Imam's instructions, being equally important for both opposing groups, had probably played a part in calming down the tensions, but it was the radicalisation of

10. Ibid., Decree No. 263, p. 28
11. For the biographies of these personalities, see Zoolshoev (2018).
12. On the panjabay constitution see, *Ismailizm na pamire* (1902-1931).
13. For instance, when after the 1917 February (or Bourgeois) Revolution a *panjabay* leader Haydarshāh became the vice chair of Shughnan Volost Committee (a Russian administrative division), a decision was made to allocate some spare land for the poor households from Rushan in Shokhdara. Pīrs Sayyīd Mursal, Sayyīd Mahmud and mīr Aziz Khan of Shokhdara challenged this decision by seeking support from the Bukhara Emirate. However, their letter was caught by the revolutionary committee and Aziz Khan was sentenced for treason (Stanishevskiy, doc. 21).
14. Ibid. docs. 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 35, 37, 38
15. Stanishevskiy, doc. 27.

the Soviet policy towards religion that forcibly overshadowed the intra-sect issues and subsequently silenced religious argumentations. In the 1930s the war on religion intensified soon after the Bolshevik victory in the civil war. The three famous *pīrs* of Shughnan Yusufʿ Alī Shāh, Mahmud Shāh and Shāh Mursal, earlier accused of conspiracy to overthrow the local government, were rearrested and sentenced to death. In 1932 Yusufʿ Alī Shāh was poisoned and the other two were assassinated in Tashkent and Khorog prisons in 1940 (Shokhumorov, 2008, 94).[16] Other *pīrs* and *khalīfas* were accused of espionage against the Soviet government. In 1928 Sayyid Abdurrahmān of Wakhan was forced to flee to the other side of the Panj River and take refuge in Afghan Wakhan after the visit of Nusratullāh Makhsum (a Bolshevik leader of Tajikistan) to Badakhshan (IHK, Doc 72, 403). In the 1930 the last remaining *pīr* of Wakhan Shāh Langar had to leave his hometown of Zung to the Afghan village of Qāzideh. The successors of these two Wakhī *pīrs* currently reside in Panja and Qāzideh.[17] Other Wakhan *pīrs* too migrated to the left bank of the Panj River among who were Shah Safdar, Ihtibār Shah and Sayyid Qāʿaṭabah from Yamg.[18]

During the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) the government for the second time had to relax its policy towards Islam by reopening mosques and freeing some religious leaders from the prisons. In 1943 the Chief Muslim Religious Administration (*muftīyāt*) was established with four independent boards in Ufa (Russia), Tashkent (Uzbekistan), Baku (Azerbaijan) and Buyanksk (Dagestan) (Yaacov, 2000).[19] These *muftīyāts*, which were of the Sunni Hanafi *maḍhab*, did not have religious authority over the USSR's only Shiʿi Ismaili community. In the absence of the *pīrs*, who fled to Afghanistan, the government decided to modify the role of *khalīfas* (*pīrs*' deputies) by making them the sole religious clerics in the constituencies previously led by the *pīrs.* The difference in constituency distribution between the *pīrs* and the *khalīfas* was that in the latter case a group of villages belonging to a local government council (*selsovet*) was led by a *khalīfa* appointed by the government regardless of their previous affiliation to a specific *pīr*. As mentioned earlier, the *pīrs'* constituencies were non-geographic; in other words, a *pīr* could have had followers (*murīds*) in various parts of Badakhshan led by *khalīfas* appointed by him. The role of new *khalīfas*, however, was limited to conducting wedding and funeral ceremonies and other rites of passage.

From post-war period until Gorbachev's Perestroika the Soviet policy towards religion was relatively relaxed and tolerant (Tasar, 2012). In fact, some argue that it was a period of reconstruction of Islam, when the government managed to reconstruct Islam by appropriating its values with those of the regime in order to balance the Soviet social order. In addition to the *muftīyāts* the government also created religious committees within the central and local governments in order to control and maintain religious life in the country (Saroyan, 1997).

16. In July 1922 the *pīr* of Qataghan Temurshāh came to Shughnan to marry the daughter of Shughan's *pīr* Yusuf Alīshāh, but his main goal was to propagate against Soviet government and instruct the local *pīrs* to call for re-union with Afghan Badakhshan (Shokhumorov 2008: 91).

17. In February 2011 while conducting a fieldwork in Afghan Badakhshan, I met with the successors of Shāh Langar and Sayyid Abdurrahmān. Shāh Langar, who bears his grandfather's name and Shāh Ismāʿīl are still referred to as *pīrs* by their followers and greatly respected across the border. The latter, ones a MP in the Afghan Parliament, is a well-educated man.

18. From an interview with Jumaqul Davlatqadamov

19. To note, the first Muslim *muftīyāt* was established by Empress Catherin II in 1788 in Orenburg (Russia).

In Badakhshan almost all elements (except for *pīrs*) of traditional Ismaili beliefs and practices managed to survive including the institute of *khalifas*, visitation of shrines, performance of *madô* and *Charāgh-Rawshan*. However, the members of the Communist Party could not openly practice in these ceremonies due to the fear of being expelled from the party. Yet, it would be wrong to think that the antireligious propaganda completely ceased during this period. The propaganda machine changed its form and tactics by becoming less aggressive and more forbearing to advice rather dictate its arguments.

**4. Perestroika and Religious Revival**

Islamic resurgence in Tajikistan emerged in the later1980s as an anti-atheist movement of the local *ulama* supported by nationalist parties for the freedom of religious expression and cultural revival. The resurgence was probably inspired by the 1979 Iranian revolution and the 1989 Afghan mujahidin's victory over the pro-communist reign of Najibullah, however, its main catalysers were undoubtedly Gorbachev's political reforms. In 1986 the first and last president of the USSR Mikhail Gorbachev launched his controversial Perestroika ('restructuring') – a political reform, which aimed at restructuring the Soviet political and economic system through the policy of Glasnost ('openness'). Although Perestroika failed to 'restructure' the USSR, it managed to give the Soviet people the freedom of speech, belief and expression alongside other elements of democracy. One of the aspects of freedom of belief was to liberate religion from the government control and provide Soviet citizens with the right to practice their religion freely. It is true that Perestroika also roused the underground political Islam in Tajikistan; the Islamic resurgence movement, which originally claimed for the restoration of religious rights of the Tajiks later turned radical to challenge the country's secular culture in a cruel civil war (1992-1997). However, for vast majority of the Ismailis of Tajikistan Perestroika became a source of inspiration to revival their ethnic, cultural and religious identities. Similarly, they saw the reforms as an opportunity to establish links with their coreligionists abroad and most importantly with their spiritual leader – the Aga Khan.

In the summer 1991 the first Ismaili envoys, in nearly seventy years after Sabzalī's mission, were sent from London to Tajikistan to establish contacts with then mostly unknown Ismaili population of the Soviet Union. The envoys included three scholars, who were theoretically familiar with the cultural context of Tajikistan and spoke Persian; I shall call them 'the troika', which included Alī Mohamed Rajput, Rafique Keshavjee and Jalal Badakhchani. There are various arguments for and against how the mission began. Some believe it was motivated by a letter sent on behalf of the Tajikistan's Ismaili community to the Aga Khan's office in Paris. Yet, a former Tajik film director Davlat Khudonazarov in his commentaries on Shokhumorov's book (2008, 119) claims that in 1991, while serving as the Chairman of the USSR's Association of Cinematographers, he visited Paris and met with some representatives of the Aga Khan and that he updated them about the Ismailis of Tajikistan. He also takes personal credit for inviting the first missionaries to the country. Yet, in their interviews with Tajik media the missionaries commented that they were commissioned by the Institute of Ismaili Studies to conduct research on and establish contacts with the

Ismailis of the Soviet Union.[20] The core objective of the troika was to gather first-hand intelligence about the locals, their religious traditions, institutions, social structure and most importantly to build foundations for the future Aga Khan institutions in Tajikistan. During the nine-day trip (from 27th of June to 6th of July 1991), the group conducted numerous sermons in Dushanbe, Khorog, Rushan, Shughnan, Ishkashim and Darvaz. The topics of those sermons varied from religious propaganda to political debates, in which they not only preached about the Ismaili Imam, but also praised the Soviet government, especially its president Mikhail Gorbachev by calling him 'the angel of democracy'.[21] Similarly, the missionaries extended their gratitude to the people of Tajikistan for their hospitality and complemented the local women for their beauty and freedom of expression.[22] The troika was well received by the people of Badakhshan and its government officials. In fact, they were treated as the special envois (*namāyanda-yi makhsus*) of Aga Khan IV, and accordingly enjoyed the kind of hospitality and respect that the Imam himself would have received. Their trips were covered daily by the country's media, mainly by the GBAO's regional newspaper *Badakhshon-i Soveti* ('the Soviet Badakhshan') in Khorog and the central government's newspaper *Tojikiston-i Shuravi* ('the Soviet Tajikistan') in Dushanbe.

The time of the troika's mission coincided with the great upheavals in Tajikistan's history followed by Perestroika; the country was drawn into series of demonstrations and riots against the last communist government.[23] The freely given but reluctantly received independence of Tajikistan was followed by a civil war (1992-1997) and the full package of socio-economic and political destructions. Worse than this, the war severely damaged the education system of the country, which used to be one of the best in the world and created an ideological vacuum. In 1994 the Aga Khan outlined his vision for the future of Tajikistan, which he thought was crucially dependent on taking on board the cultural strengths of the ex-communist, the Western and the Muslim worlds to make the transition humane.[24] Following this wisdom, the Aga Khan agencies entered Tajikistan by presenting themselves as the best of both worlds – 'the civilized' Western and 'the moderate' Muslim – in order to preserve, as they believed, the balance between the religious (*dīn*) and worldly (*dunyā*) matters. In the early stages of the civil war, the agencies seemed to restrict their activities largely to humanitarian assistance, which in turn allowed the internal process of religious revival to flourish in

20. See, for example, the local government newspaper *Badakhshon-i Soveti*, 10.07.91.
21. *Badakhshon-i Soveti*, 04/07/91' 07/07/91; 10/07/91. *Tojikiston-i Shuravi* 17.07/91.
22. *Badakhshon-i Soveti*, 07.07 and 10.07.1991.
23. Like many people in the USSR, the inhabitants of the GBAO regard the collapse of the Soviet Union as a tragic event in their history, for they entirely depended on the central government for food, clothes, hospitals, schools and security. This remote mountainous region was geopolitically significant for the USSR because it shared thousands of miles of border with China and Afghanistan and closely located to the borders of Pakistan. The Soviet government, therefore, constantly supplied the region with readymade products, often directly from Moscow, which was popularly known as 'Moscow supply' (*moskovskoe obespechenie*). However, in terms of the local economy, the GBAO did not substantially benefit from the Soviet economy except for a small number of hydropower stations, roads, schools and hospitals. The *kolkhozes* were the only farms in the agriculturally focused economy of the oblast, but their products, as the first years of independence showed, could only be sufficient for few months of survival.
24. Collection of the speeches by His Highness the Aga Khan from 24 November 1963 to 9 June 2009: "Commencement Speech by His Highness the Aga Khan at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA, 27/05/1994). Source: www.iis.ac.uk (accessed date: 10.05.2011).

Badakhshan.[25] This process aimed at cultural restoration and revival of the indigenous religious rites and rituals. The resurgence specifically concerned the *Panjtanī* beliefs and practices associated with shrine culture (shrine visitation and saint veneration), devotional songs and other important aspects of faith and practice. As a result, many shrines were restored and congruently transformed into cultural museums. I explained this matter elsewhere (Iloliev, 2008b), but here suffices to say that the internal process of religious revival was overtaken by the Aga Khan agencies, which introduced new ideas and institutions to standardise the local beliefs and practices with those of the Ismaili worldwide. Launched in 1993 in London 'Project Tajikistan' was the first agency to coordinate the implementation of Ismaili reforms in Tajikistan. It was instrumental in overseeing the activities of the Ismaili Tariqa and Religious Education Committee (now ITREB, i.e., 'board') of Tajikistan. In 1995 in coordination with other Aga Khan agencies, 'Project Tajikistan' contributed towards organising His Highness Aga Khan's first historical visit to Tajikistan, where the Ismaili community for centuries had been longing for the congregation (*didār*) with its spiritual leader.

**5. Updating the Rite of Charāgh-Rawshan**

The ceremony of *Charāgh-Rawshan* (lit. 'luminous lamp') is traditionally believed to be introduced by Nāṣir-i Khusraw as a means of inviting (*daʿwa*) people to his sessions. Although the text of *Charāgh-Rawshan* has little to do with the deceased individual, it is usually performed on the second night of a funeral ceremony and is an important element of the rites of passage in the region. It is believed that during this ceremony the soul of the deceased is assisted to ascend from this world to the next and its path is lighten towards eternity; the soul will not rest until its candle is lit. *Charāgh-Rawshan* includes certain rituals based on a fixed text called *Qandīl-Nāma* or *Charāgh-Nāma* ('the Book of Candle'), consisting of certain Qur'anic verses and several religious lyrics (in Persian), which are attributed to Nāṣir-i Khusraw (Hunzai, 1994 ; Najib, 1976 ; Mirhasan, 2003 ; Khan, 2013). In 2010 recognising the significance of *Charāgh-Rawshan* for the followers of Nāṣir-i Khusraw's tradition, the Aga Khan issued a special decree in which he emphasised that the ceremony should be observed all over the world where the followers of this tradition reside. The decree was publicly recited in the *jamāʿatkhānas* across the globe. Ismaili scholars and religious clerics took several steps to implement this decree in practice. In fact, preliminary discussions about changes to the ceremony took place well before the decree was issued. The first step in this direction was to edit the texts of the *Qandīl-Nāma* so that it could theoretically accommodate the new perspectives on faith and practice. The editors concluded that the original texts, which slightly varied from one region to another, included some 'non-Ismaili' elements borrowed from other interpretations of Islam under different historical circumstances.[26] In 2010 the revised text alongside supplementary notes were sent to the *khalīfas* in Tajikistan. The latter became a topic of hot discussions among the *khalīfas* and ordinary devotees. One

25. According to Plekhanov (2005) during the war the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) sponsored by the governments of the USA, Canada, Germany and other countries transported (from America and Europe to the Kirgiz city of Osh) and distributed 10 million tons of aids annually to each and every village in GBAO.
26. The text, for instance, contained the names of the Twelver Shiʿi Imams. See, *Chirāgh-Nāma*, MS 31. ISCU (IIS). See also for texts of *Qandīl-Nāma* in Ivanow 1959, Najib 1976, Hunzai 1994, Mirhasan 2003.

of the discussions was about the issue of abandoning the sheep slaughter (*zabh-i gusfand*), a traditional ritual when a specially designated lamb is sacrificed on the afternoon before the ceremony. This had both symbolic and practical applications in the context of Badakhshan. Slaughtering an animal either for religious ceremonies or other occasions is strictly a dignified occasion in the region. In the case of the *Charāgh-Rawshan*, some elderly people seldomly select and care for a sheep during their lifetime to be slaughtered in their funeral. On the day of *zabh* the sheep is given symbolic wash (*tahārat*) and food (wheat) blessed by the *khalīfa*. Before the slaughter, which is done with a special technique that reduces suffering, the *khalīfa* recites a verse from the Qur'an. The lamb's fat is used in making candles; one of the candles, which is called the 'proof candle' (*dalīlak*), is lit prior to the ceremony, which is followed by lighting the main candle (*pilta*) during the *Charāgh-Rawshan* process. The intestines of the sheep are later used as strings in the Pamiri *rubāb*, a musical instrument, which is played during the ceremony. The head and skin are given to the *khalīfa* for his services. The rest of the meat is mixed with water and wheat to prepare a special meal (*gandum-āb/bāch*) for the funeral attendants and the guests. It should be noted that all services are based on the traditional voluntary principles, which include washing the body, digging the grave, carry the body to the graveyard, and comforting the bereaved family. Additionally, each household donates some amount of money (material products in the past) to the bereaved family's extra expenses. The *khalīfa* then blesses the meal and recites the final prayer to mark the end of the grievance.

### 6. The Ismaili Centre in Dushanbe

Muslim places of worship and gathering vary from mosques (*masjid*) to the Sufi *khānaqāh* (Persian), *tekke* (Turkish), *zawiya* (Arabic), *imambara* (Indian), shrines and others. The Ismailis call their site *jamāʿatkhāna* or simply *jamatkhana* (driven from Arabic *jamāʿat* – 'community' and Persian *khāna* – 'house'), which emerged during the Imamate of Aga Khan I (1804-1881) in the Indian subcontinent. In brief, 'the *jamatkhana* is the centre of the religious, cultural and to an extent the social life of the Ismailis. The most important part of their building is the prayer room' (Clarke, 1975, 33). However, *jamatkhana* and the rituals associated with it are new phenomena in Tajikistan. In fact, the Pamiri Ismailis did not have any specifically designated prayer houses in the past, instead they prayed at their homes and shrines. The traditional Pamiri house (called differently in different Pamiri languages: *khun, khāna, chid, chad*) itself is a symbolic expression of religious ideas and devotion, in which every architectural entity conveys certain meanings, for instance, the five pillars represent the five members (*panj-tan*) of the Prophet's family (*ahl al-bayt*).

It should be noted that in the late nineteenth and early twenties century the Afghan and Bukhara authorities tried to impose mosques across the Ismaili populated regions of Badakhshan (Stanishevskiy, IHK, Doc 8).[27] The number of such mosques (none exist currently) is not known, but according to the local sources many of these mosques did not even fully function during the occupation period. Some elderly people (my interviewees) asserted that their grandfathers visited mosques only when

27. From the Field Report of the Russian Political Agent in Bukhara A. Cherkasov (12 February 1905).

the Afghan or Bukhara military administrators were present at the sites.[28] Most of the mosques were in the villages, where either the local clerics lived or the colonial posts were located.[29] With the Russian full takeover of the Pamir regions in the early twentieth century, the mosques disappeared for good.

In October 2009, the Aga Khan and Tajik president Rahmon inaugurated the Ismaili Centre in Dushanbe (ICD) designed by a Canadian firm. Due to its architectural and religious significances, the ICD is a unique building not only in Tajikistan but Central Asia as a whole.

It is the sixth in the series of Ismaili centers around the world after London (1984), Burnaby (1985), Lisbon (1998) and Dubai (2008).[30] Recognizing the cultural diversity of Tajikistan in general and its Ismaili community in particular, the Aga Khan explained the role and significance of the centre in connecting the past and the present and offered his visions for the future:

The community holds a recognised and admired position in the history of human endeavour here, contributing some of the greatest names in the fields of theology, philosophy, poetry and the sciences. This new Centre will be a place for looking back on that rich and powerful history in grateful and solemn remembrance…

… Human diversity itself is seen as a gift of Allah, cultural differences are embraced as a blessing, and different interpretations of faith are seen as a mercy, one that nourishes the *Ummah*'s vast identity and its constructive interface with society at large.[31]

Until 2012 the centre did not function as a space of worship and was open only to some members of the community involved in the activities of the Aga Khan agencies in Tajikistan. In 2012 the ICD began functioning as a community centre as well as a space of worship based on the Khoja *jamatkhana* system with all its activities synchronised in Tajik. From the local tradition, it includes performance *madô* or more correctly its standardised version, which means reciting devotional songs instead of singing them with musical instrument, and recitation of a strictly selected texts. *Jamatkhana* is now officially recognised as a space of worship in 'the Conscience and religious associations' law of Tajikistan.[32] Until very recent the ICD was the only functioning *jamatkhana* in the country approved by the Aga Khan. In 2018 the second *jamatkhana* was opened in the GBAO's capital city of Khorog, where similar activities take place as in the ICD.

In the eyes of the majority Sunni population of Dushanbe, the ICD is a mosque

28. This information is based on my interviews with some local elderly and religious leaders (*pīrs* and *khalīfas*) in Badakhshan (both Tajikistan and Afghanistan) in February 2011.
29. An old room believed to have served as a mosque during the occupation of Badakhshan is still intact in the village of Yamg next to the house of a regional judge (*qazī*) called Ghulāmnabī.
30. For more information about Ismaili Centres, including ICD see https://the.ismaili/microsite/homepage
31. An extract from the Aga Khan's speech at the inauguration ceremony of the Ismaili Centre in Dushanbe, 12, October 2009 at http://www.theismaili.org/cms/874/Speech-at-the-Opening-Ceremony-of-the-Ismaili-Centre-Dushanbe accessed 27.10.12.
32. See law of the Republic of Tajikistan on 'Conscience and religious associations' adopted on 26 June 2011. Article 10/8.

or as they informally call it 'the Pamiri mosque' (*Masjid-i Pāmirīhā*). At the start this popular definition somehow served to overshadow the past prejudices about the Muslim identity of the Pamiris. In the history of Dushanbe, Tajikistan and Central Asia the ICD is the first non-Sunni 'mosque' to emerge in the city's horizons with all its architectural and cultural differences. Originally the ICD was mainly focusing on socio-cultural events. The range of celebrations, accompanied by music and dance, vary from modern Ismaili (Imamate Day in June, the Aga Khan's birthday in December, the Day of Light - *Nūr* in May etc.) to more classic (e.g., Navrūz) holidays. In October 2011 for the first time, it hosted a civil society gathering addressed by then USA Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Since then, many government and non-governmental organisations conduct their seminars and workshops at the ICD.

The ITREB Tajikistan currently has four main offices in Khorog, Dushanbe, Khujand and Moscow. One of the essential tasks of the ITREB is to provide religious education for the adults and children based on centralized curriculums developed in London. Likewise, there are several other programmes and projects, which are locally managed by the ITREB. Preachers and teachers are mainly trained in the United Kingdom and North America in courses such as the Professional Teacher Educators Programme (PTEP), the International Waezeen (preachers) Training Programme (IWTP), the International Adult Education Programme (IAEP), the Secondary Teacher Education Programme (STEP) and numerous professional development programmes.[33] The ITREB, thus, is becoming an official and exclusive institution of religious education and management in Tajikistan and other Ismaili populated countries of the former Soviet Union by gradually replacing the traditional institute of *khalīfas*.

**Conclusion**

During the Soviet regime, the *Panjtanī* tradition, though strongly challenged by the state-imposed atheism, still managed to preserve its core elements (*Charāgh-Rawshan, madô, shada*, shrine visitation and veneration of saints), due to the changing nature of the Soviet policy towards religion. Disconnected from their direct source of spiritual guidance for almost a century, the local Ismailis had to develop their own mechanisms of religious organisation and education represented by the *khalīfas, madīha-khāns, mullās* and religious clans.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan became vulnerable to new globalizing forces of socio-economic, political and religious significances, which began addressing its immediate humanitarian needs, shortage of food, clothing and medicaments. The Aga Khan institutions were the first and the most active agencies, which came to the aid of the people of Tajikistan regardless of their religious and sectarian backgrounds. They also pursued religious objectives as far as the local Ismailis were concerned. The religious education agencies began to teach new approaches to the faith by aiming to reform the norms and forms of traditional beliefs and practices by bringing them closer to the Ismaili institutional standards and introducing new religious institutions and management system.

33. For the IIS educational programmes see https://iis.ac.uk/graduate-studies

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