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# Shi'a Ismaili tradition in Central Asia: Evolution, continuities and changes

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## RELIGION IN SOCIETY

**SHI‘A ISMAILI TRADITION  
IN CENTRAL ASIA:  
EVOLUTION, CONTINUITIES  
AND CHANGES**

Sarfarozi NIYOZOV

*Coordinator of Central Asian Studies  
of the Institute of Ismaili Studies  
(London, U.K.)***Introduction:  
The Challenge of Writing  
on the Central Asian Ismailis**

**W**riting an article about Central Asian Shi‘a Ismaili Muslims represents a very challenging task for several reasons: In geographical terms, Central Asia includes a very broad area and this makes the region wherein perhaps the majority of modern world’s Ismailis inhabit. The Central Asian Ismailis can be divided into three groups:

- Khurasani Ismailis, who inhabit Iran’s western-most province of Khurasan;
- Hazara Ismailis, who mainly live in the central part of Afghanistan (i.e. Kabul and the Kayan valley of Baghlan province);
- Badakhshan Ismailis, who originate from the mountainous valleys that stretch between northeast Afghanistan, northern areas of Pakistan, Badakhshan province of Tajikistan and Tashkurghan district of Xinjiang province of China.

In a broad historical and cultural sense, Central Asia has always exhibited intellectual dynamism and cultural pluralism. As a Silk Road crossroad, Central Asia has been a place where the major religions—Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity, Manichaeism, and Islam encountered each other, making Central Asia one of the most plural places of the medieval world. The Islamic spread in Central Asia since the 8th century CE resulted in internal Islamic diversity, reflected in the division of the Sunnis

and Shi‘as into their numerous subdivisions. In addition, some of the most powerful Muslim Sufi orders such as the Naqshbandiyya, Qadiriyya and Yasawiyya played a vital role in spreading Islam further east and north of Central Asia.<sup>1</sup> Among those Islamic forces that left their mark on history were the Ismaili Muslims who actively spread across Muslim land from the Fatimid Egypt in the west to the Pamir Mountains in the east and Multan in the south.<sup>2</sup> Ismaili history spans more than a millennium and is not only full of important and interesting epiphanies, but also mysteries and loopholes. While one could find more commonalities in the early period of the Central Asian Ismaili da‘wa, the subsequent political history of the region makes it difficult to portray Central Asian Ismailis as a homogenous whole. One, therefore, should not view the notion of Central Asian Ismailism as monolithic: while there are common principles that bring all Central Asian Ismailis together, and while there is a shared pool of cultural practices among them, these Ismailis also differ on many levels. One of the reasons is perhaps that the Central Asian Ismailis belong to specific ethnicities that are often defined in terms of geography, specific languages and particular nation-states. Neither should the term “Ismaili” be taken as the only term that used to signify the adherents of this school of Islam. Across history various names such as “shi‘a,” “shi‘at Ali,” “rafizi,” “batini,” “ta‘limi,” “ahli haqq,” “pairwoni rohi rost,” “panjtani,” “Aliparast” were used to refer to this community either from internal or external perspectives.

Due to the limited scope, this article will increasingly focus on the “Tajik” Ismailis. They belong to the larger Badakhshani Ismaili constituency and are simultaneously a vivid representation of the larger community’s common tenets and diversity.

## A Brief Historical Journey

Tajik Ismailis, divided along the Panj River and surrounding mountains, constitute one of the largest and historically oldest concentrations of Ismaili communities in the world. Their history may be divided into the following periods:

- Since the spread of Ismaili ideas in Central Asia (i.e. the 8th century CE until the late 19th century).
- From the late 19th century until the collapse of the Soviet Union.
- Post-Soviet period.

The spread of Ismailism in Transoxania (Ma wara an-nahr in Arabic) was related to the broader Shi‘a Ismaili da‘wa of that era. Central Asia was a hub of pro-Ali insurgences, one of which, led by Abu Muslim Khurasani, brought the fall of the Umayyads in 750 CE. After the Abbasid’s takeover and their subsequent repression of the Alids, the da‘wa was renewed in Central Asia, where several prominent hujjats and da‘is<sup>3</sup> disseminated the Ismaili interpretation of Islam. Several prominent among them were Abu Abdallah Al-Khadim, Hussain bin Ali al-Marvazi, Abu Ya‘qub Sijistani, and Muhammad bin Ahmad an-Nasafi (also known as al-Nakhshabi). Accumulatively, these da‘is managed to infuse the Ismaili vision into the Samanids’ court and even convert their Emir Nasr II bin Ahmad Samani (914-943 CE). Many great scholars of that time, such as the poet Rudaki<sup>4</sup> and vizier Bal‘ami who served in that court eventually converted to Ismailism. Moreover, Ismailism gave birth to some of the most famous thinkers of the

<sup>1</sup> See: A. Bennigsen, *Mystics and Commissars: Sufism in the Soviet Union*, C. Hurst & Company, London, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> See: F. Daftary, *Ismailis. Their History and Doctrine*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> The hujjat (da‘i) is a particular figure in the Ismaili hierarchy who serves at a given time as an evidence, or a proof, among mankind, of God’s will; it also means a rank following that of the Imam. Ismaili doctrines divided the inhabited earth into twelve regions; each region’s da‘wa hierarchy was headed by a hujjat (see: I. Poonawala, “Ismaili ta‘wil of the Qur’an,” in: *Approaches to the History of the Interpretations of the Qur’an*, ed. by A. Rippin, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988, p. 216).

<sup>4</sup> Rudaki (856-941) is considered the father of classical Persian-Tajik literature.

Muslim world, such as Abu Ali ibn Sina, Al-Biruni and Firdousi. These were either Ismailis<sup>5</sup> or closely affiliated with its spirit of faith, intellect, and justice.

Ghaznawid (962-1186 CE) and Seljuk (1034-1300 CE) rulers used ruthless political and military campaigns against the Ismailis across Central Asia to Sind in the name of a jihad against heresy. Persecuting every non-Sunni sect, Sultan Mahmud was granted legitimacy from Baghdad's Khalif al Qadir who encouraged him in the atrocities and "bestowed" upon him titles such as Nizam ud-din, Naser ul-Haq and so on. These terrible oppressions were taking place against Ismailis in the eastern part of the Muslim world in the name of God, religion and justice. A contemporary to Nizam ul-Mulk justified the brutality against those who thought differently during the NK's time as follows: "Killing them (i.e. the Batiniya and the heretics.—*S.N.*) is cleaner (i.e. a job that is purer.—*S.N.*) than the water of the rain and is an obligation of the sultans and kings, who must convict them and destroy them so as to clear the Earth from their dirt. No one should have friendship with them, talk to them, eat the meat they sell. It is more favourable to release the blood of a heretic than to kill seventy infidel citizens of Byzantium."<sup>6</sup>

This situation resulted in the migration of Ismaili adherents from the valleys and cities of Khurasan and Transoxania to the remote mountainous areas such as Mazanderan and Badakhshan. It is not accidental, therefore, that the great Ismaili thinker and missionary of Imam Al-Mustansir bi-Allah—Nasir Khusraw—took refuge in Badakhshan and spent the rest of his life here.<sup>7</sup> His success in spreading the Ismaili teaching was made possible because the local ruler of Badakhshan, Ali ibn Asad, was an early Ismaili convert. Another wave of Ismaili refugees to Badakhshan was possibly related to the fall of the Ismailis in Multan and later in Alamut. The story of the four legendary dervishes/missionaries—Shoh Khomush, Shoh Burhon, Shoh Malang and Shoh Koshon—to Badakhshan is often associated with this period.<sup>8</sup>

The development of the post-Mongol history of Central Asia coincides with the creation of ethno-religious states (e.g., Shi'ite Safawid in Iran, and Sunni Timurid and Shaibanid in Central Asia). Numerous assaults of Mongols and Turkic rulers in the name of Islam subjected those whose faith did not fit within the "canonical" interpretation of religion to barbaric genocides. The history of this brutality continued during the pre-modern times with the creation of Afghanistan, which together with Bokhara Emirate competed in enslaving and repressing the region's Ismailis. All this considerably reduced the Ismaili influence in Central Asia. Throughout the post-Mongol period and after, Ismailism survived largely due to the geographical remoteness and the institute of pirship whose structures, in the physical absence of the ever-present Imam due to adversities of time, resembled Sufi Tariqahs.

Toward the middle of the 19th century, the Great Game initiated by imperialist Great Britain and Russia fragmented the region further and turned it into zones of interest. Russo-British rivalry cut across people's religious and cultural connections. Consequently, the Ismailis were divided between Russia, Afghanistan, Britain, and China. Ever since, the Ismailis' destinies have been intimately linked to the political histories of the nation-states in the region. Gilgit and Chitral with their subregions, as segments of British colonies, ended up in India and later Pakistan. Afghan Badakhshan has undergone endless tumultuous experiences under the Afghan royal dynasties from Amir Abdurrahman Khan to Mohamed Dawud, followed by the Communist regime (1979-1992), and the subsequent wars between the Mujahideens and the Taliban (1992-2001). The Ismailis who lived on the Eastern Pamir Mountains (Sarikol) were incorporated into China. Together with the rest of the Chinese people, they have experienced Cultural Revolution, militant atheism and the relative cultural revival since the 1980s.

The course of the Russian Ismailis under Russian/Soviet rule is the focus of the following discussion. Their history is punctuated by a series of ups and downs, moments of relief followed by

<sup>5</sup> Abu Ali ibn Sina (980-1037) was born to Ismaili parents in Bukhara. For Firdousi's Ismaili affinity see his comedy on Sultan Mahmud the Ghaznawid.

<sup>6</sup> N. Arabzoda, *Nasir Khusraw. Study of Philosophical Theories*, Maorif, Dushanbe, 1994, p. 41 (in Tajik).

<sup>7</sup> See: A. Hunsberger, *Nasir Khusraw. The Ruby of Badakhshan. A Portrait of the Persian Poet, Traveler and Philosopher*, IB. Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> See: A. Boldyrev, *Istoriya Badakhshana*, Izdatel'stvo Leningradskogo Universtiteta, Leningrad, 1959.

traumatic social cataclysm. On the positive side, the Russians salvaged the Ismailis from the brutal repressions and conversions by their non-Ismaili neighbors. A.V. Postnikov referring to the earlier Russian sources on Badakhshani Ismailis brings an incident that vividly describes the continuity of sufferings of the local people, as a result of their neighbors' incursions, which were in turn caused by imperial forces dominating the region: "In 1889 the Afghans occupied the separated Shugnan and Rushan again, and their occupation was accompanied with brutality and atrocities unheard of in Central Asia's entire history. The population in the captured territories was slaughtered entirely, their villages burnt and their fields poisoned and so on. Running away from the Afghans, a part of the Shugnan population ran to lake Yashilkul, hoping to move either to Sarikol (in China.—S.N.) or to Russia. The Chinese forces in Kashgar led by Chen-Dzarina, worrying that the Afghans may, by hunting the Shugnanis, cross to China sent their force to Yashilkul to return the Shugnanis to Shugnan, which was already occupied by the Afghans. Moreover, their leader also informed the Afghans that the Shugnanis were being repatriated. The Afghans met the devastated Shugnanis and slaughtered all of them entirely."<sup>9</sup>

A similar experience of historical suffering, persecutions and perseverance resulting from a difference in identity is mentioned by a pioneer of Ismaili studies, Ivanow: "My learned friends in Europe plainly disbelieved me when I wrote about the community to them. It appeared to them quite unbelievable that the most brutal persecution, wholesale slaughter, age-long hostility and suppression were unable to annihilate the community which even at its highest formed but a small minority in the country. Only later on, however, when my contact with them grew more intimate, I was able to see the reasons for such surprising vitality. It was their quite extraordinary devotion and faithfulness to the tradition of their ancestors, the ungrudging patience with which they suffered all the calamities and misfortunes, cherishing no illusions whatsoever as to what they could expect in life and in the contact with their majority fellow countrymen. They with amazing care and devotion kept through ages burning that Light, mentioned in the Koran, which God always protects against all attempts of His enemies to extinguish it. I rare saw anything so extraordinary and impressive as this ancient tradition being devoutly preserved in the poor muddy huts of mountain hamlets or poor villages in the desert."<sup>10</sup>

The Russians, and thereafter the Soviets, considered Badakhshan (also known as Pamir) as an example of socialist revolution in Muslim East and invested heavily in its modernization. In the Soviet period (i.e., 1917-1991), the region was renamed the Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Province and incorporated into the Soviet Socialist Republic of Tajikistan. The Tajik Ismailis played a vital role in the creation and development of Tajik statehood.<sup>11</sup> The Soviets subsequently built modern schools, hospitals, cultural centers, powerhouses, roads, and airports in all major areas of the province. Free education was provided from kindergarten to doctoral studies. The literacy rate increased from less than 2% in 1913 to more than 99% in 1984. Badakhshan stood amongst the first in the whole of the Soviet Union in terms of the number of holders of higher education degrees. It produced a great number of highly educated professionals who made valuable contribution to Tajik society.<sup>12</sup> The improved health, education, social welfare and security resulted in rapid demographic change and greater mobility. Many Ismailis migrated to Tajikistan's lowlands and other parts of the Soviet Union.

On the other hand, Soviet times also witnessed periods of forced collectivization of agriculture, during which lands were nationalized and certain types of crop production (e.g., tobacco) were forced upon people. The forced migration of the mountainous Ismailis to the southern lowlands of Tajikistan with its radically different climatic conditions in the 1950s and 1960s resulted in the death of thousands. Under various pretexts, and through unfounded accusations such as bourgeois nationalists, of being "agents" of British imperialism, and disloyal, Stalinist purges eliminated a great number of Is-

<sup>9</sup> A.V. Postnikov, *Skhvatka na "Kryshe Mira"*, Pamiatniki istoricheskoi mysli series, Moscow, 2001, pp. 273-274.

<sup>10</sup> W. Ivanow, "My First Meeting with the Ismailis in Persia," in: *Shi'a Imami Ismailia*, s.a., pp. 3-4.

<sup>11</sup> See: R. Masov, *The History of National Catastrophe*, University of Minneapolis, Minneapolis, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> See: M. Nazarshoev & N. Nazarshoev, *Sokhtmoni madani dar Badakhsoni Soveti* (Cultural construction in Soviet Badakhshan), Maarif, Dushanbe, 1984 (in Tajik).

maili political, intellectual, and cultural elites. The influence of Soviet industrialization also remained minimal: apart from a few powerhouses and light-industry factories, no significant production sites were built. The people's basic necessities were provided from outside rather than produced locally. The local youth was encouraged to move to other parts of the Soviet Union to fill deficit workplaces in the labor market. A cultural revolution was carried out in the name of creating a "new Soviet human being," who was to be above religious, ethnic and cultural "prejudices." The underlying agenda was that eventually this "Soviet human being" should have not become much different from an enriched Russian modern citizen.<sup>13</sup> Although education was free and total, its quality and relevance to the community's development remained questionable.

The Soviet's harshest blows came upon people's faith. The Communists consistently regarded religion as myth, superstition and fanaticism. In 1936 the Tajik-Afghan border was sealed. This resulted in disconnecting the Ismailis of Tajikistan from their Afghan-side brothers and sisters. Their ties with their Imam (spiritual leader) became physically impossible, but never completely severed. Under the pressure of militant atheism, the local Pirs were either jailed or fled the country. Khalifas went underground. Performance of public rites and rituals were forbidden. During this period, the performance of the basic religious sunnats such as prayer, hajj, Idi Qurban, fasting, and of rituals such as janaza, khatna, nikah, chorghrawshan and madohoni (see further) became a highly risky endeavor.

This policy was relaxed during Khrushchev. When the Soviets realized the impossibility of eradicating religion, they changed their tactics rather than the overall repressive attitude: In order to keep religion under their control, the Soviets created official religious structures. Khalifas were appointed by the state, but still, the observance of religious practices remained a highly private and concealed domain of social life. Despite all this, people's religiosity increased. One of the great lessons of the Soviet experience is that one cannot eradicate people's existing beliefs by imposing on them a new theory that is perceived as superior and "science-based truth."<sup>14</sup> The last decades of Soviet experience revealed the failure of the communists' claims to provide justice, equity and prosperity for the majority. This period is marked by system's total crisis, reflected in its economic, educational and moral decline. As a result, Badakhshan, despite some important changes and development projects, remained the poorest region of Tajikistan in the Soviet Union.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, the Ismailis, excited by the promises of Perestroika and Glasnost, became involved in broader political, cultural, and religious movements. Their cooperation with the Democratic and Islamic forces of Tajikistan resulted in the loss of the latter forces in the political struggle for power. This led to tragic losses of human life and material resources. A considerable number of the Ismailis fell prey during the civil war. Both during the war and afterwards, many lowland Ismailis took refuge in Badakhshan and other parts of the former Soviet Union. From 1992-1993, Badakhshan was cut off from the rest of Tajikistan and the former U.S.S.R. and left to its own devices. It is at this time that many people immersed in reflection over the recent and remote past, recovering their roots and history of sufferings. How is it that such a highly educated community ended up so poor? How is it that such an educated community fell prey to populist slogans that drew the community into the flames of devastating civil war? What is going to happen to us now? Are we returning to the old animosities? How to build new relations with the others in Tajikistan and Russia? How are we going to feed the population that has rapidly increased in Soviet times and inflated by the arrival of the displaced people?—these were some of the major questions people began to ask.

The post-Soviet era has also become a period of great news and mass exhilaration for events such as the arrival of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), the establishment of the connection with the Imam and the global Ismaili community. Since 1993, the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) has provided basic

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<sup>13</sup> N. Belkanov, "Russian Education for Non-Russian Peoples. A Sample of Colonial Policy?" *Russian Education and Society*, Vol. 39, No. 9, 1997, p. 29.

<sup>14</sup> S. Niyozov, *Understanding Teaching in Post-Soviet, Rural and Mountainous Tajikistan: Case Studies of Teachers' Life and Work*, Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, Toronto, 2001, p. 96.

food and clothing that saved the population of the Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Province from a humanitarian disaster.<sup>15</sup> Since then, it has been the major supporter of the local Government in creating grassroots involvement and technical support in all post-Soviet reforms, including privatizing the land, providing technical agricultural assistance, improving health, enhancing communications, hydropower generation and supporting the development of small businesses and industries. AKF's support has been crucial for the education system's survival through the years of independence. Since 1997, AKF has been involved in assisting the provincial Department of Education to enhance and upgrade teachers' knowledge and skills, strengthen education managers, increase the involvement of parents and community in education, establish an education revolving fund, and reconstruct the Institute for the Improvement of Teacher Qualifications in Khorog. AKF has annually been offering scholarships to a number of students from Khorog State University, to pursue Bachelors' degrees in Moscow and Bishkek. Together with the Aga Khan University (AKU), the AKF has been involved in the training MBAP education personnel through the visiting teachers, management, and Master's degree courses at the Institute for Educational Development of the Aga Khan University (IED/AKU). Aga Khan Education services opened the first private school in MBAP in 1999. In response to requests from a number of Tajik intellectuals, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture has established a humanities project in Central Asia. Its approach rests on consolidating the achievements of the three civilizations that have met in Central Asia—Islam, Soviet Socialism and Western democracy—to fill the vacuum created by the departure of the Communist ideology. Since 1996, the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) initiated a major educational project in Tajikistan, which aims at the balanced development of citizens through the teaching of ethics and knowledge. The program utilizes the existing educational facilities and teachers in implementing its program. The curriculum package includes textbooks, activity books, and guides for teachers and parents. The IIS has also provided scholarships to prepare the foundational skills of a great number of Central Asian students in Humanities and Islamic studies. The students can then receive graduate degrees in various western universities. In 2001 the University of Central Asia, the first of its kind to study the realities of mountain people, was established in several of Central Asian capitals with Khorog being the site of the largest center.

Apart from these, the two visits of His Highness the Aga Khan to Tajikistan in 1995 and 1998 were moving experiences for the people of the region. For the first time in centuries, the Ismailis of Badakhshan met with their Imam of the Time. These visits took on an even greater significance because of their timing<sup>16</sup>: The historic visits coincided with the spiritual expectations of the devastated population of Badakhshan, recovering as it was from the recent bloodshed and human and material losses. The present author in his study of teachers' lives and work in Tajikistan's Badakhshan quotes one of the participants of his study in this regard as follows: "Some people thought we would all die soon or become slaves to others as a result of our defeat in the civil war. With the arrival of the Imom we all felt that, though we are a small and very poor people, we have got a strong protector and guide. From 1993 to 1997 there was no major problem with basic foods. The Aga Khan Foundation also provided us with clothes, shoes and some textbooks. For us, as teachers, some of the most touching words were Hozir Imom's<sup>17</sup> appeal for education when he said that teaching is the noblest profession. He asked us to carry on our work and to seek knowledge..."<sup>18</sup>

During both his visits, His Highness the Aga Khan stressed the importance of peaceful coexistence, education and ethics. In short, the spiritual, emotional, financial, educational and material pres-

<sup>15</sup> It is hard to imagine what could have happened to the MBAP, and even Tajikistan, if there were no external assistance. Since 1993, in MBAP only, several international organizations, such as AKDN, the U.N. World Food Program, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Red Cross, Red Crescent, and Save the Children, have been fighting against poverty and health epidemics.

<sup>16</sup> For more on the visits of the Aga Khan to Tajikistan see a special issue of *Ismaili*, London, 1995.

<sup>17</sup> Hozir Imom, also Hazir Imam (i.e., ever-present Imam) is an Ismaili theosophical concept, which refers to the eternal nature of the concept of Imam as a guide of Muslims since the death of Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>18</sup> S. Niyozov, op. cit., pp. 138-139.

ence of the AKDN has helped the Pamiris to rejoin postwar Tajikistan as a revitalized and confident community.

Amongst many other changes, these visits substantially raised self-confidence of the population, sparked hope within many people, and contributed to the peace process. This considerably enhanced the relations between the Ismailis and their non-Ismaili neighbors in both Tajik and Afghan Badakhshans. Khan captures this improvement through the voice of one of his participants: "Fortunately, in Badakhshan we do not face enmity and religious persecution from others as much as Ismailis in other regions. People of one village may be Ismailis and others Sunnis but they live together peacefully. Let me tell you an incident. At the time of Hazir Imam's *dîdâr* in 1998 in Ishkashim, the Sunnis worked as much as the Ismailis. They carried stones on their skirts to build the stage. And on the day of *dîdâr*, not only the Ismailis but also Sunnis were walking together along with their children at three o'clock in the morning and sitting together under the scorching sun."<sup>19</sup>

While the above was an Ismaili participant's voice, Niyozov indicates this positive development was genuine. He does so through a non-Ismaili's reaction to the way the Aga Khan Foundation's relief program has contributed to the mutual acceptance and coexistence. This voice is vital, particularly in the post-Soviet period, wherein old enmities are being instigated by certain forces pursuing their own political agendas: "The mullahs in our district were totally mystified to see trucks with goods coming and coming endlessly ... bringing the basic necessities right from America and Canada on a free basis. This changed their attitude toward the Ismailis. They stopped considering them as kafirs. They stopped telling us not to marry women from Rushan and Shugnan. They accepted the Aga Khan as a truly caring and blessed Muslim person."<sup>20</sup>

Currently, about 200,000 Tajik Ismailis live in the Badakhshan province, while a similar number of Ismailis lives in the rest of Tajikistan. There are also a considerable number of Ismailis who have migrated to Kyrgyzstan (Osh and Bishkek), Kazakhstan (Almaty) and Russia (Moscow, St. Petersburg, Saratov and other cities).

## Some of the Distinct Features of the Ismaili Community in Badakhshan of Central Asia

The Badakhshani Ismailis consider themselves as historically grounded part of the Muslim Ummah, and their claims are authenticated not simply by their adherence to common Islamic principles, but also by the guidance of their Imam, and by the legacy of their Da'i Nasir Khusraw and his disciples in the history. Regardless of being minorities in their native countries, the Ismailis have been able to build friendly relations with the majority of the non-Ismaili Muslims of Central Asia.

At the same time, the Central Asian Ismailis represent significant majorities in their particular geographic areas. Local governments represented by themselves, as well as the basic legal tenets of their respective states provide them with an opportunity to preserve their distinct identities. Secondly, the Central Asian Ismailis, as is the case with the broader Nasir Khusraw tradition, largely inhabit isolated mountainous terrains, which provide enormous challenges to their development and communication with the rest of the world. Thirdly, the tradition disseminated by the great thinker and scholar Nasir Khusraw historically favored and cherished knowledge, intellect and education. It draws on synthesizing Islamic revelation with neo-Platonic system of thought,<sup>21</sup> and the centrality of intellectual tradition in the Fatimid pe-

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<sup>19</sup> M. Khan, *Ismaili Traditions in Nasir Khusraw Context: A Study of the Ismaili Practices in Afghan Badakhshan*, An Internal Report available at the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, U.K., s.a., p. 105.

<sup>20</sup> S. Niyozov, *op. cit.*, p. 345.

<sup>21</sup> See: A. Hunsberger, *op. cit.*; I. Poonawala, *op. cit.*, pp. 199-222.



riod.<sup>22</sup> Education and intellectual development are seen as powerful forces that could enable the community to successfully face and reshape commercialization, consumerism, individualism, competition and other realities of free market and neoliberalism in post-Soviet Tajikistan and to ensure that the intellectual and ethical aspects remain central to community's existence.

Fourth, Tajik Ismailis as one of the oldest Ismaili communities have creatively incorporated some of the famous pre-Islamic Mithraist, Zoroastrian and other rites. These traditions have become Ismaili in content to the degree that many scholars claim that these rituals have always been Islamic.<sup>23</sup> One of these traditions is charoghrawshan (tsirow-pithid in Shugnani<sup>24</sup>). Tsirow-pithid begins with the gathering in the deceased's house on the third day after the death, which is accompanied by the singing of Madohs (devotional poetry from classical poets such as Rumi, Hafiz, Nasir Khusraw, Attar, Sanoi, etc.). Close to the ceremony's end, a candle, created from the fat and wool of a freshly-slaughtered sheep, is lit, accompanied by the continuous recitation of special prayers. It is believed that the soul of the deceased will thus be purified by the recitation of the special prayers, light, and devotional poetry, and leave the house and find rest in eternity.

Another factor is the peculiar structure of the Pamiri house (cheed, chod in local languages). Some students of history believe that the five pillars of the house that used to hold the names of the Mithraist and Zoroastrian angels were renamed after the members of Ahl al-Bait: the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, his cousin and son-in-law, the Imam Ali, and their children Hasan and Hussein. The Ismailis of Badakhshan also celebrate Nawruz as a broad cultural celebration marked throughout Tajikistan. Since 1995, i.e. after His Highness' historic visit to Badakhshan, the local Ismailis started to celebrate Rooze Noor (the Day of Light) on the 25th of May. This day is a celebration where religious and cultural aspects are brought together. Lastly, the Tajik Ismailis have also incorporated a number of Sufi traditions such as paying tributes to the shrines and ostons (mazars), which have served them to maintain their identity and connection with God throughout Soviet antireligious campaigns.

## *E p i l o g u e*

Rapid changes triggered by the sudden collapse of the U.S.S.R., civil war, emerging capitalist and market relations have caught by surprise all the Soviet people including the Tajik and other Badakhshan Ismaili communities. Apart from the positive aspects mentioned above, forces of change also brought some important challenges such as to contend with poverty, unemployment, warlord culture, drugs, and migration. The values of neoliberalism and free market economy (such as individualist freedom, competition, consumerism, and commercialization of existing values and goods) have made it more difficult for minority and marginalized communities living in already unfavorable geographic and economic conditions. In spite of these problems, nevertheless, with love for, faith in, and support from their Imam, the cooperation between his Network and the local Governments, and the assistance of the other international agencies across the globe, the Badakhshani Ismailis believe they will continue to make a positive contribution to the development of their societies and find their place within the Muslim and global community in general. It will be possible because of the living intellectual tradition, their history of contribution, their values of tolerance and engagement and their abilities to work hard and to endure hardships.

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<sup>22</sup> See: H. Halm, *The Fatimids and their Traditions of Learning*, I.B. Tauris in association with the IIS, London, 1993.

<sup>23</sup> See: N. Hunzai, *Chiraghi Rawshan, Khonai Hikmat*, Karachi, 1993, p. 11.

<sup>24</sup> Shugnani is a major ethnic language in Badakhshan.