

Minstrel Poetry from the Pamir Mountains

A Study on the Songs and Poems of the Ismailis of Tajik Badakhshan

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1. Auflage 2004. Buch. 788 S. Hardcover
ISBN 978 3 89500 339 4
Format (B x L): 17 x 24 cm
Gewicht: 1448 g

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Preface

Ever since I spent an academic year in 1988–1989 in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, I have wished to see the country of Badakhshan, stimulated by the enthusiasm of my friend and roommate Nigina Dushanbiyeva, who like many other Badakhshanîs studied in Dushanbe. Unfortunately, she could not take me to her homeland, since Badakhshan was a prohibited area for foreigners as a result of the Soviet struggle in neighbouring Afghanistan. A few years later, in 1992, I eventually succeeded in visiting Badakhshan for the first time, as a member of the team of Coen van Hall, filmmaker and Jan van Belle, musicologist. The original goal of this journey was to make a film on Badakhshan and its people and to make recordings of the local music. I accompanied Jan and Coen as a translator of Tajik Persian, hoping to initiate a study of Shughnî, the main Pamir language spoken in the area of Badakhshan. During the journey, it appeared that the music served for a great part as accompaniment for poetry in Tajik or in one of the Pamir languages. The great amount of interesting material that simply fell into my lap enabled me to start a research project on the sung poetry of the Ismâ'îlîs of Badakhshan. A second journey, this time with Jan van Belle alone, was made in 1993, in order to do additional research and to make new recordings. The material collected during these two journeys consists of more than forty hours on DAT-tape, providing a rich source for the study of a still existing Iranian minstrel tradition amongst the Ismâ'îlîs of Tajik Badakhshan.

Without the help of a great many people and friends, not only in Badakhshan, but also in Dushanbe, Osh (Kirgizia) and Moscow the fieldwork resulting in this study could not have been done. Gurminj Zawqibekov, Mawluda Inoyatova with her team from Tajikfilm and Tatiana Didenko are amongst those who supported us, besides many

other persons. As for Badakhshan, I would like to thank in the first place the madâhxâns and the musicians for their willingness to perform poetry and music for us. We have fond remembrances of the warm hospitality of the musicians and their families, not to mention all the other persons from various villages and towns, who provided us with food and a place to sleep, and guidance on our further track.

In Xorugh, our basis in Badakhshan, we received much support from the Mastonshoev and Karamshoev families. I am particularly obliged to our guide, Ulfatsho Mastonshoev, who established the actual contacts with the musicians and with many other persons, whose acquaintance we highly value.

Furthermore, I want to express my admiration for the truck-drivers who brought us from Osh to Xorugh and back again, and for our drivers in Badakhshan, Sultonshayx and Alek, who delivered us safely from many difficult roads.

During our journeys in Badakhshan, we had many fruitful discussions with numerous people, amongst which I particularly enjoyed the discussions in Shivoz with Warqa Oxoniyozov and his family, and in Ishkoshim with Dilorô Bodurxonova and her family.

With Dr. Dodixudo Karamshoev and Dr. Nisor Shakarmadov from the Institute of Pamirology I have kept up a correspondence since 1993, which enabled me to find an answer on a number of remaining questions.

Parwona Jamshed, Nozigul Zamonova, Zulayxo Adjieva and Ulfatsho Mastonshoev were the main persons who helped me with learning Shughnî as well as with the transcription of a number of recordings.

In Leiden I was kindly supported by the members of the debating societies Golius and Het Kleine Gedicht. In particular I would like to express my gratitude to J.T.P. de Bruijn, professor emeritus of Iranian Studies at the University of Leiden, who has been my teacher and supervisor for many years.

Françoise Berserik, who made the map with great meticulousness, brought me into contact with Gillian Riley from London. She revised the English in an enthusiastic manner, providing me with many useful suggestions.

I am greatly indebted to my parents for their permanent support. My father, Peter van den Berg, showed a vivid interest in my work

from the beginning onwards and commented carefully on all my drafts, while my mother, Marry van den Berg, tirelessly looked after my little daughter Marthe.

My husband Jaap Blansjaar took care of the final layout of this work, generously assisted by Christoph and Nina Noordzij.

In the course of years, many friendly Tajiks have contributed to make me feel comfortable during my stays in their home-country, which has become very dear to me. I have lost contact with many of them now and it has been painful to watch from afar the sufferings of so many Tajiks in the civil war of the 1990s. Now that the war has ended, I sincerely hope that peace and tranquillity may dwell again in this beautiful country.

This work was originally written as a doctoral thesis at the University of Leiden between 1992-1997. Some years have passed since, and in the meantime the study of the music and poetry of the Ismailis of Badakhshan has been continued. Jan van Belle has gone back to Badakhshan in 1998, 2001 and 2003 to make new recordings, which form the basis for ongoing research in this field. The Institute of Ismaili Studies in London is currently supporting a project entitled “Living Traditions of Ismaili Communities: The Case of Tajik Badakhshan”, in which the music and the sung poetry of the Badakhshani Ismailis will be further explored in a broader context. Being part of a living tradition, the music and the sung poetry of Badakhshan are far from static; however, the material collected by Jan van Belle in 1998 and 2001 confirms that the corpus of poetry treated in the present study can still be seen as representative for the poetical tradition of Badakhshan.