Minstrel Poetry from the Pamir Mountains

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

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Introduction

The present study is an exploration of the sung poetry of Tajik Badakhshan, also known as the Autonomous Region of Gorno-Badakhshan or simply Pâmîr (The Pamirs), a sparsely populated area in the south-east of the Central Asian republic of Tajikistan.

A number of regions within Tajik Badakhshan were visited in 1992 and 1993 in order to record music and poetry. These regions are Shughnon, Rushon including the Bartang valley up to the village of Roshorw, and Waxon. In this study, the name Badakhshan is used to denote in particular the regions mentioned above, although in fact Badakhshan proper stretches beyond these three regions and also beyond the boundaries of present day Tajikistan.

In 1895 the area named Badakhshan was divided by British-Russian colonial policies. The river Panj, the ancient Oxus, which runs through Badakhshan, became the frontier between British and Russian spheres of influence. The northeastern part fell to the emirate of Bukhara, in the Russian (czarist) sphere of influence, while the other part came under British influence in the Afghan kingdom. After the Russian Revolution of 1917 the frontier became tightly locked and virtually impassable until the early nineties.

Badakhshan is situated in the high mountains of the Pamirs and only small parts of the land are inhabited. The majority of the people of Badakhshan live in the river valleys of the great rivers rising in the Pamirs, such as the Panj, the Ghund, the Shohdara and the Bartang. The isolated mountain villages are cut off during the harsh winters.

According to local estimates, Badakhshan has 200,000–300,000 inhabitants. Since the Badakhshanîs have always been counted as Tajiks in official assessments, it is difficult to give a precise estimation of the number of Badakhshanîs. Besides, many Badakh-

shanîs reside in other parts of Tajikistan and in different C.I.S. states.

The population of Badakhshan is divided into several linguistic groups. The main spoken languages are the Shughnî-Rûshânî group and Waxî, both belonging to the Eastern Iranian group of Pamir languages. The Shughnî-Rûshânî group consists of a number of closely related languages or dialects – in fact each village of Shughnon and Rushon has its linguistic particularities. Usually however the following subdivisions of the Shughnî-Rûshânî group are given: Shughnî; Rûshânî; Bartangî; Oroshorî (Roshorwî) and Sariqulî, which is spoken only in Xinjiang. Waxî, spoken in Waxon, east of Ishkoshim, differs greatly from the Shughnî-Rûshânî group. In the last available census, dating from the early eighties, Waxî had about 15,000–20,000 speakers, and Shughnî-Rûshânî about 30,000–40,000 speakers.[1] Other Pamir languages with no more than a few thousand speakers are Yazgulâmî, spoken in the north along the valley of the Yazgulom-river and Ishkâshimî or Rynî, referring to the village of Ryn, the only village in Tajik Badakhshan where this language is spoken.

The official language in Tajikistan and consequently in Badakhshan is Tajik Persian (Tâjîkî), dialects of which are spoken as the main language in Ghoron, a district south of Xorugh, in the town of Ishkoshim and in the village of Yamg, as well as in the northern parts of Badakhshan (Qarategin and Wanj). Moreover, Tajik Persian serves as a *lingua franca* all over the area. Since the Pamir languages do not have a developed written tradition, Tajik is indispensable as a written language. Shughnî forms a second, informal *lingua franca*, which is understood by most of the inhabitants of Badakhshan, even by the Kirghiz people who live in the eastern upland plains of Badakhshan in Alichur and Murghob.

Russian, the major *lingua franca* in the former Soviet Union, holds today an uncertain position, but its influence is visible in numerous loan-words which have crept into the indigenous languages. The number of Russians in the area is restricted to members of the military forces and their families, who live in the main border towns of Badakhshan – Ishkoshim, Rushon and Xorugh, the capital of the Autonomous Region of Gorno-Badakhshan.

Xorugh[2] (Xaragh in local speech and Xorog in Russian), occupies a key position, situated near the Afghan border at the crossroads of

the narrow Shohdara-valley, the Ghund-valley, with the main road to the eastern plains and Kirgizia, and the Panj-valley, leading north to Rushon and south to Ghoron and Waxon. The town was developed in Soviet times with a population of approximately 20,000 in the summer of 1992; this number was increased hugely in the following winter, by waves of refugees from Dushanbe and Xatlon. These refugees were originally Badakhshanîs, who had found a living in other areas of Tajikistan, but were forced to return to their homeland because of the atrocities of the civil war of 1992. In the recent political turmoil in Tajikistan, the position of the Badakhshanîs is complicated, partly on account of their Shî'î-Ismâ'îlî faith, separating them from the Sunnî Tajiks and other Central Asian people.

The people of Shughnon, Rushon and Waxon are mainly Shî'ites, adherents of the Nizârî Ismâ'îliyya. The Ismâ'îliyya came into existence in the latter half of the 2nd/8th century with the untimely death of the seventh Imâm of the Shî'a, Ismâ'îl; the religion acquired political power during the rise of the Fatimid dynasty in Egypt, who held the Ismâ'îlî imamate, in the 10th century. A schism in the Ismâ'îliyya was caused by the deposition of the prince Nizâr in favour of prince Musta'lî after the death of al-Mustansir bi'llâh (487/1094). The adherents of Nizâr became famous in medieval Europe as the Assassins, who ruled from the fortress of Alamût in Iran until the Mongols destroyed them in 654/1256. Afterwards the Nizârî Ismâ'îlîs survived in small pockets; many took refuge to India, where they are known as Khojas. An Ismâ'îlî state had been created in Sind by the Ismâ'îlî missionaries even before the Fatimids came to power. It seems that the Ismâ'îlîs of Badakhshan accepted the Nizârî imamate before the fall of Alamût: the Imâm had sent two missionaries, Sayyid Shâh Mâlang and Shâh Xâmûsh, to Shughnon where they became the ancestors of dynasties of pîrs and mîrs, who have ruled this area for centuries.[3]

The Nizârî Ismâ'îlîs of Badakhshan believe in the rule of an unbroken line of divinely inspired Imâms from 'Alî (murdered 661), cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, to Shâh Karîm al-Husaynî (b. 1936), the 49th Imâm and the fourth Agha Khan. In Badakhshan he is thought of as the *xudâ-yi zinda*, the living God on earth; he is referred to as the Imâm (Sh. Imüm), the *Imâm-i zamân* or *Imâm-i hâziru'l-waqt*, the Imâm of the era.

The adherents of the Ismâʿîlî Shîʿa have always been subject to persecution by zealous Sunnîs and by Twelver-Shîʿîs, the major branch of the Shîʿa. The Ismâʿîlî population of Badakhshan could well have its origin in small Ismâʿîlî communities who took refuge in the mountainous country in order to survive.[4] The relative isolation of the area ensured not only their survival, but also that of a number of treatises connected to Ismâʿîlism, such as two works by Nâsir-i Xusraw, the *Wajh-i dîn* and the *Shish fasl* or *Rawshanâ'înâma* in prose. The Ismâʿîlî Badakhshanîs also preserved the enigmatic *Umm al-Kitâb* (*Mother of the Book*), which is venerated in Badakhshan as an Ismâʿîlî treatise, but appears to belong to the tradition of *ghulûw* or Shîʿite extremism.[5]

The eleventh century poet-philosopher and Ismâʿîlî missionary (*dâʿî*) Nâsir-i Xusraw (b. 394/1003–4) is highly revered by the Ismâʿîlîs of Badakhshan as the *pîr* (spiritual guide) who brought them the Ismâʿîlî faith.[6] Local tradition has many legends concerning this holy man. The places he is said to have visited have become places of worship; in the village of Porshnev, a few kilometres to the north of Xorugh, one can find the famous spring of Nâsir-i Xusraw. The Ismâʿîlîs of Badakhshan claim to have been fire-worshippers until Nâsir-i Xusraw came on *daʿwa* (mission) to the eastern part of the Islamic world around 1050 on behalf of the Fatimid caliph al-Mustansir bi'llâh. Nâsir-i Xusraw himself came originally from Central Asia: he was probably born in Qubodiyon, in Xatlon, adjacent to Badakhshan. Nâsir-i Xusraw died between 465–470 A.H./1072–1077 A.D. in Yumgân, situated nowadays in the Afghan part of Badakhshan. This town is a place of pilgrimage for the Ismâʿîlis of Badakhshan, although nowadays there are few opportunities to go there.

Other places of worship are the graves of local saints, called *mazâr* or *âstân* (Sh. *ostün*). A mazâr is usually surrounded by a walled courtyard and decorated with ibex horns. Mazârs are often situated just outside a village and are carefully maintained by the village people. Every mazâr has its *ayyâm* (Sh. *ayyüm*) or yearly festival. On that day people gather around the mazâr for a performance of religious poetry (*madâh*).

The religion of the Ismâʿîlî community of Badakhshan has developed in isolation, far away from Ismâʿîlî centres of authority. When the area became a part of the Soviet Union, the Ismâʿîlîs of

Badakhshan were completely isolated from their fellow-believers. The Central Asian borders were closed and the practise of a religion was hampered. For urban people in particular and to a lesser extent for those who led a tranquil life in the rural areas, religion faded into the background. Interest in the Ismâʿîlî religion increased during the religious revival of the latter years of the former Soviet Union. Contact with other Ismailis and with the Agha Khan was restored, which resulted in his visit to the area in 1995.

The prolonged isolation of the Ismâʿîlî community of Badakhshan seems to have influenced their faith: several aspects of the Ismâʿîlism of the people of Badakhshan, which appear for instance in the sung religious poetry, are difficult to reconcile with the official Ismâʿîlî doctrine.[7]

The Ismâʿîlis of Badakhshan refer to themselves as *panjtanî*, followers of the five bodies or *panj tan*, – Muhammad, ʿAlî, Fâtima, Hasan and Husayn, that is the Prophet, his son-in-law and cousin ʿAlî, his daughter and his grandsons. In contrast, they call their Sunnî neighbours *choryorî*, 'followers of the four', meaning the four caliphs (Abû Bakr, ʿUthmân, ʿUmar and ʿAlî) of Sunnî Islam. The panj tan are of great importance in every day life. The five basical pillars, the *panj sitan*, in the central room of every traditional house in Badakhshan are named after the panj tan. The central room is divided by these five pillars into smaller parts and each part has a particular function in the celebration of religious feasts.

When the Ismâʿîlîs of Badakhshan describe their faith, certain points keep recurring, which seem to characterize the faith of the common believer. The most important point is the opposition between the exterior appearance (*zâhir*) and the interior meaning of life and in particular of religion (*bâtin*). The inward meaning behind everything should be observed above all – to pay attention to outward appearance only is condemned. One should strive for pure sincerity, and reject what is done solely for outward appearance. Thus the long fast during the month of Ramazân is not essential to the Ismâʿîlîs of Badakhshan. They regard fasting as an untrue and unhelpful way of purifying oneself, done to show off piety to other people rather than to God. The Ismâʿîlîs may fast for a couple of days, but a month is considered an exaggeration. The true faithful should try to lead their whole life as a metaphorical fast.

Accordingly, performing the *salât* (prayers) five times a day is not held in esteem. People who pray are mostly over forty, because they are believed to have attained a certain degree of self-knowledge. They pray in solitude: we did not come across a *jamâ'atxâna* (the Ismâ'îlî communal house of prayer) in Badakhshan, and the people say that a man's house is his mosque. Prayers are performed twice a day, in the morning and in the evening. Young people seldom pray, since it is generally thought that their minds are still too much occupied by worldly matters.

Often the Ismâ'îlîs of Badakhshan point out that they are *mu'min*, true believers. They have been called *kâfirs* (heretics) by the Sunnites of the other parts of Central Asia for a long time. They defend themselves by saying they are *mu'min,* while the Sunnis are *musulmân*, muslim in the literal sense of the word – who only subjugate themselves to the outward form of Islam without thinking of any inner meaning.

Furthermore, the mu'min strives to attain perfection whatever his task in life may be, since that is the way by which God can be reached and be known. In general, to gather knowledge is considered important, therefore education is highly appreciated, and the performance of religious poetry is considered to be an educational activity. A *xalîfa*[8] (religious guide) explained that every being is on the way to his real origin, God. The human state is potentially a stage nearer to this origin, because men, in contrast with animals, possess reason *('aql)* as well as the lower soul *(nafs).* However when a human being leads his life in a wrong way, he regresses again to a lower state.

The Ismâ'îlîs of Badakhshan believe that Ismâ'îlism is one of the most progressive and tolerant religions in the world, because it is constantly adapting itself to the needs of the time, through the mediation of the Imâm-i hâziru'l-waqt, the Agha Khan, who is alive and who is able to give suitable guidelines to his followers.

The description of the common faith given above resembles in many ways the Sufi approach to religion:

> *Most Sufis considered dogmatic, ritual and legal differences, and occasionally even differences between different religions, as secondary or even completely meaningless.*[9]

Sufism or Islamic mysticism became increasingly important from the third/ninth century onwards and affected both the Shî'a and the Sunna in the course of its development.

Although the Badakhshanî Ismâ'îlîs strongly deny any connection with Sufism, many notions of Ismâ'îlism occur as well in Sufi thought. Both the Ismâ'îlî religion and the Sufi movement focus on gnostical elements within Islam, to which purpose they make use of elements of antique philosophy.[10] References to the *bâtin* and to cosmology, as well as the propagation of acquiring knowledge (*ma'rifat*) prevail both in Sufi and in Ismâ'îlî thought. After the fall of the Ismâ'îlî strongholds in Iran in the early 13th century A.D., the Ismâ'îlîs were for a long time victims of persecution, which resulted in an apparent approachment of the Ismâ'îlîs and the Sufi movement.[11] However, much remains unclear about the relationship between Sufis and Ismâ'îlîs, since the constant persecution of the Ismâ'îlîs, in particular in the centuries after the Mongol invasion, probably prevented the Ismâ'îlîs from continuing an extensive tradition of theology, while early sources have been destroyed on a large scale. This tremendous loss, and the lack of sources makes it impossible to acquire a detailed picture of the history and the doctrines of the Ismâ'îliyya through the centuries.

The current dislike of the term Sufism in Badakhshan is probably related to the practical experience the Ismâ'îlîs have of Sufism in Central Asia. Sufi orders in Central Asia have been mostly Sunnite: before the Soviet Union came into existence they were important and powerful, and probably hostile towards the Ismâ'îlî minority in Badakhshan. Besides, the high position of the Sufi shaykh or pîr, who is of great importance in many Sufi orders, is in sharp conflict with the sovereignty of the Imâm in the Ismâ'îliyya as well as in Twelver Shî'ism.

In daily life, *xalîfa*s guide the Ismâ'îlîs of Badakhshan in matters of religion, together with *mullâ*s and the *madâhxân*s (performers of religious poetry). The xalîfas act as the deputies of the Imâm: they explain to the believers how they should live and they accompany the people in the events of life; they confirm the marriage (*nikâh*), they bless the birth of children (*mubârakbâd*) and they are present at the mourning rituals.[12] They also give general counsel and are sometimes believed to have some ability to heal people, alongside the *tabîb*, the

traditional healer. In their function, xalîfas make use of the Qur'ân and the *Wajh-i dîn* by Nâsir-i Xusraw[13], which is believed to complement the Qur'ân. It is referred to as the *maghz-i qur'ân* (the kernel of the Qur'ân), in which the interior aspects of the Qur'ân are explained.

Xalîfas are chosen by the people of an appointed area, mostly one big village or a couple of smaller villages or the quarter of a town, as in the capital Xorugh. A xalîfa often works together with a mullâ, who is also expected to know the Qur'ân, but who has not been chosen by the community, for which reason he is deemed less important. A xalîfa is often a former mullâ; sometimes he is a madâhxân and a tabîb as well. Unless prevented by old age, these offices are usually performed in combination with other employments, such as farming.

The main occupation in the villages, where most of the recordings took place, is small-scale farming in former sowchozes. The fertile strips of land bordering the rivers are used to grow small amounts of wheat and other crops. Walnuts, mulberries, apricots and calendula are grown succesfully. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the sowchozes function as communal farming-grounds. The crops are consumed by the people of the neighbouring villages.

Since the Tajik civil war of 1992, the people of Badakhshan have suffered increasing poverty: the local crops cannot feed all the indigenous people, let alone the refugees who came in great numbers in 1992 and 1993. The help of development-organizations, in particular the Agha Khan Foundation, has protected the Badakhshanîs from greater catastrophes.

THE POSITION OF POETRY IN BADAKHSHAN

The poetical tradition as it exists in Badakhshan forms part of the Iranian minstrel tradition, which has been described in the famous article *The Parthian gôsân and Iranian Minstrel Tradition* by Mary Boyce.[14] This article focuses on the glorious traditions of the past, mainly on the pre-islamic Iranian minstrel tradition, but it also presents an overview of the continuation of the minstrel tradition of the past up to the fifties, when her article was written. Boyce makes a distinction between the professional and the non-professional minstrel: the former per-

formed at court and was supported by a maecenas. The fame of a minstrel like the Sasanian court minstrel Bârbad has lived on for centuries: his name is still known through his immortalization by later poets. He earned his fame as the companion of the king, to whom he gave counsel and entertainment when necessary, besides bestowing eternal fame through his famous songs and music. The products of his creativity have been long since lost, because in pre-islamic Iran poetry was not written down, but orally transmitted and so was lost irretrievably as soon as circumstances changed. In the course of time, political changes caused by the coming of Islam brought new courts, with new poetry in a new Persian language and a new taste, and except for the names of the most famous minstrels, the old court poetry was forgotten.

The profession of the court minstrel had undergone a major change during the first centuries of Islam. While the pre-islamic minstrel was both creator and performer, his Islamic counterpart acted mainly as a performer of the poetry of court poets, who took over the role of the pre-islamic minstrels. The heyday of court minstrelsy and court poetry is long since past; non-professional minstrelsy however has remained in existence until the present day, being less dependent on the vicissitudes of time. Apparently, non-professional minstrelsy covered the same grounds as professional minstrelsy.[15] Its continued existence can only be surmised: even references to a tradition of non-professional minstrelsy, both in pre-islamic and in Islamic times, are scarce, while written material has not been handed down. As a result, it remains unclear how the poetry sung in these traditions has evolved, and how it is related to the poetry which became part of the written tradition. There does not exist a survey of modern Iranian minstrel traditions, although a number of studies have been devoted to individual traditions such as of the Baxtiyârî[16] and the Afghans[17]. Mary Boyce gives a general characterization of contemporary Iranian minstrelsy:

> *Although their content is relatively modern, these local schools of minstrelsy can boast a long literary lineage, coming as they do at the end of a tradition attested over two and a half millennia. They have survived in each case among poor communities, dwelling isolated in arid or mountainous country, and with a restricted intellectual and artistic life. However interesting their products, it is*

> *plain that they cannot be taken as providing any adequate measure for the old Iranian minstrel-poetry, created by minstrels numbering among them the finest poets and musicians in a rich and flourishing land, who served with honour in the courts of its princes.*[18]

This description of contemporary minstrelsy as a marginal phenomenon seems to do less than justice to the modern minstrel traditions. They reflect the function and the performance of poetry from a poetical tradition which is nowadays largely studied as written poetry, while it is evident that a great part of Persian poetry composed through the centuries, both in court circles and outside the court, for example among Sufi orders, was meant for reciting or singing in front of an audience. Poetry had a social purpose: it was not only meant as individual artistic expression, but it served often to celebrate a feast or a ceremony, to educate or to counsel kings and people, and to divert the mind of various audiences. The minstrels of Badakhshan have preserved and developed a tradition of singing poetry which is still alive in its proper context, and which does not only function as an art form.

The poetical tradition of Badakhshan is formed by a diversity of poetry and occasions for which it is performed. It may be characterized as oral poetry, since the poems are largely orally transmitted and performed; on the other hand, the greater part of the poetry is connected to or comes from literate verse, that is poems which were written down after composition, because it was deemed worthy to be preserved for a wider audience and for posterity.

It is however difficult to describe the sung poetry of Badakhshan as either oral or folk or literate or classical; besides the fact that often these notions only serve to give a general, possibly prejudiced idea of the poetry in question, continuous mutual influence between different kinds of poetry has made it difficult to label the poetry with only one of these terms. The recorded poetry is considered as a part of a corpus, which functions as a whole. Oral and literate poetry have merged into performances of poetry, and the implied contrast of these qualifications of poetry has faded.[19] To speak of quality, which is implicitly done by using the terms referred to, is dangerous: of central importance is the meaning of this poetry for the people for whom it is intended.

Their dedication and attitude towards the poetry and the performers of this poetry defines its quality. Although the 'users' of poetry in Badakhshan do not have a uniform perception or standard of quality for the poems, certain ideas about poetry circulate in the area.

The people of Badakhshan make a non-distinct difference between *xalqî* (folk) poetry, which is poetry coming from either anonymous poets or from minor poets who do not answer to the standards of literate poetry, and *shi'r*, 'literary poetry', depending on the fame of the poet, the style and the contents of a given poem in interaction with the nature of the performance in which a poem is sung.

The sung poetry collected in Badakhshan reflects the linguistic diversity of the area, although poetry in Tajik Persian is prevalent. This may be explained by the important position owned by religious poetry, which is almost exclusively composed in Persian.[20]

The poetry can be divided into two main groups, religious and secular poetry. Religious poetry is largely performed in *madâh* (mado), literally praise. In Badakhshan, the term madâh serves to denote both the poetry sung in the performance and the performance itself. In this study, to avoid confusion, the term will be used to refer to the performance (or the performance-genre, see below), while the poetry is referred to as madâh-poetry. Because of its close relation to the Ismâ'îlî religion, madâh can be considered as the most important performance-genre of the Ismâ'îlî part of Badakhshan. Madâh is performed in sessions of many hours on a number of occasions, on Thursday-evenings and Fridays, at the *ayyâm* of a mazâr and in particular when a member of the community has passed away. Madâh is often performed in the presence of a xalîfa, who explains parts of the poems that are sung, and who recites prayers in between the madâh. Madâh is attended by the family of the deceased, by neighbours and other villagers.

The description of the Sufi *samâ'*, given by Jean During in the Encyclopaedia of Islam[21], bears close resemblance to madâh. Like samâ', madâh may be characterized as a spiritual concert, in a ritualised form, a devotional practice considered to be the 'nourishment of the soul'. The practice of madâh seems to be similar in many ways to the musical practice of the Chishtî derwishes in Baluchistan as described by Jean During in *Musique et mystique dans les traditions de l'Iran*:

> *Les derviches se retrouvent certains soirs autour d'un chanteur qui s'accompagne au rabâb, soutenu par le tanbure dont le rôle se réduit au bourdon rythmique que l'on retrouve dans tous les ensembles baloutches. Leur participation se limite à la reprise d'un distique* (beyt) *invariable, qui alterne à la façon d'un refrain avec les autres distiques du poème chanté par le soliste. La plupart des derviches écoutent silencieusement, parfois plongés dans un zekr muet. Il n'y a pas de manifestations remarquables telles que danses, exclamations, pleurs, battement des mains. L'atmosphère est simplement recueillie, mais sans tension, ce qui n'exclut pas évidemment le hâl. [...] Le propos de ces chants n'est pas de provoquer l'extase mais un certain* hâl *plus intérieur; on peut les considérer comme une forme de divertissement sacré, qui, comme les ancien samâ', constitue une détente pour les derviches qui se soumettent au rigueurs de l'ascèse.*[22]

In Badakhshan, however, the whole Ismâ'îlî community takes part in the madâh-performances, but like the Chishtî dervishes described by During in an introvert manner. Madâh has a didactical as well as a ceremonial function, while it is also regarded as a spiritual diversion.

Secular poetry appears in different performance-genres, which are listed below: an appropriate occasion for the performance of secular poetry is a wedding or the celebration of a birth. Secular poetry is also performed in an informal way by many people, specialists and amateurs alike, in the family circle.

Musicians, who are considered as a specialist in one or more instruments are called *nawâzanda*; many of these musicians also sing secular poetry. Several women are known as singers who are accompanied by other musicians, but men usually play an instrument and sing at the same time. The only instrument commonly used by women is the *daf*. The Tajik word for singer is *hofiz* (m) or *hofiza* (f); this term is also used amongst the Badakhshanîs. To perform secular poetry is denoted by the term *soz lüvdow* or *bayt lüvdow* (Sh.) or *surûd xândan* (Tajik). Madâh is always performed by a male singer, the *madâhxân* (Sh. *madoxün*) or singer of madâh; the term for singing madâh is *mado lüvdow* in Shughnî or *madâh guftan* in Tajik. A number of musicians performed both madâh and secular music, or stated that they did so. As

a result of the hard times and possibly because of the religious revival, *madâhxânî* (the singing of madâh) has become very popular during recent last years. Many people started to learn madâh from an established madâhxân, and in 1993, we were able to record far more madâh than secular poetry.

There are a number of madâhxâns whose performances are famous throughout the country, such as Akbarsho Odinamamadov from Roshtqal'a and Muhammadyor Xujamyorov from Yapshorw. Madâhxâns are only occasionally professional musicians, in the sense that they make a living of their performances. This is because their virtues are closely connected to the profession of faith; it is not considered suitable to make money out of madâhxânî, it is rather an honourable service for the community. We recorded however a blind madâhxân (Muhammad Dilbeg Ruzadorov), unable to work on the land, who dedicated his life to madâhxânî. In the past few years, many performers of secular poetry applied themselves to madâhxânî; Dodixudo Jum'axon from Ishkoshim for instance was the director of the local school of music and the leader of a brass band, but nowadays he also sings madâh, using the texts of his father.

Performers of secular poetry and music are in many cases professional musicians, who work in local theatres or schools of music, and who earn additional money by performing during weddings or other feasts. It appears that the positions of the madâhxâns and other musicians are different in each situation. The madâhxâns learned the canon of music and poetry in their own village or town, from their father or grandfather or a neighbour. Often it was stated that madâh was composed *az rû-yi bayâz* (from the *bayâz*, 'notebook'[23]), either by ancestors or by contemporaries. Old notebooks, written in Arabic script, may still be used by some madâhxâns; but more often they keep modern notebooks with similar poetry in Tajik script. Manuscripts in Arabic and Persian, such as notebooks, were shown by a number of madâhxâns. The madâhxân of Yamg in Waxon, Muborakqadam, is the grandson of a poet and mystic, named Sûfî Mubârakqadam, who composed numerous religious works which he wrote down on his homemade paper. The inhabitants of Yamg built a museum dedicated to the life and work of this poet. His manuscripts are partly kept by his heirs and partly in the Oriental Institute at St. Petersburg. Manuscripts,

lithographs and printed books by different authors were present among several madâhxâns, although the material in these works seems to have been seldom used in madâh.[24] The manuscripts were shown on request, often with a slight reluctance, probably due to the number of researchers in the past who took away manuscripts in order to keep them safe in public or personal libraries.

Like madâhxânî, secular music and poetry is likewise transmitted by members of the family or village, although at the same time the art of secular music could have been acquired (or perfected) in a local school of music or at the Institute of Arts in Dushanbe, where traditional music of Tajikistan is taught alongside other musical genres. Such musicians were mostly already acquainted with local repertories of songs and rhythms and perfected their art, or tried to obtain a degree in teaching or management at a theatre or school of music.

Since a poem is usually sung in combination with different poems, the terms *performance-genre* and *genre of poetry* have been used in this study to explain respectively the nature of the performance in which a sequence of poems is sung and the nature or form of the individual poem sung in the performance. For example madâh is a performance-genre, in which poetry is sung as a religious expression. This performance-genre is characterized by the use of certain instruments, rhythms and poetry. A ghazal however is a genre, which can be sung in madâh, but also in other performance-genres, and which is characterized by a number of formal aspects. Dargîlik can be termed as both genre and performance-genre, denoting both the text of individual pieces as well as the performance in which these texts are sung, often in combination with the broad performance-genre of ghazalxânî/folksinging.

The division into performance-genres and genres of poetry is based on the indications given by the musicians themselves. They use all the terms given in the list below, with exception of the term ghazalxani/folksinging, which they would describe by one of the general terms *soz*, or *surûd (xânî)*, 'songs' or 'the singing of songs'. Unless explicitly asked for, the musicians seldom specify the genres of poetry they sing in their performances, but limit themselves to the naming of performance-genres.

Main performance-genres present in Badakhshan
All genres of sung poetry fit into one or more of these performance-genres.

I – *Religious performance-genre*
1 madâh

II – *Secular performance-genres*
1 ghazalxânî
2 ghazalxânî-folksinging
3 rubâ'îxânî
4 dargîlik: a. dargîlik
b. lala'ik
c. duwduwak
d. dargîlmodik
5 bulbulik
6 falak
7 dafsâz

Main genres of poetry used in Badakhshan
I *'Literary' genres,* i.e. poems composed according to the classical Persian prosody, which prescribes a certain use of rhyme-patterns and quantitative metre. These genres are usually in (Tajik) Persian.
1 quatrain: a. rubâ'î
b. dubaytî[25]
2 ghazal (poem in monorhyme of 3–20 lines)
3 muxammas (stanzaic poem)
4 hikâyat (story, either in double rhyme (masnawî) or in monorhyme (qasîda))
5 qasîda (poem in monorhyme, in Badakhshan comparable to the ghazal, but longer)
6 munâjât (prayer-poem)
7 du'â (prayer-formula)

II – *'Folk' genres*, poems that cannot be classified according to classical prosody. These genres are either in one of the Pamir languages or in Tajik Persian.

1 dargîlik (two-lined poem, in Shughnî-Rûshânî)
2 bulbulik (three-lined poem, in Waxî)
3 folksongs (a group of different kind of poems both in Tajik Persian and in the Pamir languages.)

NB In some cases both the genre of poetry and the performance-genre in which a genre of poetry is sung have the same name.

This study presents an analysis of the different poetical genres and performance-genres of the minstrel tradition of Badakhshan. In the first four chapters the formal aspects of the poetry, its contents and aspects of origin and authorship will be examined. The practice of the performances is described in four subsequent chapters. The poetry examined is largely in Tajik Persian, and for a small part in Shughnî-Rûshânî. Unfortunately I am not able to discuss poetry in Waxî, of which we made only a few recordings.

Since much of the poetry recorded is not readily available in written or published form, a representative body of poetry has been transcribed and collected in an anthology forming one of the appendices of the present study. These poems form the main body of this study. The system of reference to the poems collected in the Anthology is by an abbreviation, representing the genre, followed by a number (for instance G1 = ghazal no. 1).

Little attention can be paid to the music which accompanies the poetry in this study; the practice of music requires a separate study, done by a specialist on this area. Although music constitutes a main feature of the sung poetry, it is nevertheless subordinated to the texts; it serves to accompany the texts. On the other hand, the music often defines the performance-genre in which the poetry is sung, and as such the importance of the texts for the audience. Many poems sung in madâh are also sung outside madâh, but their impact and value for the audience are much greater when sung in madâh than elsewhere. As I had the good fortune to travel with a musicologist, ready data are available on the musical aspects of the Badakhshanî minstrel tradition, which will be published in due course.[26]

The main instruments used in Badakhshan are the Pamir rubâb (rubâb-i pâmîrî), the tanbûr or bulandzughâm, the sêtâr, ghîzhak

(or ghîjak), daf, nay and accordion. Less used are the târ, the rubâbcha, the Afghan rubâb (rubâb-i afghânî), the tablak and the labchang (Jew's harp), which almost vanished among the Badakhshanîs, but is still common among the Kirghiz people of Badakhshan. The accordion was probably brought by Russian soldiers and is very popular in the accompaniment of folksongs. The other instruments are in most cases locally made of mulberry, apricot or apple wood. The instruments have simple, elementary forms and are soberly decorated by patterns of small holes in the corpus.

In madâh performances the choice of instruments is in most cases restricted to one or two rubâbs or tanbûrs (sometimes one rubâb and one tanbûr) and one or more dafs, although performances without daf also occur. One reason for this specific choice, given by a number of older players, could be the fact that the skin of the resonators and the gut strings came from the sheep: therefore these instruments were considered as 'instruments from heaven', while ghîzhak and sêtâr have metal strings and no skin and therefore called 'instruments of hell', not appropriate for religious music. However, nowadays gut strings are often replaced by nylon strings. Below the main instruments have been listed and briefly described.[27]

Plucked instruments

Rubâb (Rubâb-i pâmîrî): The rubâb is an unfretted longnecked lute with six gut or nylon strings, tuned in fourths. The *rubâbcha* is a smaller variant of this instrument.

Tanbûr: The tanbûr is larger than the rubâb, and probably from a different family of lutes, with seven gut or nylon strings, tuned in fifths, fourths and thirds.

Bulandzughâm (Bulandmaqâm): In Waxon, the tanbûr is referred to as bulandzughâm or bulandmaqâm. In Yamg however, this instrument was a kind of double-necked tanbûr. The strings of these instruments are plucked with a thick wooden plectrum, which is called a *zaxmak*.

Sêtâr: The sêtâr is a long-necked lute with seventeen or more nylon frets, three melody strings of thin steel wire and a variable number of sympathetic strings of steel wire, arranged in single, double and triple pairs, tuned in fourths, fifths, octaves, and seconds. The sêtâr is plucked by a twined metal plectrum, called *nâxunak*.

Bowed instruments

Ghîzhak (Ghîjak or in Shughnî Ghîgh'ak): The only bowed instrument is the ghîjak (ghîjak-i pâmîrî), a spike fiddle, often with a tin can as a resonator, and two, three or four strings, tuned in fourths. It is never used to accompany madâh. The ghîzhak is appropriate to perform falak, dargîlik and variants by an individual musician, who sings and plays by himself. It is also used in instrumental performances together with daf and nay.

Percussion instruments

Daf: The daf, a circular frame drum, is the main percussion instrument. Its usual name in other parts of Tajikistan is dâ'ira. Some dafs are painted with ornamental figures. The daf is used by women to announce the arrival of the groom during a wedding (*daf-i shâdî*), and to announce the death of a member of the community (*daf-i ghəm*). In *dafsâz*, performed by men, the daf is the sole instrument.

The **tablak** or vase-drum, common in other parts of Tajikistan, is seldom used.

Wind instruments

Nay: The nay is a small wooden fipple flute with six fingerholes. It is mostly used as a solo-instrument – it is the traditional instrument of the shepherds on the high pastures – or in instrumental pieces with ghîzhak and daf; it is not often present in performances of sung poetry.

Innovative instruments

The musician Masayn Masaynov has found renown as an inventor of all kinds of musical instruments, inspired by existing instruments. For example he invented a double-necked sêtâr and the **nayrûd**, an instrument with both keys and strings, driven by electricity. Many of his inventions are anthropomorphical.

The poetry examined in this study is not static, although the presentation of a collection of texts might suggest otherwise. The poetry belongs to the performance at which it is sung, and this performance is never static, but always fluid. This study reflects the situation of sung poetry in Badakhshan as it was during the time of the recordings. It is

an accepted idea nowadays that the text of oral poetry is inextricably bound up with the performance[28]; inevitably an elusive element is lost in studies of oral poetry when performance and text are separated. Moreover, sung poetry is intrinsically subject to a continual process of development, although the performers themselves often state otherwise. However slow this process may be, it cannot be impeded; so each study of oral poetry might be considered as the reflection of a specific moment in an ever-changing tradition.

To preserve as much as possible of the original context, long descriptions of every detail of the performance would be necessary; such descriptions should be made by several specialists or at least by several observers, who can each try to concentrate on aspects of music, text, delivery of the text, movements of the performers, interaction of performers and audience, reactions of the audience and so on. But even then, the observation of the performance will always be influenced by the individual perception of the person describing it and the performers too will be influenced by the presence of such a person. This might seem to deny the possibility of an effective study of oral traditions, but this cannot be justified, for even a description which is in some respects defective is to be preferred to no description at all.

In this study, I have tried to give due attention to different aspects of the performance by making detailed descriptions of different aspects of a number of performances. The main focus has been on the poetry; aspects like the position of the musicians in the community, the musical features, the nature of the audiences must necessarily remain to the background.

In several cases the texts given in the Anthology have variants, of which data are given. One version has been taken as the basic version, by which I do not mean that the text in question is the original or the correct version: it has been contended sufficiently that in the continual evolution of oral poetry no such notion is valid.[29] In this study, the text chosen is the clearest example of the text recorded, although in many texts there are obscurities, which have been marked. I have tried to keep as close as possible to the sung version of the poems; grammatical inconsistencies in the Persian included. In a number of cases a few remarks made by Jean During in his study of the Chishtî Sufi poetry and music may also be true of the sung poetry in Badakhshan:

> *[...] leurs vers ne sont que des imitations imparfaites de poésie classique, dont les faiblesses sautent aux yeux des connaisseurs [...] A cela s'ajoutent les faiblesses des transmetteurs qui souvent, faute d'en saisir tout le sens, altèrent des mots et des vers ou y introduisent des interpolations incongrues.*[30]

Ivanow (1949) held a similar opinion for the Badakhshanîs who preserved copies of Nâsir-i Xusraw's works:

> *The Persian of their religious literature is a foreign language to them, speaking, as they do, various local dialects. Being mostly people of very little education, they often misunderstand the text and commit many errors while re-copying it. And, what is much worse, they rarely hesitate to introduce their 'corrections', sometimes of the wildest kind, which finally upset the reliability of the text.*[31]

Today, most Badakhshanîs are well-educated according to the Soviet educational system, which included Tajik Persian in Cyrillic script, but no Arabic or Persian in Arabic script or religious teachings.

The great bulk of the poetry presented in this study was recorded in the houses of the musicians, who performed on request for us. Usually the recording-method was as follows: we arrived in a village, either by car or on foot, we asked for the house of a musician, whose name we often already knew from information from other musicians; accordingly we were guided to his house. In many cases the musician was not at home, but had to be fetched off the land. He would come, or he would promise to come, within a couple of hours – and sometimes he would not. Most madâhxâns tidied themselves and put on a *tâqî*, the traditional embroidered cap of the Badakhshanîs, if they were not already wearing one. Some musicians played on their own, but many had an accompaniment. We would sit together, usually in the central room with the five pillars of the traditional house, or sometimes outside on the verandah. They often asked where to sit, if the performance was arranged for us. We installed the microphones, and the DAT-recorder; we agreed on a sign for the start of the performance. If possible, we made a sound check – this was not always possible, because

some madâhxâns would not stop once they had started their performance. During the recording, I wrote down parts of the text, as far as possible; sometimes photos were made during the performance, for which we had asked permission in advance. After the performance, we often had a chance to discuss the poetry, the music, the instruments used and the background of the musician. In most cases, it was possible to go over the sung text once more together with the musician or sometimes with a member of the audience: in Yamgi bolo I was helped out by a ten-year old boy who could reproduce the sung texts better than his grandfather, who had just performed them. Reproduction of the texts outside the context of the performance often appeared to be difficult for the musicians: without the help of the provisional text written down by me during the performance, the reproduced text would not have been reliable in many cases. As the performances were often recorded at night, we spent the night in the house of a musician as his guests. In this way we had often ample opportunity to discuss matters of poetry and music, besides other subjects. We could also attend private performances of women singing dargîlik for their children in this way. The majority of the musicians would not accept any money; in 1993 the circumstances of the country were such that the performers accepted the dollars or rubles we offered, however with reluctance. The musicians often travelled the following morning with us for a while, since due to the scarcity of transport our bus was seen as an opportunity to visit family or to do some business. Sometimes they accompanied us to a musician in an adjacent village, where they would take part in the performance by this musician as well. This happened for instance in Rubot and Nimoz, and in Yamgi bolo and Wichkut.

Many performances resulted in the gathering of village-people, who came to attend: in this way, the original context of the different performances was approached, in particular when the recording of a performance of madâh fell on Thursdays and Fridays. We did not deem it appropriate to record madâh during a mourning ceremony.

In 1992, we were able to attend two weddings (in Xufak and Rushon), where we could record secular music in its proper context. As a result of the civil war, there were few weddings in 1993, but we could attend a birth festival. The other recordings have been arranged by us as described above: the great advantage of an arranged performance is

the clarity of the recordings, which cannot possibly be achieved during a wedding. Nevertheless, the recordings were seldom made without a response from members of the family or neighbours who enlivened the performance, either by enthusiastic exclamations or by devoted silence, followed by grateful remarks in case of madâh.

We are convinced that the arranged performances give a true reflection of the use of music and poetry in Badakhshan: in the case of secular poetry, since we were able to attend several feasts, and in the case of madâh because we had ample occasion to ask numerous people about the contexts in which madâh is performed; we also had access to video recordings of madâh, which had been made by the local people on the occasion of festivals and of the arrival of a representative of the Imâm.

Both in 1992 and in 1993 we used Xorugh as a base, from which we travelled to the different valleys accompanied by a driver and a local guide, and often as well by local travellers, who provided us with much useful information concerning musicians. Initially, we acquired information from Gurminj Zawqibekov, who owns a private museum of instruments of the Pamir region in Dushanbe.

The villages and towns where recordings have been made are shown on the map; the names of the musicians, their instruments and other data are listed in the appendix.