

The Kyrgyz of the Afghan Pamir Ride On

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“And when you leave this little country, and ride three days north-east, always among mountains, you get to such a height that ‘tis said to be the highest place in the world! And when you have got to this height you find a fine river running through a plain clothed with the finest pasture in the world; insomuch that a lean beast there will fatten to your heart’s content in ten days...The plain is called Pamier, and you ride across it for twelve days together, finding nothing but a desert without habitations or any green thing, so that travelers are obliged to carry with them whatever they have need of. The region is so lofty and cold that you do not even see any birds flying. And I must notice that because of this great cold, fire does not burn so brightly, nor give out so much heat as usual, nor does it cook food so effectually” - Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*

In this famous description, Marco Polo captures the barren and forbidding nature of the *Bam-e Dunya*, the “Roof of the World”, Afghanistan’s Wakhan Corridor. Yet, for the very reason that Polo notes in this passage – its lush pasturage - the Wakhan has been the seasonal home of nomads for thousands of years. More recent travelers than Polo were still told legends concerning the fabled Pamir pasture lands: “A single blade of Pamir grass is as good as a haystack” (Michaud, 1972: 458). The most recent group of people to dwell in this remote corner of Central Asia are the Kyrgyz, who had traditionally roamed the vast grasslands and river valleys of what was, until fairly recent geopolitical events divided it into nations, simply known as Turkestan. First Russian colonial expansion, then the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and finally the Chinese Communist Revolution of 1949 forced the various Central Asian pastoral nomadic groups to either settle or move into increasingly marginal, isolated areas, delimited in a way that made no sense from a pastoralist’s perspective. As the international borders of the Soviet Union, China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan became more clearly defined – and politically sensitive – during the twentieth century, one small population of Kyrgyz nomadic pastoralists found themselves confined to living on the Roof of the World.

Even this remote mountain refuge proved insufficient to insulate the Kyrgyz from the effects of greater geopolitical forces, as external “socio-political interference led to the creation of an arena of confrontation in the Pamirs, Hindukush and Himalaya during the Cold War which was one of the least permeable frontier regions in the world” (Kreutzmann, 2005: 23). In April of 1978, a Marxist coup in Kabul toppled the republican government of Mohammed Daoud. The Saur Revolution sent tremors up into the faraway Pamirs, as the Kyrgyz, who had in the past sporadically fought with Soviet forces just across the border in the Tajik SSR, heard that this coup was backed by the Soviets. Additionally, soon after the Saur Revolution, the Kyrgyz claim to have seen increased Soviet military activity near the border.

Fearful of Soviet reprisals, in late July 1978, 1,300 Kyrgyz living in the Little Pamir¹ fled across the Hindu Kush into Pakistan, led by their khan, Hajji Rahman Qul. For reasons that are not entirely clear, the nearly 500 Kyrgyz living in the Great Pamir remained behind². During the summer of 1979, more than 100 of these Kyrgyz refugees, living in Gilgit, died, mostly from illness (Shahrani, 2002: 232). High mortality, combined with dissatisfaction over Rahman Qul Khan's authoritarian style of leadership and a guarantee of safe passage from Soviet forces, prompted 54 families (about 250 individuals) to return to the Little Pamir in October 1979. Eventually, with the cooperation of the Turkish government, the remaining 1,129 Kyrgyz refugees in Pakistan were allowed to resettle in eastern Turkey, near Lake Van, where, in 2001, they numbered about 2,200 individuals (Shahrani, 2002: 264).

The story of this group's four difficult years as refugees in Pakistan and their resettlement in eastern Turkey in 1982 has been told elsewhere (Denker, 1983; Shahrani, 1984 and 2002; Somerville-Large, 1991). However, the fate of the 250 Kyrgyz who returned to the Little Pamir from Pakistan, as well as the 500 individuals who remained in the Big Pamir, has remained largely unexamined. 10 years of Soviet occupation followed by nearly a decade of civil war made the Afghan Pamirs for the most part off-limits to research.

Furthermore, many commentators were quick to assume that the out-migration of so many Kyrgyz in 1978, combined with the Soviet invasion the following year, spelled the end of this community in Afghanistan. In 1983, Deborah Denker wrote an article entitled "The Last Migration of the Kyrgyz of Afghanistan?" In the epilogue to the 2002 edition of *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan*, Nazif Shahrani described the earlier, 1979 edition as "in retrospect, my salvage ethnography of the Kirghiz of Afghanistan" (Shahrani, 2002: 235). But, to borrow from Mark Twain, news of the Kyrgyz's demise has been greatly exaggerated.

This paper seeks to provide a short overview of the recent history and current situation of the Afghan Kyrgyz. It is based on two field trips to the region made by the author³ as well as a survey of the extant English-language literature concerning the Afghan Kyrgyz. Given that no systematic and thorough research has been conducted among the Kyrgyz of the Afghan Pamirs since Shahrani's fieldwork in the mid-1970s, there are numerous lacunae in the narrative and almost all the hard data – population figures; stock numbers; maternal and child mortality rates – should be treated as approximate⁴.

¹ This was the entire population of the Little Pamir, save for 10 households (50 individuals), described by Shahrani as "very poor and disgruntled", who elected to stay behind (2002: 231).

² Shahrani claims that the decisive factors were the distance and difficulty of the terrain separating them from the Pakistani border (1984: 232). However, my interviews with Afghan Kyrgyz suggest that there were political and economic considerations involved as well.

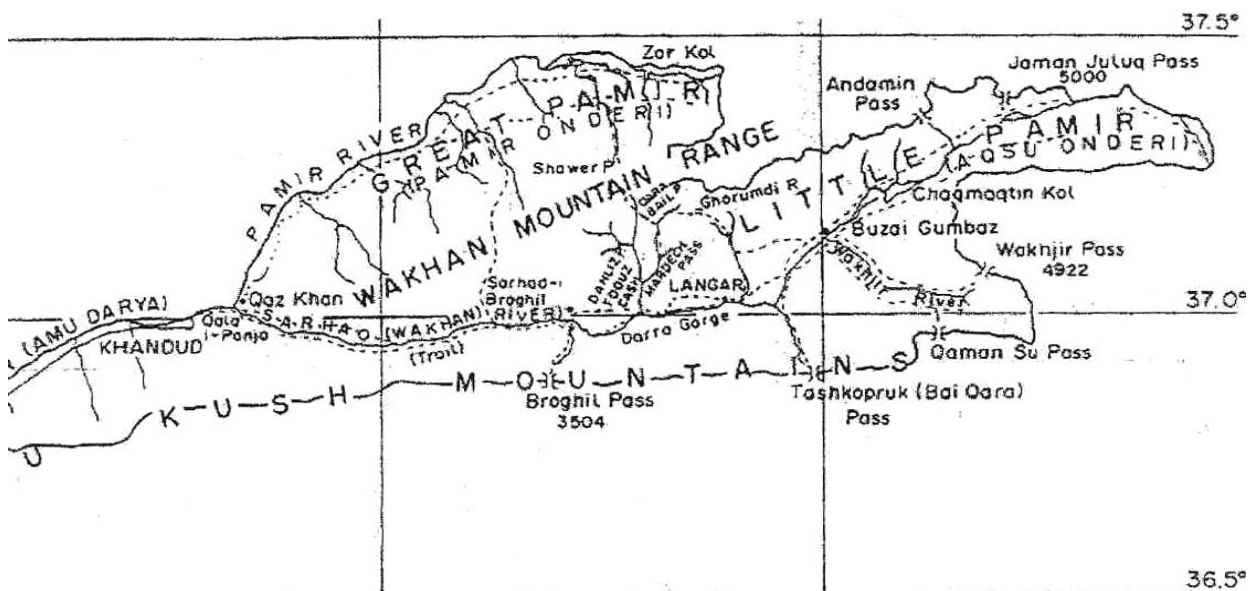
³ May-June, 2006 (via Kabul) and September-October, 2006 (via Tajikistan – Ishkashim border crossing). Funding was provided by a grant from the Central Asia Institute and their support is gratefully acknowledged here.

⁴ Even today, with northeastern Afghanistan relatively stable, very little has been written about the Afghan Kyrgyz, save for various reports by NGOs active in the region and the work of a German geographer, Hermann Kreutzmann (2000, 2003; Kreutzmann and Felmy, 2003).

The Kyrgyz who inhabit the Wakhan Corridor have managed to subsist in one of the most challenging environments imaginable. 82.9% of the Wakhan-Pamir area is above 3000 meters and during the nearly eight-month winter (early November to late June), temperatures can plummet to -50°C . The area is exceedingly remote, lacks any motorable roads, and access - on foot or on horseback - is restricted to certain times of the year. Both flora and fauna are sparse. The Wakhan-Pamir area consists of two high valleys, known as *onder* (plural, *onderler*). The higher *onder* is called the Great (Zor) Pamir, runs east-west for nearly 60 kilometers, and is bounded by the Alchur and Wakhan ranges on the north and south, respectively. The Little (*Kechek*) Pamir also runs east-west, for 100 kilometers. It is separated from the Great Pamir, lying to the north, by the Wakhan range and is bordered on the south by the Hindu Kush, which forms the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The mountains surrounding these *onderler* average 5450 meters in height.

The passes linking these two areas are generally only open in summer and early fall, which affects trading patterns as well as communications and serves to separate the two Kyrgyz populations economically as well as geographically. Both Kyrgyz groups are entirely dependent upon trade for the acquisition of cereal grains, horses, opium, and manufactured goods. The Kyrgyz of the Big Pamir trade with Wakhi agro-pastoralists or lowland traders from outside the Wakhan, most of who are ethnically Tajik. Although the Little Pamir Kyrgyz also have extensive trade relations with these two groups, in addition they enjoy cross-border trade with Pakistan and, until recently, Tajikistan⁵. Largely for this reason, the Little Pamir appears to be much better off economically than the Big Pamir (Fitzherbert, 2003: 44).

Source: Shahrani, 1986



⁵ The cross-border trade with Pakistan is technically illegal but so far seems to be tolerated by both Pakistani and Afghan border guards. The occasional bazaar that would occur on the Afghan-Tajik border, near where the Aksu River flows from Chaqmaqatin Qol into Tajikistan, seems to have ended following the withdrawal of the Russian forces in 2005 that had been guarding the border.

The precipitation and wind patterns of the Pamir valleys are dictated by the mountainous topography of the region. Average precipitation is between six and 12 centimeters, mostly in the form of snow. The prevailing wind direction is from the northwest, which has the effect of scouring the windward and northern ends of the valleys: “the winter pastures are thus left clear of snow, but the continuous wind adds to the extreme harshness of the winter” (Shahrani, 2002: 13). Permanent snow cover is found above 5000 meters.

The Kyrgyz follow a short (usually less than 20 km), pendular migration cycle, moving from their summer camps (*jailoo*) on north-facing slopes (*terskey*) to winter camps (*keshtow*) on south-facing slopes (*kongey*)⁶. The migrations typically occur in October (*jailoo* to *keshtow*) and June (*keshtow* to *jailoo*). As pastures are privately owned and significant investment, in terms of labor and materials, is expended to improve the campgrounds⁷, the migration pattern and seasonal residences are fairly regular, with little variation. Winter camps, occupied for a longer annual period (about eight months), tend to receive more investment and accordingly are more developed (fixed structures, irrigation systems, etc.).

Kyrgyz populations tend to be less densely concentrated in winter than in summer, when smaller aggregations of *oey* (households; literally “house” or “yurt”) gather in *ail* (camping groups, ranging from 1 to 12 *oey*, depending on the season), in part to prevent overuse of the critical and intensely grazed winter pastures. Table 1 shows mean seasonal distributions based on data from the mid-1970s.

Table 1. Kyrgyz Seasonal Distribution, 1970s

	# of <i>ail</i>	# of <i>oey</i>
Summer (<i>jailoo</i>)	86	3 to 12
Winter (<i>keshtow</i>)	118	1 to 7

Source: Shahrani, 2002 [1979]

However, regardless of the season, Kyrgyz population density is uniformly low. As can be seen below in Table 2, estimates of the total Kyrgyz population and household structure vary considerably. For the purposes of this report, I have assumed a total population of 1,500 individuals (600 in the Big Pamir and 900 in the Little Pamir) living in 250 households (100 in the Big Pamir and 150 in the Little Pamir), with an average of 6 persons per household⁸. The total area of the Afghan Pamirs is 4400 km², giving a rough overall population density of 3 persons per km². The Big Pamir, despite its

⁶ Because much of the snow carried by the northwesterly winds is deposited on the *terskey* side of the valleys, they are suitable only for summer pasturage.

⁷ For example, many wealthier *ail* have built small stone or wattle-and-daub single-storey houses (*tam*), erected stone pens for their animals, and dug irrigation channels for improving the growth of fodder.

⁸ These figures are based on my reading of the extant data as well as my own observations.

considerably smaller land area (1550 km², versus 2850 km² for the Little Pamir)⁹ has a smaller population density (approximately 2.6 persons per km²) than the Little Pamir (3.17 persons per km²).

Table 2. Kyrgyz Population and Number of Households

	Shahrani (1979)	Fitzherbert (2003)	Kreutzmann (2003)	Duncan (2006)	WFP (2006)	Abdul Rashid (2006)
Total Population	1825	1400-1600	~1334	N/A	N/A	1600-1700
Total Households	333	210-240	250	N/A	338	418
Average per H/H	5.5	6.7	~5.3	N/A	N/A	3.8-4.1
Big Pamir:						
Population	445	~938	~587	690-740	N/A	403-435
Households	87	140	110	100-108	100	106
Average per H/H	5.1	6.7	~5.3	6.9	N/A	3.8-4.1
Little Pamir:						
Population	1380	~600	~747	N/A	N/A	1186-1280
Households	246	100	140	N/A	238	312
Average per H/H	5.6	6.7	~5.3	N/A	N/A	3.8-4.1

Note: For 1999, Kreutzmann and Felmy claimed a population of 1264, divided into 237 households, giving an average of 5.3 per H/H. This would suggest a total population of 1334 in 2003 (587 in the Big Pamir and 747 in the Little Pamir).

Sources: Shahrani, 2002; Fitzherbert, 2003; Duncan and Duncan, 2006; author's interviews with World Food Programme (2006) and Abdul Rashid Khan (2006)

The main economic activity of the Afghan Kyrgyz is semi-nomadic pastoralism. They derive most of their subsistence from secondary pastoral products (dung fuel, milk products, wool). Their economy is based on barter and prices for goods are reckoned in terms of sheep. As noted earlier, the Little Pamir Kyrgyz also trade with Pakistan, in which they take their sheep over the 4,890 meter Irshad Uween pass into the northern

⁹ The actual total area of the Big Pamir is 5500 km² but the area occupied by the Kyrgyz is only 1550 km²; the rest is claimed by Wakhi agro-pastoralists (Schaller, 2004).

Chapursan Valley of Hunza. The Pakistani government built a road that terminates not far from the base of this pass, near the shrine (*ziyarat*) of a local saint, Baba Ghundi, so the animals are exchanged for other goods and then driven down-valley.

In most cases, the traders come to the Kyrgyz. This increases the price of their wares but spares the Kyrgyz from having to make the trip down into the Wakhan valley. When the Kyrgyz do come down to trade at either Goz Khan (roadhead for the Big Pamir) or Sarhad-e Boroghil (roadhead for the Little Pamir), goods are purchased on credit and the Kyrgyz transport them back into the Pamirs on yak. The traders then come up into the Pamirs to collect their debts in kind. The prices the Kyrgyz are charged for manufactured goods are very expensive, usually involving a 200% mark-up from what they would fetch at the nearest commercial village, Khandud.

The Kyrgyz did not have a ready answer as to why they don't oversee more of the marketing of their livestock themselves, as they did in the 1970s. As Table 3 shows, stocking rates in the Afghan Pamirs are much lower than they were in the 1970s, although the current human population is about four-fifths of what it was at that time. Kreutzmann and Felmy suggest that, based on this data, the pasture potentials of the region are currently under-utilized (2003: 27). However, surveys by Petocz in the 1970s noted extensive overgrazing in many parts of the Pamirs (Petocz, 1978a&b; Petocz et al. 1978), so it's possible that current stocking rates are at or close to the carrying capacity of the natural grazing lands.

Table 3: Comparison of herd sizes among the Kirghiz in mid-1970s and 1999

Animals	mid-1970s	1999	Comparison of both (percentage)
Sheep and goats	38600	8836	22.9
Yak	3544	1424	40.2
Horses	318	159	50.0
Camels	83	91	109.6

Source: Kreutzmann and Felmy (2003), based on data derived from Shahrani (2002:177) and Focus survey, Aug-Sept 1999

Over the past 10 years, the Kyrgyz have witnessed the many aid projects delivered to the adjacent Wakhi communities through the efforts of several NGOs. Foremost among these organizations has been the Aga Khan Foundation, through two of its affiliates, Focus International and the Aga Khan Development Network. This has created a fair bit of resentment among the Kyrgyz, who feel that they have received little benefit from development efforts in the region. In particular, they cite the lack of roads,

health care, and schools as the main areas of development that are lacking, all of which have been delivered, to varying degrees, to the Wakhi in recent years.

However, the main reason that the Kyrgyz have seen little developmental assistance owes to the remoteness of the Pamirs. The only motorable access is from Tajikistan, along a rough track used by the Soviet army to establish and supply their garrison in the Little Pamir from 1979 to 1989. Today this passage is not an official border crossing and the Tajik government has only allowed Focus to cross it in order to deliver food relief to the Kyrgyz, which they did from 1997 to 2004. Since then, the World Food Programme has taken over distribution of food aid to the Kyrgyz. However, these shipments are only taken as far as the roadheads at Goz Khan and Sarhad-e Boroghil, from where the Kyrgyz have to transport the food up into the Pamirs.

The lack of developmental assistance is only one of many problems plaguing the Kyrgyz communities in the Afghan Pamirs. Opium use and addiction is widespread and results in further impoverishment as potential income is spent on opium rather than for productive purposes. For example, in 2004, George Schaller calculated that through the purchase of opium, “the local economy is deprived of at least \$9000 that could be spent productively” (2004: 16). Furthermore, since opium is sold by itinerant traders – mostly Tajiks from lower Badakhshan (especially the Jurm area) – this income flows out of the Wakhan and often into the pockets of local commanders involved in opium production and trafficking.

The Wakhan-Pamir area has some of the world’s highest rates of maternal and child mortality. Although definitive figures are unavailable, surveys by a Western doctor active in the area for the past five years indicate that the maternal mortality rate (MMR) among the Kyrgyz of the Big Pamir is likely “more than 4000 per 100,000 live births”¹⁰ (Duncan and Duncan, 2006: 7). This means that a Kyrgyz woman’s lifetime risk of maternal death is nearly 1 in 3, versus 1 in 6 for Afghanistan as a whole.

Child mortality figures among the Kyrgyz are similarly staggering. In the Big Pamir, under five mortality (U5MR) is approximately 520 per 1,000 live births (Duncan & Duncan, 2006: 7), meaning that more than half of all children born die before reaching

age five¹¹. Amazingly, given no appreciable in-migration, the Kyrgyz seem to have been able to maintain a balanced demographic trend, largely through high rates of fecundity and fertility (Callahan, 2005).

These factors, combined with the difficult period the Kyrgyz experienced following the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989 and the predatory reign of the mujahideen factions in Badakhshan province thereafter, have led them to consider leaving the Pamirs. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the independence of the five Central Asian states, there has been a move among some of the latter to tilt the demographic balance in favor of the titular nationality (IRIN, 2001). This was especially true in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which both sought to “repatriate”

¹⁰ Afghanistan’s average MMR is already one of the world’s highest, with 1,900 per 100,000 live births. For comparison, the average for “least developed countries” is 890 per 100,000.

¹¹ Afghanistan also has one of world’s highest U5MR, with 257 deaths per 1,000 live births. The average for the “least developed countries” is 155 per 1,000.

diaspora groups through various inducements. Kyrgyzstan, for its part, has seen limited success in this endeavor. Of the 23,000 ethnic Kyrgyz who returned to Kyrgyzstan between 1991 and 2005, only 9% have received citizenship; the rest enjoy no legal status whatsoever.

Discussions between the Afghan Kyrgyz and the Kyrgyzstani government began in 1996 and in 1999 the current Kyrgyz khan, Abdul Rashid, made a formal petition to then-President Akaev for the Kyrgyz living in Afghanistan to be repatriated to Kyrgyzstan (Kreutzmann, 2000). However, this deal foundered on the question of who would pay for the repatriation, where the Afghan Kyrgyz would be resettled within Kyrgyzstan¹², and divisions among the Afghan Kyrgyz over the wisdom of leaving the Pamirs for an uncertain future in Kyrgyzstan, itself struggling economically. Of additional concern to the Kyrgyz in Afghanistan was the availability and cost of opium in Kyrgyzstan, an indication of how pervasive opium use has become in their society.

The future for the Afghan Kyrgyz is not especially hopeful. Political leadership is weak and limits the possibility of collective action for their own benefit. In 2004, Abdul Rashid Khan made a trip to Kabul to petition President Karzai for developmental assistance and received several truckloads of supplies in return (cf. Anderson, 2005). However, the promises that Karzai supposedly made concerning building roads, clinics and schools have yet to materialize and, in all likelihood, never will without the assistance of NGOs and foreign aid. At present, the Kyrgyz are largely resigned to their fate in the Pamirs and this has led a further atomization of Kyrgyz society. Aside from the mission to Kabul, the Kyrgyz have been generally passive in terms of taking any steps to improve their situation from within, foremost among which would involve curbing opium consumption. The “last migration of the Kyrgyz of Afghanistan” still has yet to occur, but seems sadly probable in the near future.

¹² Initially, the Kyrgyzstani government planned to resettle the Afghan Kyrgyz in the Chong Alai region of southern Kyrgyzstan. In part, this was to counter the out-migration of ethnic Kyrgyz and the in-migration of Tajiks and Uzbeks to this region.

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