

## **Islam, Transnationalism, and the State in Gorno-Badakhshan, Tajikistan**

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Research Paper, March 2010

### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

In the following research paper, I would like to draw the attention to some aspects of the broad topic of state and religion and how it is perceived in Murgab and Khorog, both small towns in the Eastern part of Tajikistan. I will first concentrate on the situation in Murgab and then shortly focus on Khorog in order to contribute to the regional context.

While talking about the history of the region and their own lives the people of Murgab and Khorog do often not refer to a linear development, but to a range of periods and events that are related to the notion of modernity. Modernity, or its absence, is then attributed to different topics such as religion, society and the state. However, these processes vary considerably in both places.

State and society in Murgab are often defined as being trapped in an era of decline since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Religion, on the other hand, is described as developing while at the same time going back to pre-Soviet roots. This dilemma includes, as Julie McBrien precisely argues, a “longing for a modern past”<sup>2</sup>. I will therefore focus on how the inhabitants of Murgab and its adjacent region discuss the recent growth of religious activities in relation to state intervention. Since the “longing for a modern past” is often fostered by movements of transnational dimension, I will furthermore try to locate the discussion of these events within the discourse on transnational influences in Tajikistan. In order to provide a broader regional context, I will therefore turn to Khorog as the base of the Ismaili movement, the most prominent transnational actor in the country.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on data from an ongoing PhD-project on Islam in the Tajik Pamirs. After having lived and worked in Tajikistan from August 2007 till June 2008 with regular visits to Gorno-Badakhshan and its Pamir range, I have conducted 6 month of field research in the region. Islam and politics are sensitive topics in Tajikistan. Therefore names and identities of all informants are covered.

<sup>2</sup> McBrien (2009), p. 129.

## **Approaching Murgab**

Occasionally, the inhabitants of the Eastern borderlands of Tajikistan, the Autonomous Region Gorno-Badakhshan, are overwhelmed with changing governmental attitudes. This was also the case when the new national law on religion was finally introduced in March 2009.<sup>3</sup> For the first time since 1994 a new law on religion was implemented in Tajikistan, a process which caused public and private discussions among officials and citizens. Except from the facts that were published in newspapers most people were not aware of the actual content of the law and governmental employees and religious specialists suddenly had to interpret and react on a law that was issued in an often unknown language.

“Tajik in Tajikistan: an unknown language?” one could ask and at the same time focus on one of the most common problems in Central Asian everyday life. State languages usually differ from everyday languages and languages of ethnic minorities are rarely incorporated into governmental structures. While even many Tajik native speakers show difficulties in understanding the changing official state language<sup>4</sup>, language issues are becoming a real everyday life obstacle to the inhabitants of Gorno-Badakhshan. In Western Badakhshan where the majority of the population are speakers of Pamir languages<sup>5</sup> Tajik is still more widely understood than in the Eastern highlands of the region where the majority are Kyrgyz who speak a Turkic language.

In summer 2009, I conducted field research in Murgab. Murgab is a predominantly Kyrgyz district town in the Eastern Pamirs. Out of approximately 7000 inhabitants, 5000 are Kyrgyz and about 2000 have a diverse ethnic, but common religious background. While the Kyrgyz define themselves as Sunnis of the Hanafi school, most inhabitants of (linguistically) “Iranian” origin (Shughni, Wakhi, Bartangi, Yazgulomi, Rushoni etc.) share a common Shia-Ismaili identity. They have strong ties to the Ismaili communities in the Western parts of Gorno-Badakhshan.

This religious and ethnical setting makes Murgab an interesting field site for the observation of confessional co-existence and political decision-making in a highly marginalized region. On the one hand, the Kyrgyz of the Eastern Pamirs play almost no role in the public sphere of Tajikistan. It is even hard to talk about a specific perception of the Kyrgyz in the Western

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<sup>3</sup> See Blitt/Durham (2008) and Epkenhans (2008).

<sup>4</sup> Usually, Russian words are replaced by words of Arabic or Iranian origin.

<sup>5</sup> The Pamir languages belong to a subgroup of the Eastern Iranian languages. While its speakers are officially defined as Tajiks, they linguistically and culturally differ from Tajiks in the Western parts of the country.

parts of the country since their existence seems to be largely ignored. On the other hand, many Tajik national decisions of rule and governance are reflected in the Eastern Pamirs. The effects of their execution and transformation serve as expressive examples of how a state (or the notion of it) is constructed in the course of approval, rejection, and everyday interaction.<sup>6</sup>

## **Law and Confusion**

When I was talking to a state official in the Eastern Pamirs in summer 2009, two religious men joined and interrupted our conversation. After my initial irritation had faded, I realized that I was witnessing an extraordinary situation of negotiating the state. The two men came to see the official in order to seek help with the understanding and interpretation of the new law on religion that was issued in March 2009. However, the Tajik capital Dushanbe lies 1000 kilometres to the West, the roads to the Pamirs are bumpy and news usually need some time to arrive in the highlands of Murgab.

After both men had paid their respect to the official, one of them started:

It happened this way: The last time I was in Dushanbe, there was a meeting at X.'s place. X. invited us (...) He asked about the documents. Y. told him that the documents of the mosque were ready and sent to Dushanbe. And now X. is sending requests to mosques asking about the documents. Guests from the mosques are coming and ask us what to do. You were there when we were asked to prepare documents. We will submit them as soon as we finish it on the basis of the law... Which documents are needed? (...) X. was given wrong informations...X. started to run after us. We have become the guilty ones.

Beside the fact that these religious men of Murgab had become victims of chaotic and often haphazard Tajik bureaucratic procedures this statement tells us more than just a complaint about a sole incident of injustice. The on-going implementation of the new law on religion has caused confusion and a re-evaluation of the religious landscape. As it turned out later during the conversation, even if the text of the law could be obtained language would be a major obstacle in understanding the content. Few Kyrgyz in Murgab have a proficient knowledge of the state language Tajik while almost no official documents from Dushanbe are issued in any other language that could be understood in the region of Murgab (Kyrgyz or Russian). This is also reflected in the following part of the conversation between the three men:

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<sup>6</sup> See Das/Poole (2004).

- A.: I don't know. I wasn't there. There was another issue. Z. and I were given a task. Then Z. wrote a letter. I don't know what would be the response...
- B.: It's like that. Nothing will happen within the next 10-15 years. The mass speaks Kyrgyz and there is no such development as during the Union.
- A.: Is the charter in Kyrgyz and Russian?
- B.: No, it's fully in Kyrgyz. Who would understand if we make it in Tajik? Nobody would understand. Moreover, it would be good for us if the charter was in Kyrgyz. Because people understand what we are doing and what needs to be done. It is not right to force people to learn Tajik today. (...)

In Murgab executors of a law often have to consult knowledgeable individuals who are experienced in working with the state language. This not only leads to a new hermeneutic setting as the power of interpretation lies with few, but also fosters negative feelings towards the structure that is defined as “the state” (Kyrg. *mamleket*) and that is located in the capital Dushanbe. The Russian term for “dictatorship” (*diktatura*) is sometimes used in Murgab when people talk about the governmental language policy as well as about new regulations in the field of religion.

### **Law and State Intervention**

The new law on religious associations is being discussed in Tajikistan since 2002 and is ought to replace the 1994's law on religion that was designed during the civil war. While the 1994's law was already meant to control religious activities rather than to coordinate and facilitate them, the new law on religious associations aims at state interference.<sup>7</sup> It is no surprise that since 2006 the concept of state religion slowly emerged in Tajikistan along with the new law. In the course of the implementation of the law on religion, mosques and all buildings connected to religious activities in Tajikistan have to be re-registered. On the one hand, this causes various problems to those involved in such activities since status and use of the buildings have to be legitimized and documentation has to be provided. On the other hand

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<sup>7</sup> See Epkenhans (2009), p. 431-432.

however the process of governmental re-assessment of the religious landscape gives denominations a chance to register their facilities that have not been recognized so far. The promotion of state lead religion that can be observed in media such as the national TV as well as newspapers comes along with the regulation of “foreign activities”. These include Christian mission as well as the presence of Islamic movements that are often perceived through the discursive angle of “extremism”.

In recent years, the fear for “religious extremism” became one of the main concerns in Tajik public discourse which was to a large extent dominated by the presidential apparatus. As in other Central Asian republics, the boundaries between the marginalization of religious movements for the sake of national security (Taj. *amniyati milli*) and the stigmatization of opposition members as so-called “terrorists” (Taj. *terroristho*) are blurry.

When I conducted field research in Murgab in summer 2008 bearded men usually went from door to door in order to talk about the correct practice of Islam. These men who called themselves *daavatchys* in Kyrgyz were not perceived as strangers since many of them originated in the region. Many inhabitants of the town regarded the *daavat*, the call to Islam and its correct practice, as a noble action and some of my informants thought the *daavatchys* to be new dervishes (Kyrg. *derbishter*) who had disappeared in the course of the early Soviet period.<sup>8</sup> As I described in an earlier publication on Islam in Kyrgyzstan<sup>9</sup> these men belong to or are inspired by the Tablighi Jama'at, a religious movement of transnational dimension.

When I came back to Murgab in winter and summer 2009 the bearded men had slowly disappeared from public sphere. At first I did not realize how serious the intimidation was for the members and admirers of the Tablighi Jama'at. But soon I came across the Kyrgyz term “jamaat” (here: Tablighi Jama'at) on many occasions. It was mentioned in homes, at the bazaar and in newspapers. Although the movement was already prohibited in 2006, the new law and the prohibition of the jamaat were now discussed together as an action of shaping a state lead religion. This is also reflected in one part of the conversation I have mentioned above:

A.: I wanted to discuss with you about the *jamaat*. I wanted to show this newspaper to you. (*He shows the newspaper Asia Plus*) 150 people were imprisoned. I wanted to read it once again...and a secular-religious studying place has been launched...in Dushanbe. And there was something about Imam Azam. It's in Russian. It says “What does the new law tell us about religion?” This is what we need. They wrote about the special features

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<sup>8</sup> The *daavatchys* were described as similar to pre-Soviet dervishes, however less powerful. In contrast to the dervishes *daavatchys* would neither overcome physics (e.g. by flying) nor heal.

<sup>9</sup> See Mostowlansky (2007), p. 105-115.

praising them. They say that it's applicable to international standards. It's a general article. There's the Party of Islamic Revival. It's the Islamic Party. They wrote their opinions. In some places there are some contradictions...

*The conversation goes on and they turn to an administrative topic connected to the law. After a while the three men come back to where A. started.*

- A.: Yes...I've also read a newspaper today. It's "Islam and West". I've been reading this kind of things. There was an issue whether Tajikistan will be an Islamic state in 10-15 years or not. I don't remember where it was. Now the number of interested people in religion has grown. The religion has been enhanced in Tajikistan. There was the question whether it will go on or not. Maybe it's here... (*He looks for the newspaper*) I misplaced it. I don't know where it is now. It was interesting. It says "An Islamic State of Tajikistan, is it possible within the next 10-15 years?". It's interesting to read.
- C.: If it happens in Tajikistan within 10-15 years, then in Kyrgyzstan it would happen in 7 years. It (*Islam*) is more powerful in Kyrgyzstan.
- A.: If you want to look through, please take it. (*He hands over the newspaper*)

In this excerpt of the conversation a field of discourse that is similar to the discussions about the law on religion gains more importance: the sensitive question of "religious extremism" and the transformation of the state. This is not a co-incident since the newspaper articles on the law, the national definition of Islam and on the Tablighi Jama'at can be found altogether in one issue of the Tajik-Russian newspaper *Asia Plus*.<sup>10</sup> While the permission or prohibition of religious organizations and movements are not necessarily connected to the new law on religion, many people in Murgab consider them related. The Tablighi Jama'at was already prohibited in 2006, but only from spring 2009 public awareness of this fact lead to a decrease in Tablighi-activities in the region.

## **The Tablighi Movement**

The Tablighi Jama'at has its historical roots in Northern India. In Mewat, a region south of Delhi, the movement began develop at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as an endeavour of

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<sup>10</sup> *Asia Plus*, 27<sup>th</sup> of May 2009. *Asia Plus* is considered the only independent newspaper in Tajikistan. However, the newspaper's "independence" is based on the idea that it does not openly promote governmental interests. There is no serious critique of the government.

faith renewal. Wherever the local population was considered “nominal Muslims” the early protagonists of the movement called for purification of faith and religious practice.<sup>11</sup> However, the movement extended its activities in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from local to transnational level and is now active all over the world. The presence of the movement in Central Asia started soon after the independence of the republics that were formerly part of the Soviet Union, but especially in recent years Tabligh-activities are more consciously noticed in public discourse.<sup>12</sup> In Tajikistan as well as in other republics there are some major contradictions between the emic (members) and the etic (media, local governments) perception of the movements that are associated with the terms “political Islam” and “transnational identity”. In regard to both terms the Tablighis’ point of view considerably differs from how they are depicted in media and by the government. While Tablighis are often identified as Islamists who are involved in militant activities and the struggle for political power<sup>13</sup>, nobody connected to faith renewal in Murgab showed any interest in violent actions or politics in general. Furthermore, political involvement is seen as impure and of no use to the correct realization of faith. This attitude towards “the political” certainly fits the official position of Tablighi Jama’at, but seems not convincing to Central Asian governments.<sup>14</sup> Tablighis are often identified as “Islamists” (Taj. *islamistho*), “Salafists” (Taj. *salafistho*) or “Wahhabi” (Taj. *vahabitho*).<sup>15</sup> In the microcosm of Murgab, however, Tablighis (locally known as *daavatchys*) are regarded as pious men leading a pure life. These men (and increasingly women) are sometimes depicted as comical characters due to their non-Kyrgyz clothes (*shalwar kamiz*) and their moral speeches, but political involvement or any other action in connection to worldly matters (Kyrg. *düinö*) are not attributed to them. Nevertheless, the definition of “the political” is shaped by discourse and its agents. Even if protagonists of the movement do not define it as political, one should not underestimate the political power of the vision of an ideal society and its religion. But these processes may be much more subtle than governmental structures would like to make us believe. Regarding the political role of the Tablighi Jama’at Marc Gaborieau states:

To my mind the dividing line is not between apolitical and political movements; it is between two ways of conceiving politics. On the one hand, with the Islamists, we have a short-sighted conception of politics in the framework of the nation-states, which aims at conquering power by

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<sup>11</sup> Masud (2000b), p. 3-43.

<sup>12</sup> See Arynov (2009).

<sup>13</sup> See “*Dzhamo’ati Tablig’ novaia ugroza Tadzhikistanu?* (2009).

<sup>14</sup> Not only Central Asian government consider the Tablighi Jama’at as “wolf in sheep’s clothing”. See the rather polemical article in the Middle East Quarterly by Alex Alexiev (2005).

<sup>15</sup> For similar developments in Thailand see Braam (2006), p. 43.

the shortest route. On the other hand, with other schools like the Tablighis and the Deobandis, there is a far-sighted conception of politics. Going beyond the narrow borders of nation-states, they have not set fixed short-term ends. Putting politics most often in parentheses, they first build individuals and institutions, which over time may exert a more lasting political influence.<sup>16</sup>

Marc Gaborieau talks about the extension of concepts beyond the borders of nation-states. Social scientists often refer to such concepts as transnational even though transnationalism, as it used in many studies on migration and diaspora, remains a rather blurry category.<sup>17</sup> Apart from this, it can still make sense to apply the term “transnational” to a movement like the Tablighi Jama’at if it is taken into consideration that transnationalism is not necessarily opposed to nationalism. As Masud states, the “Jamā’at has adopted physical movement and travel as the most effective method of reform”. It then “gradually expanded this from local to national to transnational travel”. On the other hand, “the Jamā’at has adopted transnationalism as a means of seeking legitimacy for its ideology. The more the Jamā’at expands transnationally the more universally its ideology is recognized.”<sup>18</sup>

As I tried to show with the case of Central Kyrgyzstan earlier<sup>19</sup>, certain components of what Masud calls “ideology” are universalized. The promotion of being Muslim as the most important identity marker is a universalized value as well as the unimportance of national borders. In the case of Murgab, the neglect of Tajik national borders and the expansion of the *daavat*-network from Kyrgyz communities in Kyrgyzstan to the ones of the Eastern Pamirs appears as a sensitive issue to the state. On the other hand, many facets of national discourses are being borrowed and integrated into Tablighi teachings.<sup>20</sup> Tablighi members always originate from a specific context and try to promote their goals within the framework of local narratives.<sup>21</sup> This is how I experienced the *daavatchys* of the Eastern Pamirs who are mostly local Kyrgyz and brought up in an educational environment that is very much influenced by Soviet national and ethnic categories of thinking. Furthermore, the oscillation between national and transnational dimensions of the movement is demonstrated by the fact that many elements of the Tablighi discourse are already considered local common sense in Murgab. This can be observed based on Tablighi literature in use, religious specialists who feel

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<sup>16</sup> Gaborieau (1999), p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> See Vertovec (2009), p. 1-26.

<sup>18</sup> Masud (2000a), p. xvi.

<sup>19</sup> See Mostowlansky (2007), p. 93-115.

<sup>20</sup> Kyrgyzstan’s state sanctioned stereotype of Kyrgyz as „nominal“, „superficial“ Muslims belongs to these borrowings as well as the constant reference to the Kyrgyz’s nomadic past.

<sup>21</sup> See Noor (2007), p. 24.



attraction towards *daavat* as well as on the opinion of many people in Murgab who regard the Tablighis as Kyrgyz, Tajik citizens and initiators of a local endeavour.

### **Jamoat, Jamaat, Jamat – the Other Transnation**

The use of the originally Arabic term “jamā’a” (community, congregation, collective) in Gorno-Badakhshan reflects the colouring of the word in its respective context. While the Tajik version “jamoat” denotes the communal level of political organization and is used to describe the sub-divisions of a district, the Kyrgyz “jamaat” and the anglicised Ismaili term “jamat” contain the dimension of religious attachment. As I showed above Kyrgyz refer to the Tablighi Jama’at simply as “jamaat” (community). In the same way members of a different transnational movement sometimes express the belonging. With the integration of the Ismaili population of Gorno-Badakhshan into the global network of Ismailis since the early 1990s the meaning of the word “jamat” (community) has truly developed to a category of transnational dimensions. As Jonah Steinberg states in his doctoral dissertation *The Anatomy of the Transnation: The Globalization of the Isma’ili Muslim Community* the terms “transnational” and “transnation” are imperfect ones since the correct description of such phenomena would include concepts of “trans-state-nation”, “trans-ethnic-nation” as well as “trans-local-nation”.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, Steinberg provides a definition of “transnation” that could support the comparison of movements and such as the Tablighi Jama’at and the Ismaili community<sup>23</sup>:

The term “transnation” is meant to refer to a community which is widely-scattered across the planet yet tightly bound together by intensive communicative process. It is a community which, crucially, considers itself a community. It is a community with no territorial base but which still acts in some ways as a political unit. And it is a community which can serve as a site of individual and social organization and identification.<sup>24</sup>

Later on, Steinberg presents a short comparison of the Tablighi Jama’at and the Ismaili community according to their level of centralization and some typological features.<sup>25</sup> It can be questioned, however, if it makes sense to compare two communities on the basis of abstract

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<sup>22</sup> Steinberg (2006), p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> On the use of the term „movement“ in the Ismaili context see Grondelle (2009), p. 14-19.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 43-47.

facts just because they are both usually defined as transnational in academic literature. As I focus on notions of the state and its attitude towards transnational movements in this research paper, it may be reasonable to analyze how transnational movements are being perceived rather than how their phenomenological abstraction could look like.

When talking about the Tablighi Jama'at in the Eastern Pamirs I mentioned that the prohibition of the movement in Tajikistan in 2006 was probably strongly connected to the undifferentiated governmental definition of Islamic (or Islamist) movements as well as "misbehaviour" of single members. On the other hand, such acts of prohibition also include the restoration of sovereignty when facing concurrence in the Tajik context.<sup>26</sup>

The "jealousy" of the presidential apparatus can grow to remarkable dimensions in the battle for the identity of Tajik citizens. In Khorog, the "capital" of Gorno-Badakhshan, letterings made from white stones such as "Welcome our Hazir Imam. Golden Jubilee Mubarrak" (some in English, some in Tajik) can be seen on the mountain sides. These letterings remember the Agha Khan's ceremonial visits to the city in his function as leader of the global Ismaili community. In 2008, the Tajik president Rahmon(ov) visited the region and a similar lettering in honour of the political leader had to be prepared above Khorog. After some locals had tried to remove the stones the night before the visit and had been caught, rumours circulated that they were kept in the KGB prison for several days.

Of course, letterings on mountainsides belong first of all to the realm of symbolic values. They can function as strong signs of respect or disrespect (if they are removed). In the case of Khorog, these incidents reflect the encounter of a representative of the state and the leader of a community that (at least implicitly) promotes the idea of transnational space and belonging. Moreover, such conflicts are fostered by the fact that Ismaili development institutions play a powerful role in the erection and preservation of local infrastructure. Furthermore, they provide the Ismaili population with education programmes and accessibility to the outside world (mainly through scholarships and community exchange).

## **Conclusions**

A state is not an entity that is defined by linear structures and unity. As the example of Tajikistan and the Autonomous Region of Gorno-Badakhshan shows, the answer to the question of what should belong to the state and what can be excluded is dependent on more

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<sup>26</sup> For the discussion of Ismaili institutions and state sovereignty in Pakistan see Hussain (2009).

than just the definition of the president's administration. While such an administration struggles for the promotion of values along the guidelines of national history, ethnicity and religion, other movements and networks provide different markers of identity. These markers vary from being a good Muslim, living a pure life to travelling on the right path or otherwise from being Ismaili to being modern, enlightened, and mobile. All these markers, however, are still contextualized and construed in the framework of the state. Transnational movements adapt themselves to their respective environment. This can be shown by the example of the Tablighi Jama'at that uses elements of national and ethnic historiographies in order to promote its goals as well as by the global Ismaili community that is still divided by parameters of ethnicity and citizenship. However, in Murgab as well as in Khorog people's lives are affected by contradictory attitudes towards the importance of ethnic concepts. While the presidential apparatus attempts to define nationality along Tajik ethnicity, transnational movements in the region offer a broad range of options. Since these movements shape local notions of the state, modernity and religion, a further analysis of how respective discourses are embedded in everyday life seems crucial.

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