

LEGENDS



OF THE PAMIRS

Retold by Robert Middleton

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Cover photo: Oston-i Pir-i Foqmamad in Darshay, Wakhan.

INTRODUCTION

Folklore and legends are part of a people's cultural identity. They serve to tell them much about themselves and facilitate understanding of their culture by others.

The religious tradition in the Pamirs is inextricably interwoven with stories of saints and holy men and of the places where they are believed to have been and of the miracles and other deeds that they performed.

The rich oral tradition of the Pamirs, as all other orally transmitted elements of culture throughout the world, is in danger of being lost. It was part of my job for the Aga Khan Foundation in the 1990s to bring electricity to remote villages in the Pamirs, but each time that a mini-hydel – as the small hydro-power generating stations were known locally – was brought into operation in a remote valley I had some pangs of regret for the loss that television would bring sooner or later to those spontaneous moments of music, dancing and story-telling that made it a joy to go on a field trip up the valleys of the Pamirs.

It was with delight, therefore, that I discovered the legends and stories collected by Nisormamad Shakarmamadov and his students at the Rudaki Institute for Language and Literature in Dushanbe, affiliated with the Tajik Academy of Sciences, and published with the assistance of the Institute of Ismaili Studies in 2005 (*Фолклори Ҷомӣ*). As part of my work with the Mountain Societies Development Support Programme on promoting tourism in the Pamirs, I was also able to encourage the collection of more legends and stories by Nisormamad and a group of local students.

In conceiving this book, it was my intention to make this wealth of material available to an international English-speaking audience. It is not a translation of Nisormamad's work but a

retelling of the stories that he and his students recorded. I admit freely my use of poetic licence when a story was obscure or the moral uncertain and I am not ashamed to admit that I have chosen those with the most powerful narrative or interesting historical thread. In some cases I have combined several oral accounts into a single text where this made for a more complete narrative.

Sources are given in the end-notes and I have included Appendices listing the main shrines in the Pamirs and an explanatory glossary. (Both of these are taken from my Pamirs section of the guidebook *Tajikistan and the High Pamirs*, published by Odyssey in 2008.)

There is a reason why stories are passed on by word of mouth: I hope that in my retelling I have not done violence to the essential purpose of these tales and that this book will encourage many to travel to the Pamirs to discover the extraordinary hospitality and vitality of the people who live there, and, for those who have already made their acquaintance, enrich their understanding of what was certainly an unforgettable experience.

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WHEN GOD CREATED THE WORLD



When God created the world, he asked all the people to form a line so that he could distribute the lands of the earth to them.

Now everyone knows that the Pamiri is not big, he is very polite and does not use his elbows. So the Pamiri representative found himself at the end of the line.

When it was his turn, God looked surprised: “It seems I miscalculated,” he said. “I don’t have any land left for you.”

The Pamiri began to cry – and everyone knows that when a Pamiri cries, even God cries too.

God put his arm around the Pamiri. “It was my fault,” he said. “Actually, I do have one little piece of land left that I was going to keep for myself as my garden. But since I made such a foolish mistake I will give it to you. It is called Badakhshan.”¹



When God created man he began with a handful of earth brought by the angels. He asked the angels to think how best to design this new being. The angels were perplexed and God said, “Look in this pail of water and you will find inspiration.”

The angels looked into the pail held by God and saw the reflection of God’s countenance. In this way, man came to be created in God’s image.

When the body had been made, God asked the angels to give it a soul. The angels brought a spirit and ordered it to enter the body. When the spirit reached the throat it complained that the passage was too narrow and it would go no further. God ordered the angels to play music; the spirit began to dance and in this way it entered man’s body – that is why man’s voice recalls the music played by the angels and man dances when his soul is awakened by music.

The spirit continued to complain to God about the limits of the body and threatened to leave. God agreed that the spirit should be bound to the body only for a limited time. In this way, the spirit is able to leave the body when man is dead.²



When God created man, he gave him a life of thirty years. Man was not happy with this and complained to God.

God replied that He had already allocated life to all living beings – to give man a longer life He would have to take years from the life of other animals. Man insisted.

So God gave man ten more years from the donkey, ten from the dog and ten from the monkey.

That is why man lives without care until thirty; then he begins to work like a donkey; after ten years he starts to fight like a dog; and his last ten years are spent playing games with his grandchildren.³



It is said that in the olden days man's stride was seven meters long and therefore he was able to run very fast. In those days the wolf could not escape with his prey because man always caught him up and took away the sheep and the lambs he had caught. The wolf always remained hungry.

In despair, the wolf went to God and complained: "You created me to hunt but I can never hunt successfully. Man always runs after me and catches me."

God felt sorry for the wolf. He gave him two cups and told him to throw them with all his strength when next he was chased by man. "How will two cups stop him?" said the wolf. "You will see," said God – "Believe in me."

The next day, the wolf stole a big sheep. Sure enough, man followed him with big steps until he caught up with him. The wolf hurled the cups at his pursuer as hard as he could, hitting him in the middle of his legs.

Since then, men have kneecaps and cannot take big steps. The wolf no longer goes hungry.⁴



When God created the world, he did not make a monkey. The monkey came about in this way:

In the first days of the world, a woman had baked a flat loaf of bread. Just then a poor man knocked at her door. She let him in but did not want to share her bread with him and so she sat on it. After a while the poor man left.

When the woman got up the flat bread stuck to her and she had been changed into a monkey because of her meanness. Since then the bottom of the monkey looks like a flat loaf.⁵



It is said that the marmot was originally a human being.

Once two men quarrelled about a piece of land. They took their argument to the Qozi (judge) but he could not settle the quarrel.

They decided to ask the land itself to whom it belonged and to sleep on the field and wait for a voice in the night.

One of the men dug a hole in the middle of the field and hid his son in it. At midnight, the son cried out the name of his father so that the other would then recognise him as the owner.

In the morning, the son had been changed into a marmot. Since then marmots live underground.⁶



It is said that in Noah's time there was a big flood. The prophet sent the hen to find dry land. Having found it, the hen did not return immediately but lived a comfortable life eating grains.

Noah waited long for the hen, but finally sent the dove and the raven to find out if the flood had ended and look for dry ground.

They fulfilled their mission but Noah was so angry with the hen that from that day she can no longer fly.

THE PROPHE TS, SAINTS AND HOLY MEN



The Prophets Joseph and David once had an argument about their respective talents. Joseph’s beauty amazed all and David had a wonderful voice. Joseph said to David: “Let us go down to the river – the goddess Anahita will tell us who is right.”

When they got to the river, Anahita was so struck by Joseph’s beauty that she stopped the river flowing. But as soon as David started singing she let it free again.⁷



Once, long ago, the king of a far-away country decided to find out what his subjects thought of him. He put on the clothes of a hermit and walked among his people.

To his surprise, no one had anything to say about the king – all only spoke of someone called Khotam-i Toy and of his saintly deeds. The king was angry, because he had offered many camels to his people and had organised many entertainments.

He went back to his palace and, having put on his royal robes again, called all the people together for an entertainment at which he announced that he would give a thousand dinars to any one who brought him the head of Khotam-i Toy.

The people were very surprised, and all looked at one another wondering who would betray Khotam-i Toy. Only one poor man set off to look for him.

After a few days, he found a strange-looking man at the edge of town, who said to him: “My friend, I see that something is heavy on your soul. What can I do for you?”

The poor man told him of his intention to find Khotam-i Toy and bring his head to the king.

The strange-looking man said: “I am the one you are looking for. There is no need to take my head – I will go with you in person before the king and make sure you get your reward.”

The poor man was deeply embarrassed because he had revealed his greedy thoughts to Khotam-i Toy. He started to ask forgiveness. Khotam-i Toy told him:

“You have been tormented by these thoughts but to refuse the reward would be bad and you need the money.”

The poor man said, “I could not foresee that Khotam-i Toy was a poor person like me and I cannot accept a thousand dinars from the king for this act.” Khotam-i Toy answered: “If you will not take me, I will go alone and tell the king it was you who found me.”

The poor man was compelled to go with Khotam-i Toy to the king. On the road into the city, the people saw the two and understood that this was Khotam-i Toy being brought to the king. Some of them were jealous and decided to claim the thousand dinars for themselves.

A crowd arrived at the palace, with each one shouting that he was the one who had found Khotam-i Toy. He, however, addressed the king and said, “I am the person you were looking for and it was this poor man who found me. He deserves the thousand dinars.”

The king asked the poor man if this was correct and how he had found Khotam-i Toy. The poor man told the king exactly as it was.

The king gave the poor man his reward but let Khotam-i Toy free for his bravery and honesty. Now the king understood why there were legends about Khotam-i Toy.⁸



On the river Vomardara in the center of Rushan, before it joins the Panj, there are two huge plane trees at a place called Langar. According to legend they grew from the staffs of Sho Nosir Khusraw and Sho Tolib Sarmast which they planted there on their journey to Badakhshan 900 years ago. The place is revered as holy by the local people and it is here that Sho Tolib is buried.⁹





The six holy pirs (meaning the highest religious leaders – Sho Nosir, Sho Tolib, Said-Jalol, Said Surobi-Vali, Bobo Umari Anghi and the one-armed master builder Hasan) were all sent to the Pamirs to make it inhabitable, for at that time there were no roads and no paths. Everything was covered in dense forests and rocky places.

They began by building “ovrings” which are the precarious passages built into the rock face above the river and that allow people and animals to pass. The first were built with branches and stones at difficult places on the left bank of the Panj, at Darg and Tirak in lower Rushan. Once these were complete, they built more ovrings at Kul and Millopar. When they had finished, they had made a road of ovrings for all to travel to the home of the Imam.¹⁰



19th century Russian sketch of an “ovring”

They returned to Vomar, where Sho Tolib died. One-armed Hasan built a tomb there for him and Sho Tolib’s brother Said-Jalol stayed to guard it. It is still there today and people call the place Shotolib.

Bobo Umari Inghi settled in Bar Rushan, where Sho Nosir called a meeting of the people and converted them to Islam. He requested Bobo Umari Inghi to remain as their teacher. Said Surobi-Vali set off for Osh and Sho Nosir walked as far as the highest part of Porshinev.

There was no water there and Sho Nosir was thirsty. An old woman came by with a jug of water from the river below; Sho Nosir asked her for a drink to slake his thirst.

The old woman laughed at him and said: “You must fetch water for yourself old man.”

Sho Nosir was angry and struck the ground with his staff. He then calmed down and began to pray. At the place where he struck his staff, a pure fountain sprang up. He thanked God for quenching his thirst and requested that the fountain should remain to help the people to cultivate their land. He wrote some words on the stones in Arabic saying “Where there is water there is life”.

Every day many local people, but also people from other countries, come there to drink holy water from silver cups and have a rest under the trees. Before going on a long journey people come to the spring to take some water with them and pray to God to keep them safe. Newly married couples also come to the spring to worship and pray for blessing.

Sho Nosir continued on his way but the people came to look at this miracle and understood that he was a very holy man and built a shrine in his honour. Today this is a holy place where the water still flows. A statue of Sho Nosir was built there.



From Porshinev, Sho Nosir travelled to Ishkashim. On the way he met a dragon that tried to swallow him. Sho Nosir started to pray and the dragon was turned to stone. You can still see the stone near the road.

From Ishkashim he crossed the river and went to Yumgan where he died and is buried.¹¹



In Darwaz there lived a giant by the name of Iskandar. He believed that Sho Nosir Khusraw was a sorcerer and was jealous of him.

One evening Iskandar began to plan an attack on Nosir Khusraw. He fell asleep and next morning his beard was gone and he was completely bald, not a hair on his head. He immediately understood that he was making a mistake in trying to attack Nosir Khusraw.

Iskandar repented and went to a nearby village where Nosir Khusraw and his brother Abusaid were meeting the people. Iskander addressed to him the following verses:

Sho Nosir Khusraw, you are the Lord of Truth.
I, Iskandar, from Darwaz, have made you these verses.
Everyone who comes to you seeking justice
Is rewarded with truth.

When Nosir Khusraw heard these verses he told Iskandar he should go back home and all would be forgiven. The next morning Iskandar's hair grew again and his beard returned.

After that Iskandar made more verses:

Sho Nosir Khusraw, look at us,
Before death give me courage and patience.
I know that I am guilty of many crimes,
Take care of me in the dark tomb.

Iskandar is buried in a place in Darwaz known as Iskandar's prison.¹²



One day, while Nosir Khusraw was bathing, a snake crept into his boot, intending to bite him. An eagle noticed all this and, flying down, scooped up the boot in its claws. Nosir Khusraw had not seen the snake and was angry with the eagle for stealing his boot.

In the meantime the eagle had succeeded in getting the snake out of the boot and flew back to Nosir Khusraw, who was by then fully dressed but with only one boot.

The eagle dropped the boot in front of him. Nosir Khusraw then understood what had happened and dedicated a poem in thanks to the eagle.¹³



My grandfather remembered there was once a very hot summer. A Mullah called Nazardod and he were in a barn threshing wheat. My grandfather was very thirsty but no matter how much he drank, he could never satisfy his thirst.

Nazardod was a Mullah whose faith was very strong. He took a bet with my grandfather that he would find a way to satisfy his thirst. My grandfather agreed.

Mullah Nazardod then took my grandfather's skull-cap, put it in front of him and placed some grains under it. He then began to recite a prayer. When he had finished, he asked my grandfather to lift up his cap.

My grandfather could not move it. Nazardod lifted it and under the cap was ice and snow.¹⁴



Luqman-i Hakim was a wise man who had a reputation as a healer. One day a man complained to him of a headache. Luqman-i Hakim told him it was the result of old age.

Another man complained of a pain in his legs. Luqman-i Hakim again answered, that it is caused by old age.

Yet another started to tell Luqman-i Hakim about a pain in his stomach. Again, the diagnosis was old age. The man became angry with Luqman-i Hakim and told him his advice was useless and he was a fool.

Luqman-i Hakim answered him: "If you were not an old man you would not speak these words."¹⁵



ALEXANDER THE GREAT (ISKANDER)



It is told that when Iskander was still a small boy, his grandfather Amyntas III gave him the following prophecy: “Iskander, you will inherit all my territory and more. Know that the ashes of our ancestors are located in Badakhshan. This land I bequeath to you – but you must promise to protect it for all time.”

In due course, Iskander came to Badakhshan and went up to the place called Sheva, known from ancient times as “Dakhmai Shokhon” which means burial place of the kings. Iskander thought long about how to fulfil his promise to his grandfather.

Finally he decided to block off the river passing through Sheva. And thus the lake was formed that exists there today, protecting the bones of Iskander’s ancestors for all time. It is said that at night Iskander’s horses, led by Bucephalus (meaning “ox-head” on account of his great strength), come out of the lake and mate with the mares grazing near the lake. Their offspring are the most beautiful horses in the world.¹⁶



Before he died, Iskander decreed that when he was placed in his coffin, his hands should be left outside. Many wise men wondered about this.

When his coffin was carried before the people, a simple market woman explained the message: “I, Iskander, have conquered East and West, I have won many victories. All people bow down before me. Yet today I leave the world empty-handed and take only my shroud into the next world.”¹⁷



It is said that Iskander requested his mother, when he should be dead, to bring together all the daughters and wives of his followers and only after they were all gathered should he be buried.

Many were puzzled by this but, when he died, his mother followed his request.

Among those gathered at this time, some had lost a son, some a husband, some a father. And in time they understood Iskander’s message: that no one is spared from death – and tears for the one are tears for all lost loved ones.¹⁸



LEGENDS OF BARTANG AND RUSHAN



In the village of Deh there are five *qadamgoh* shrines (the name *qadamgoh* is given to those shrines where a holy person is believed to have left a footprint or other mark of his presence), one of which is named Safedoston (meaning “white shrine”). This shrine is the highest of the five and has the reputation of providing protection to the people from danger and natural disasters.

It is said that Hazrat Khizir (a name by which Hazrat Ali is known) shook the mountain above the village and caused a big rock to fall from the top and block the flow of the river, so that it would not flood the village.

Since then no mudflow or any other kind of natural disaster has ever threatened Deh. The people revere that stone for the protection it affords them. Because the stone was white, the holy place is called Safedoston. The white stone is visible even on the darkest night.¹⁹



In the village of Shidz there is one main shrine, called Kuhnpush (meaning “person wearing old clothes”). It is said that a holy man came to the village dressed in old clothes (“kuhna” means old and “push” means clothes) and spoke words of blessing for the community (“duoguy”). Above Shidz there is a fresh spring where he settled: you can still see the big stone which he used as a pillow.

One day the trees in Shidz caught fire and the snakes and other animals fled to safety above the village. A snake came up to Kuhnpush and said: “O, Kuhnpush, please protect me and put me inside your sleeve.” He put the snake inside his sleeve and when the fire had stopped he told the snake to come out.

The snake replied: “Open your hand so that I can bite it”. He said: “But I did you a good favour.” The snake replied: “Good is rewarded with evil.”

Kuhnpush was angry at the snake’s treachery and he shattered it against the mountain opposite the village so that its black and white colours were imprinted there for all to see.

At that time there were three great religious leaders: Kuhnpush lived in Shidz, Shohtolib in Vomar and Mushkilkusho went to Yemtz and settled there. When Kuhnpush arrived in Shidz, the people wanted to find out whether he was really a holy man.

A man named Hakim asked if he could find fresh apricots during the winter season. He raised his hands for prayer, and then reached underneath his hat, which was on the snow, and took out fresh apricots and gave them to Hakim. Hakim ate the apricots, fell ill that night and died. He was buried beneath the place where today is the tomb of Kuhnpush. After his burial a big stone fell and rested on the top of his tomb. At this time a voice called out from inside the stone saying: “Because I doubted the word of a holy man I must die like an animal.”

Since that time, whenever their animals were dying from disease, the people would come to this shrine, not only from Shidz but also from the Afghan side of the river Panj, and take some soil from there and then shake it over their animals or mix it in water for the animals to drink. Today, in Shidz, we walk our animals round the stone and their illness disappears.²⁰



In the village of Wamd near the power station there is an oston known as the Chiltan Spring, where there is said to be Hazrat Mawlana Ali's *qadamgoh* (footprint).

It is said that when Hazrat Ali was passing by this place, it was uninhabited: no trees grew nor was there any other sign of life. Hazrat Ali came with forty men and rested on the spot where is now the oston.

Hazrat Qambar asked him: “O, Ali, what are we doing in such a dry and deserted place?”

Hazrat Mawlana Ali raised his hand in blessing with the power of God and said “Inshallah (God willing) water will come from this valley.”

A minute passed and water streamed down from four sides and four springs appeared there.

It is also said that in the beginning the spring gave only a little water, but as time passed and the population of the village grew, the amount of water increased accordingly. Near the spring, if one looks carefully, Hazrat Ali's *qadamgoh* can be seen on the stone.

This place was called Chiltan because of the forty followers who accompanied Hazrat Ali.²¹



Once on the eastern side of today's town of Vomar there was a large jungle: this place is still called Jangal. Before that this place was called Rukhmargh. Because

there were frequent mudflows in Vomar, people preferred to live in Rukhmargh. Their leader was Shoh Husain. He was a religious man and a great scholar. Once a king set up his court in Vomar, but the people didn't respect him, they only listened to Shoh Husain.

The king considered Shoh Husain as his enemy and threatened to hang him if he didn't go away from there. Shoh Husain struck his spade on the ground and said: "Place of evil, may the water come!" and from Bartang a flood came down and destroyed that place, and only stones remained from where the king had settled. Then he left for Bartang. On leaving, he paused for a while and the place where he rested is now the *oston* of Shoh Husain.²²



In the direction of Maydon there is a big boulder they call Khaymasang (which means "stone like a yurt"). An oston is there with this name. It is said that this stone once had a door, which opened by itself. A boy was passing by in winter and saw that the door was open and a fire was burning inside. The boy went in and found an old man and a baby in a cradle.

The old man told the boy to warm himself at the fire and gave him some fresh apricots. He told him on no account to touch the cradle. Nevertheless the boy was clumsy and knocked the cradle with his foot as he went out. He brought the apricots home and showed them to his parents. They were very surprised to have fresh apricots in winter and then the boy told them his story.

This is the greatness of Khaymasang. People take food there in offering, burn sacred weed and sweep its yard. From that time on, however, the boy's successors have suffered from an inherited foot pain.²³



In the village of Yemts the main *oston* is *Mushkilkusho* (which means "reliever of hardships"). It is said that in old times a man riding a white camel arrived from the Bartang valley and as he entered the village it became bright and full of light everywhere. There were 27 households then.

People came out of their houses and watched this saintly looking man riding through the village. He dismounted from his camel at a tree on the outskirts of the village and tied his camel to the tree. All the people recognised him as a saint and came running towards him.

When they had almost reached him, the mountain behind the village was split in two: a cave opened up and a road could be seen inside it. The man mounted his

camel again and went up that road. It is said that his brightness was seen for two kilometres and then disappeared. I heard that he came out on the other side of the mountain at the place where there is now the oston of Burkh.²⁴



Interior of Mushkilkusho shrine and cave

Until the road was built during the Soviet time, the Bartang was difficult to pass. People travelling up Bartang used to worship at Mushkilkusho's shrine and would say a prayer to protect them from the dangers of the road. They still do.²⁵



In Ajirkh we have an *oston* called *Guli Khandon* (which means “smiling flower”) and another in the valley called *Boboi Khandon* (“smiling old man”). I have heard from the older people that a person named Piruz came here from Bardara and wanted to go for pilgrimage. He came here and went to sleep.

In his dream he saw a person who told him to strike his walking stick on the ground and if it grew leaves like a live tree branch, then his pilgrimage was accepted; otherwise he should continue travelling. When he woke up, he first struck his stick on a stone and water came out of the stone. Then he stuck his stick in the ground and it started growing. So, his pilgrimage was accepted and he returned from there to Bardara. That stick grew into a juniper-tree and it is still there. People go there and worship it, and bring their offerings.²⁶



In the village of Bardara there are three sacred juniper trees. I have heard from the elders that when Pir Shoh Nasir (Nasir Khusraw) was travelling in this region, people saw him coming but were afraid and hid in the mountains. There was no one in the village, but Pir Shoh Nasir knew that people lived there. He sat down for prayer and divination near a big boulder at the side of the village. He placed his axe

on the ground so that it was facing the fort (it has long ago been destroyed), and decided that if anyone lived there then the axe would change its position.

At night the people came and examined the axe. They couldn't guess that it was left there on purpose. Pir Shoh Nasir came back in the morning and discovered that the axe had changed its position. So he knew people lived there. Then he called out loud and asked them to come and listen to his message.



Juniper and "Farmon" shrine in Bardara

It is believed that those three junipers are the miracle of Pir Shoh Nasir. They grew from his three walking sticks that he poked into the ground at that time. In the nineteen thirties the people wanted to cut down the trees and use them as firewood for school, but a Russian man named Ismakov, who was the secretary of the Soviet party committee in Bartang, came there and measured the height and circumference of the junipers as well as their distance from each other (there is a distance of exactly 556 meters between them), and concluded that they were of historical value and thus should not be harmed.

At the time of war another Russian man, a secretary of the party's committee, in the centre of the district received a complaint that some teacher named Sulonmamad wanted to cut down the middle fir-tree to use as firewood for school. Not knowing that these trees were sacred, he struck the central one with an axe and as soon as he did so he was struck with a disease that tormented him his entire life.

It is said that after the pilgrims took *zakat* (religious tribute) to the house of the Pir and that a *farmon* was brought from Imam Sultan Muhammad Shoh. This *farmon* was put inside a chest placed among the branches of the tree. The *oston* is now called *farmon*. Since it has been there, our village has never been damaged by mudflow.²⁷



On the stony plain above the village of Roshorv, at the foot of peak Lopnazar (meaning “many eyes” from the rays of sun when it sets behind the mountain) there used to be three large juniper trees aligned at equal distance one from the other in a NNE/SSW direction. Only one survives today. It is said by some that the seeds were planted by Hazrat Ali when he passed this way. Others say they were planted by Sho Nosir.



In old times the people of the Pamirs did not have any religion. Pir Shoh Nasir came here and talked to people in Porshinev; he found that people were totally oblivious of religion and considered them as cows grazing grass. After Shoh Nasir Khusraw, ten people came to Roshorv here from far away and then each went his own way: among them were Khoja Nuriddin (his *oston* is in Basid), Mushkilkusho (his *oston* is in Yemtz) and Khoja Alamdor (his *oston* is in Pasor, he had a flag).



Hazrat-i Khoja-i Nuruddin shrine in Basid

Nasir Khusraw learned about their arrival and was informed that nine of them were dressed well, but one person had tattered clothes on. He said: “He is Shohtolib Sarmast.” The *oston* in Roshorv is called since then *Shohtolib Sarmast*. There used to be no water here and Shohtolib decided to make a miracle here, and called up the spring at the *oston* with his staff. He also planted seven juniper-trees. Now, only one tree is left of those seven.

It is also said that he ordered someone to make fire for him, but he disobeyed and Shohtolib told him: “You are not blessed,” and he struck two white stones against one another on the ice and the ice caught fire at once. At those times juniper did not grow in our mountains.²⁸



In Roshorv there is another *oston*: *Shoh Husain*. It is said is that Shoh Husain came here at a time when nothing grew in these places because it is very high from the sea level. Shoh Husain first met with granddad Khoja Chushchak (one of the first inhabitants of Roshorv). People did not know him. He explained different things to Khoja Chushchak. He also talked about religion and made Khoja aware of worship.

When he came there the second time, the people heard about his arrival and came to meet him at the entrance to the village (on the top of Vinoz pass). Shoh Husain mounted the pass and said that this place was like the desert of Kerbala. The leaders were frightened at these words and thought they were a curse.

One of the elders put a rope around his neck and others knelt down at Shoh Husain’s feet and said: “O, master, be careful with your breath,” (meaning ‘watch your words’).” He responded: “No, you misunderstand me – I will make this desert a bountiful place.”

It is said that he then stayed here for several days and received food and offerings. During this time, some elders went to him and said: “O, master, we have a holiday; come out and share a meal with us.” He accepted but when he wanted to break the bread, it stuck to his hands. He asked: “What kind of wheat do you have that the bread sticks to the hand?”

They responded: “O, master, this is due to the unripe wheat; because of unfavourable weather conditions the wheat does not ripen here.” He said: “Inshallah, from now the wheat will ripen in this place.” And it was so with the blessing of Shoh Husain.

Since that time different crops and fruits are grown in our village and the population increased. We also have a blacksmith's workshop dedicated to Hazrat Daoud (Prophet David) where household tools are made.²⁹



On the west side of Roshorv there is a deep canyon with reddish water. Below the village there is a flat terrain at the intersection of two mountain rivers where there is a place encircled with trees like *arar* (a type of juniper known in Latin as *juniperus macropoda*).

It is here that the Borkhatsij *oston* is located: a spring runs by it. Worshippers and those asking for their wishes to be granted go there before the dawn breaks and return under the cover of the night. Borkhatsij is greatly respected among the dwellers of Roshorv and the neighbouring villages for the granting of wishes.

My granddad Sabohy was a soldier and also a *mullah*, he had been travelling to many cities and in Ransipos (a place between Razuj and Ajirkh), on his return, he saw a cloud of smoke pouring out of a house. He couldn't see any fire and suspected that devils were there. He entered the house.

With the power of the Imam of the Time he saw the demons, but they didn't notice him. He took a basket, climbed on the *darvanokh* (Bartangi word for the platform opposite the entrance door) and hid under the basket. The demons were keeping a *parii* (fairy girl) in the fireplace for the oldest and ugliest of them to marry and they had brought a big bull from the jungle and slaughtered it for the wedding celebrations.

Granddad Sabohy peeked through the basket and saw that the *parii* was in a pitiful state. One of the devils was sent to bring salt for the meat boiling in the pot.

After half an hour the demon came back, and the others were angry that he had taken so long to find salt. He told them that everywhere he went the people of the Pamirs would always say *Bismillah* (in the name of God). He said: "I finally went to Qunduz in Toliqon where I did not hear one *Bismillah* and I brought salt from there." They spread the salt over the meat and took it out of the pot.

Remaining unnoticed, Granddad Sabohy took two ribs and ate them. The demons ate the meat and finished it all. Then they joined the bones together, placed the bull's skin over them and the bull rose to its feet and ran away towards the jungle. Our elders say that the demons made the two missing ribs from *zirk* (name of a bush).

The old and ugly demon was ready for the wedding ceremony but Granddad Sabohy could not wait any longer, and jumped out from under the basket and called: “The Prophet of God, *salavat* to Muhammad”, and as soon as he said *Bismillah* all the demons fled the house like sparrows.

However, the older demon, who had one tooth pointed to sky and the other to the earth, peeked through the opening in the roof and said: “O, Sabohy, look at my teeth, I am going to eat you with these.” Granddad Sabohy grabbed an axe and said: “I am going to cut your head off your shoulders with this axe”. That demon fled terrified.

Granddad Sabohy lifted the fairy girl on his back and took her to her home where red water streams down the canyon. When they reached Rokhats, at the start of the red canyon, and approached a *toghzor* (surrounded by trees called *togh* – a bushy tree), the fairy girl said: “I have two brothers; as a sign of their sincere welcome they will want to embrace you – they are so strong it may harm you. It will be better that you stay here and I will send someone to fetch you.”

When the fairy girl reached her home (that place is now our summer pasture), her sisters saw her and told their mother of her arrival. The mother did not believe them because the demons never released a captive. They told her to get up and take a look and she saw that her daughter had returned indeed. She hugged her and asked: “O, child, was he an ordinary human being or a great person who rescued you from the demons’ hands?”

The girl replied: “O, mother, an ordinary human being rescued me from the demons.” The mother asked: “Where is he now?” The daughter responded: “He is waiting your welcome.” When they heard this, her brothers jumped up and went after the man and brought him. The mother said: “O, Sabohy, you made us a great service by rescuing my daughter from the demons. I don’t have anything material as a reward, but I will give you my daughter: take her and go.”

He responded: “O, kind mother, she is my sister in this world and will be my mother in the afterworld.” Having heard his words, the mother of the fairies placed her hand on his head (conveying satisfaction) and said: “You did not desire my daughter, so I will find and give you whatever your heart wishes.”

He replied: “I don’t need anything. I made this service in the name of God, in the name of the Imam of the Time. I helped this fairy girl reach her motherland and I will go back.” The mother said: “This place belongs to Imam Ahmad A’zamchi. This blessing for us was left behind by him, otherwise the demons would have destroyed us.”

From the two sides of this place water runs down, and whoever comes here with a wish, makes *tahorat* in the water. Imam Ahmad A'zamchi's tomb is here; whoever comes here, his wishes are granted.³⁰



It is said that Khoja Alamdor (which means “the one with the flag”) came to Badakhshan many years ago. A man named Niyozbek from Rukhch had fields in Pasor and every day he would go there to water his fields. One day he gathered his harvest and went to the mill to grind his wheat and stayed there overnight. During the night he was approached by a mysterious person and he gave him some bread made with the flour he had just ground. The next day and the day after, the same thing happened but the amount of flour left always remained the same. This person told him to make an offering and all his wheat would be transformed into flour. This he did and on the way home, he saw that in the place where there is the oston now, someone raised his hand in greeting and disappeared. When the place was dug up, a tomb and a letter were found. The letter said that “Khoja Alamdor is the flag-keeper of Hazrat Shohi Mardon (Imam Ali).” From that day on the people of this village revere this site as a shrine.³¹



During ancient times, four holy men, Arabi Khurosoni, Mirzomamad, Akobil and Vatani, put on rags and set off on a pilgrimage, wandering from city to city. People mocked them, and boys ran behind them, throwing stones.

In one city, the king's daughter was mortally ill. The king loved his daughter dearly and was willing to do anything to save her. Many doctors and wise men had examined her and could not find the cause of her illness.

The king was informed that ragged travellers had arrived in the city. In despair, he invited them to the palace in the hope that these strangers might be able to save his daughter. As soon as they came into the room the daughter opened her eyes and stood up – fully cured.

The king was so happy that he offered them his son Amalmirzo and two servants to accompany them on their pilgrimage, as well as a golden cup with the inscription: “My son Amalmirzo and his servants Hasankoku and Hasanchokar are your slaves.”

They set off and crossed many steppes and deserts. They were short of food and there were some days when they did not eat. At last they came to a village called Chadud, where they stayed for several days.

The eldest among the travellers called them all together and said: “We cannot stay for ever in this village and must continue our journey.” To Amalmirzo, he said: “You and your servants must walk until the sun sets and at that point you must stop. That land will be your kingdom.”

Long before sunset, Amalmirzo became tired and told his servants to continue without him. This place was called Dugakhigora – near what is today the village of Ravmed. The first servant continued as far as what is today Barzud and the second to Derzud, where they made their homes.

The four pilgrims discussed where each of them should go. Arabi Khurosoni decided that he and Akobil would cross the river and follow the gorge leading up to what is now Bardara, meaning top valley.

The road was long and arduous and when they came out of the gorge they realized that the land here was not arable and too full of stones. They were discouraged and wanted to turn back – but after they had gone a little further they came out on a wide and fertile plain.

Vatani was told to travel to the West and stop where the road crosses a small river. He followed his instructions and settled in an open place that is called today Basid.

Mirzomamad remained in Chadud.



Bartang river at Chadud

It is said that before the arrival of these pilgrims, the people who lived in this country were not religious. The pilgrims explained their faith and soon the people were converted.

Some say the holy men came from Meshed.³²



In the village of Savnob there is a shrine called *Hozirbosht*, which means “be prepared.” People say that the shrine was a warning to the people to be perpetually on their guard against slave traders and invaders. Opposite the shrine there is a large cave complex in which our grandparents used to hide when danger approached.



Hozirbosht shrine in Savnob



HOW LAKE SAREZ WAS FORMED: It was in February 1911. In the village of Usoi lived seventy families. The villagers were very well off, so much so that if in any week there was no wedding they would dress a doll as a bride just to enjoy a festivity and would organize wrestling competitions and buzkashi.

A year earlier, an old man with a dog arrived in the village. His dog bit the cows and chased the other animals, and the people beat the old man because of his dog and refused to give him food.

After a few months, the old man and his dog disappeared. The next year, he was back again and no one knew where he had been. He looked even worse than before, with tattered clothes and a long unkempt beard. His dog, however, had gone. Again, the people chased him away, beat him and would not let him into their houses.

In the village there was an old man called Natmit. He had five milk cows, a calf, a heifer and a few goats and sheep and was the poorest person in the village. One night Natmit had a dream: an old man spoke to him and told him to go to the rais (village leader) and tell him to make a sacrifice.

When he woke up in the morning, Natmit puzzled about the meaning of the dream and said to himself, “If I go to the rais and tell him to make a sacrifice, he will think that I am just trying to get a free meal.” So he did nothing.

The next night, the old man appeared again in Natmit’s dream telling him the same thing. In the morning Natmit again decided not to go to the rais and went into the forest to fetch fire-wood. He carried one bundle home and fetched a second. When he got back, there was an old man sitting on the first bundle. He looked at Natmit and said: “Natmit, I told you to go to the rais. Why have you not gone?” Natmit saw that it was the old man who had come earlier to the village with his dog and recognised him as the man in his dream.

Natmit explained why he had not dared to go. The old man insisted and Natmit went to the rais and told him all that had happened, about his dream and about the old man who had sat on his firewood and asked again that the rais should make a sacrifice.

The rais replied: “Natmit, this is not a good time for a sacrifice – the animals are thin, let us wait until the autumn when we can celebrate a good harvest and our animals are fat from the rich grass.”

Natmit was worried that the old man’s request had not been followed. When he got home he said to his wife: “Woman, fetch me a sheep, we must make an offering to God.”

His wife was angry. “Why should we, the poorest people in the village, make a sacrifice of one of our only animals. Go tell some of the rich people to offer one of theirs.”

In the evening the old man came again and told Natmit: “Go tomorrow morning to Sarez.” He gave no explanation but Natmit followed his instructions and left at dawn. By mid-day he arrived in Sarez and shortly afterwards the ground began to tremble. The villagers were very afraid and began to sacrifice animals, but it was too late. For seven days and nights the ground shook; most of the houses fell to the ground and the sky was black with dust.

On the eighth day the trembling became less and the earthquake stopped.

The rais of Sarez, whose name was Bekmurad, asked Natmit to go with three others to Usoi to find out what was happening there. It became dark before they reached the village and they spent the night under a rock. When they awoke they could see that not a single house was left standing in the village.

They returned to Bekmurad and were afraid to tell him what they had seen, as he had relatives in Usoi. Bekmurad could see that they were hiding something and insisted they tell him the truth. Natmit told him that they had seen no living thing, only rocks and ruined houses.

In the morning people of Sarez went to Usoi. They found no survivors, even the apricot trees were covered with rocks, with blossoming branches appearing from underneath. Under one big rock they saw a dead child holding a ring in one hand and in the other the end of an oriental carpet.

The side of the mountain had fallen into the river and had blocked the exit: water slowly began to rise in the village of Sarez itself. Soon all the fields were covered and the houses flooded. The people left. Some went to Bachor, some to Bartang and others to Ghunt. The news about the Sarez catastrophe was broadcast to the world.

Now we pray that the rocks at Usoi will not break and release an enormous flood over the whole of GBAO.³³



Long long ago, a skilful builder called Hasan built a very strong fortress in Khorasan. The king of Khorasan cut off Hasan's right arm so that he could not build another fortress for one of the king's enemies. Hasan escaped and travelled round the world. He finally settled in Savnob, where he decided to build a new castle with his left hand from local stones and clay. The ruins of Hasan's fortress can still be seen high above the Bartang river in Savnob. He is known as "one-armed Hasan."



Ruins of the fortress in Savnob above the Bartang river



Many years ago during the Soviet times there was an old man called Munawar Bobo who lived in the village of Derzud. He had never married and although he could no longer hear very well, the people loved talking with him because he told them stories of the past and taught them to respect the old people, to protect the environment and to preserve their own culture.

Some people even thought he was a little bit mad because he used to predict the future. One day he said, “Just wait – keep your faith: in future years Mawlana Hazar Imam will come to Badakhshan and you will be able to see pictures of him and all the places of the world inside your own house – he used the words “Oinai az honamo.”

But we now know that he spoke the truth. We got television in our houses and in 1995 our Imam came; since that time we celebrate the day of light (Ruzi Nur) in remembrance of this first visit.

Munawar Bobo also told stories about Nasr Khusraw – he told us that he came to Rushan and saw the people very happy there. They greeted him with drums and rubab and sang holy songs. Nasir Khusraw said: “These are good people” and recited a poem:

Rawshandiloni Rushon oinai safoyand,
Gam az didli gharibon bo shodi mezudoyand.

Which means:

The pure-hearted people of Rushan are like a mirror that brings light and exchanges sadness with happiness in the heart of the wanderer.

Munawar Bobo told the people to worship and obey God. He was right. His stories opened our eyes and minds to think about our future.³⁴



LEGENDS OF ROSHTKALA



My grandfather was told by his great-grandfather that during ancient times Tusyan was a prosperous village: the hills were covered with vineyards, and in the fields there was wheat and many fruit trees – it reminded people of paradise. At that time, wine-making was unknown and all the grapes were used for eating.

The leader of the village was called Davlatsho. He was a good man and required no payment from the villagers but each gave him freely from their produce. The inhabitants lived in peace and harmony and no army was necessary to keep order. Davlatsho and Tusyan were known throughout the world.

The fame of the village reached Chingiz Khan who was jealous of this beautiful village with its peaceful leader and resolved to take an army to Tusyan to crush Davlatsho.

One day news reached Davlatsho that Chingiz Khan was on his way to destroy the village. Davlatsho held a meeting of all the elders to discuss how to defend their village.

After many hours' discussion, none had an idea how to prevent the disaster, other than to take up arms for the first time, even though they knew that it was hopeless against such bloodthirsty opponents.

Davlatsho had no sons but he had a daughter called Malika. She was only sixteen years old but beautiful and intelligent and was loved in the village for her kindness. She listened to the debate of the elders but was too shy to participate in the discussion.

When she realized that they could find no solution to the problem, she turned to her father and said: "My sacred father, if you and the elders allow me to speak, I will make a suggestion."

All fell silent. "Father and respected elders," she said, "in ancient books I have read, that if grapes are pressed and the juice kept for several days in a barrel they produce a water that sends men to sleep. If you allow me, I will take all the young people to the vineyards and we will pick the grapes and press them with our feet so that the juice runs out into barrels."

The elders were not convinced by what she said but because they respected her father and they had no better ideas, they called together all the young people and Malika led them to the vineyards.

All day long the air on the hills above Tusyan was full of dust as the young people worked in the vineyards and their songs and shouts could be heard down in the village. Seventy-seven barrels of grape juice were filled and placed in the sun at the entrance to the village next to the hanging bridge across the Shokhdara.

After five days, the village watchman warned the people that Chingiz Khan and his soldiers were approaching down the valley. The people began to hide in their houses for fear. But Malika ordered each family to kill a ram, and to prepare the meat. The people did as she told them.

When all was ready, Malika ordered the young people to bring the meat to the entrance of the village and place it next to the barrels.

Malika stood on the bridge and addressed Chingiz Khan and his soldiers: “My brothers, we know that you come not in peace but to destroy our village. Although we have many young people we are not used to carry arms and are peace-loving. We shall not resist you but before you attack, we invite you to a meal.”

Chingiz was very surprised at her words, but because his men were hungry and thirsty after their long journey, he agreed to pause and eat and drink before destroying the village.

Chingiz and his men ate and drank their fill. But because the grape juice had fermented, it made them all sleepy.

When they were all asleep, Malika gathered the young men and they beheaded all of Chingiz Khan’s soldiers and threw their bodies in a big hole in the ground where their bones lie today.

In this way the beautiful village of Tusyan and its peaceful people were spared. When Davlatsho died, the people appointed Malika as their leader in gratitude for what she had done. Their peace was never disturbed again. And so the art of winemaking was brought to the Pamirs.³⁵



There was once a very rich man in Badakhshan. So rich that he did not know what to do with his wealth. Yet, he was not a happy man. Many times he said to himself: “Better to be a beggar than to live such a life where all are envious and my life is not safe.” He decided to seek the advice of God.

He took his best horse and rode several days to the top of Shokhdara. There, when he could see the mountains that are today called Peaks Marx and Engels – which

the Russians called Peaks Tsar Mirotvortz and Tsaritsa Maria before Soviet times – he knelt down and prayed, asking God what he should do with his riches.

After a while he heard a voice saying, “Go home, take with you some simple nan (a flat loaf of bread) and while you are riding eat the bread. When you return home you will find that your wealth has decreased so that you have just enough to live.”

In Jawshangoz, the people gave him nan and he started on his way. Curious about the God’s words, he began eating the bread as he was leaving the village and a crumb fell on stony ground. As our tradition requires, he could not show disrespect for the bread and jumped from his horse to find it and pick it up. But no matter how hard he searched he could not find it.



Peaks Engels (centre) and Marx (right) from Jawshangoz

In order to protect the crumb, he made with his bare hands a wall of stones around the place where he dropped it, deciding to return the next days with his servants to continue the search. When he reached home he found that his treasure had doubled. He knelt down to pray again and asked God how this could have happened.

God told him: “I ordained that you should drop a crumb from your nan and that I would dispose according to your action. That you showed such respect for the bread shows that you are a good man and your wealth has been doubled so that you can provide bread to people whose lives are difficult. Do this and you will find happiness.”

The remains of the wall of stones can still be seen near Jawshangoz.³⁶



In the middle of Meidon village in Shokhdara there is a holy place, the shrine of Piri Bomafil. Even today it is possible to visit that shrine. People say that many

years ago the whole of the valley from Andarsitedz to Jawshangoz was covered by ice. Piri Bomafil was instructed by God to unfreeze the region with fire.

Piri Bomafil started his work from Andarsitedz and went as far as Mazorac, where he rested. In that place where Piri Bomafil had rested there was built a shrine.

After his rest, rested he continued his work and reached Jawshangoz. When he finished his work and came back to his village Maidonak, he died. He was buried there and his grave became a shrine named after him.



Many years ago a very beautiful and pure woman called Bibizainab lived in the village of Sizhd. People say that she was Shoabdullo's sister and that her ancestors were Saïds.

In that time there was no water in Sizhd. One Friday night Bibizainab went to a big rock, which was far above the village, and started to pray near the rock. In her prayers she asked God to grant water to the village people.

Immediately two springs appeared there, one on either side of the rock. By today, the two springs have joined in one, which runs from under the rock. People call it Bibizainab's spring.



It has been told from generation to generation that when Shoh Burhon was travelling in Shokhdara, he decided to rest in the village of Khichikh and have some tea. He lit a fire but found out there was no water in the village.

With a piece of firewood he hit the ground and from that very spot there appeared a fountain of water. This piece of wood became a tree that is today reaches more

than forty-five metres high and its circumference is seven metres. The tree is very different from the other trees in the area and can be seen from far away. The place by the tree is considered a holy site by the local people.

Approximately ninety years ago a certain man named Sarvar wanted to cut the tree for fire wood as well as for construction material to build a house. When he started to cut it, blood started to run out of the cut. Sarvar died in three to four days after the incident. The piece of wood he cut is still lying there near the tree.³⁷



In the olden days, the district known today as Roshtkala was part of Shughnan and it had a large fortress. When the Afghans conquered the people here, so much blood flowed that the fortress became known as Roshtkala (“the red fortress”). From that time, all the kings and princes of Badakhshan were vassals of the king of Afghanistan and paid tribute to his representative in Kala-i-Bar Panj, opposite what is today Khorog.

This tribute was paid with animals and money but also with slaves, especially young women, which made the families very unhappy. The people discussed their sadness with the king of Roshtkala and after some time he refused to pay the tax to Kala-i-Bar Panj and sent only the horn of an ibex.

The Afghans were very angry at this insult and sent a message to the king of Roshtkala that they were going to kill him and all his people.

The king of Roshtkala became afraid and consulted the people about what should be done. After much thought, he replied to the Afghans that it was not an insult; he told them that in Badakhshan an ibex horn was a symbol of purity and that the people of Roshtkala wanted to build a new fortress for the king of Afghanistan, for which the ibex horn would serve as a blessing.

The Afghan leader calmed down and came to inspect the work on the fortress in the place called Sindev. When it was finished he told the king of Afghanistan about it and he was very happy.

But the slavery still continued.

When this king passed away, his successor was Azizkhan. People called him “Mingboshi Azizkhon” which means “Akizkhan leader of a thousand” because he was greatly respected and had so many faithful followers.

When he died, he was succeeded by his nephew Azikhan Abodillokhon who was also much loved by his people because he sent messages to the Russian Tsar,

asking for help against the Afghans who were still making people's lives miserable and also against the Bukharans who had just taken over other parts of Badakhshan. The first messenger was killed by robbers before he could deliver the letter and no one knew where he was, so Azizkhan Abodillokhon sent a second messenger who succeeded in passing on the letter to the Tsar.

The Tsar then sent his soldiers to Badakhshan, and Azizkhan Abodillokhon met with them and told them all the problems of his people. The Russians made him their representative in Badakhshan and protected the people from the Bukharans and the Afghans.

At this time, however, England had come to Afghanistan and was supporting the king of Afghanistan in his ambition to rule over the territory on both sides of the Panj. Thanks to the Tsar's soldiers, the territory on the right bank was freed from Afghan and Bukharan rule.³⁸



Ruins of Azizkhan's fortress in Sindev



LEGENDS OF GHUNT AND SHUGHNAN



In the olden days in the village of Bachor lived a man called Mirsalim. He was a “kafir” – a non-believer. All the villages around paid taxes to Mirsalim.

One day a man in ragged clothes came to the area and traveled from village to village. After he had seen how the people lived, he asked why they paid such taxes to Mirsalim who did not provide a mill for them to grind their grain, and planted no trees for them to build their houses.

They told him that Mirsalim was a kafir and that they were afraid of him.

The ragged man said he would go to Mirsalim to try to relieve them of their heavy taxes, if they promised to do as he told them. They agreed and he went to see Mirsalim.

Mirsalim was very surprised to see such a ragged man standing in front of him and even more surprised by the man’s air of authority and holiness.

“Why, O Mirsalim, do you raise taxes from the people when you provide them with so little, not even a mill for them to grind their grain, or trees for them to build their houses?”

Mirsalim laughed at him. “I tell you, ragged man, that if you yourself can build a windmill above the village where there are no trees and make it work when there is no wind, I, Mirsalim, a kafir, will become a Muslim.”

The ragged man went back to the people and told them Mirsalim’s mocking words. He asked the strongest among them to accompany him that night to the bare ground above the village and in the morning he would tell them what to do.

They followed the ragged man up above the village and they prayed together. When it became dark all fell into a deep sleep. When they awoke in the morning, there were trees all over the bare ground. The ragged man told them to begin building a windmill.

Some were doubtful and said: “Why should we build a windmill here where there is never any wind?” The ragged man reminded them of their promise to do as he told them and soon the windmill was finished.

Just as they fixed the last sail on the mill, a strong wind began to blow.

The people then understood that the ragged man was Hazrat Ali who had come to them in their hour of need.

All the villagers gathered in front of Mirsalim's house and reminded him of his promise to convert.

And so Mirsalim became a good Muslim, the people had trees to build their houses and a mill to grind their grain. Since that day, the wind from the east blows in Bachor from November to May and during this time it is almost impossible to leave one's house.³⁹



Ghunt river at Bachor



The old people say that a princess called Malika used to live in Charthem. She requested local people to bury her in a place that could not be reached by insects. They did as she requested and buried her on top of a rock. In the morning when they came to visit the grave a big snake crept out.

There is another story among the people of Shughnan that in the ancient times Charthem used to be a flourishing place with sixty-three families. Nearby lived a rich and cruel sorcerer by name Mansurbai, who took taxes from the villagers.

Once during the harvest, using magic force, he stopped the movement of the sun and people had to work for him for three days and nights without rest. The people were exhausted and prayed to God to relieve them from their suffering.

After the crops had been gathered, Mansurbai released the sun, but by now it was midnight. During the night there was a big landslide and the village of Charthem and nearly all its inhabitants were buried by the rocks. Mansurbai was also killed and the survivors were able to live in peace.⁴⁰

A large pile of rocks can still be seen at the entrance to the village.⁴¹



Rocks at Charthem



Many years ago the king of Shughnan was called Asfalikhan. He was a weak man and felt threatened by his neighbours in Faizabad. None of his advisors could calm his fears.

One day, he was told of a wise old man called Dustak in the village of Badjuv. He instructed a messenger to ride as fast as he could to the village and to seek the advice of this wise old man.

The road was bad and Asfalikhan told the messenger to waste no time and to change horses in each village if necessary. The messenger did as he was told and changed horses in Porshinev, Yomj, Sokhcharv and Pastbadjuv.

Finally reaching Badjuv after a long climb up from the river, the messenger saw three old men ploughing. Breathless, he asked them if they knew where he could find the wise old man called Dustak.

One of the three was crushing a lump of earth in his hand and looked up. “You have found Dustak,” he said. “I am he.”

The messenger quickly explained his mission and Asfalikhan’s need for wise advice.

“The king must be a fool,” he said, “and has never seen how his people live. I am a poor man, I cannot read or write. But I know that when I break this lump of earth and sow my seed, in the autumn I will have a crop and can feed my family. That is the extent of my wisdom.”

The messenger returned to Asfalikhan and told him Dustak’s words. Asfalikhan understood the lesson that only when his people were allowed to tend their fields in peace would he gain their loyalty and trust.⁴²



There are two stories in our village of Wamd about Sabzpush (which means “dressed in green”). According to the first, a giant dressed in green came to this place and then disappeared: in his place a juniper grew. Its height reached 50 meters and it could be seen from far away. People would take branches as *tabarruk* (blessing) and burn and inhale the smoke.

The second story tells that long ago there was a mudflow that carried a juniper seed here. It grew and was the beauty of the village and a place of worship until it was cut down during Soviet times. In 1992-1993 people set up a new shrine here.⁴³



LEGENDS OF THE WAKHAN

Kakhkaha^{A4}

It is said that it took Kakhkaha three years, with seventy thousand strong men, to complete the Namadgut fortress. Clay was dug in Arghu, five days' march away in Afghanistan, and passed hand-to-hand by a long line of men reaching from Arghu to Namadgut.



Kakhkaha fortress in Namadgut with Panj river

Kakhkaha was a giant of a man and he and his followers all dressed in black. He had a wife (the legends do not mention her name), a daughter (Qumrisaymo), two sisters (Zulkhomor and Zulhasham) and two brothers (Zangibar and Zamri Otashparast, the latter meaning 'fire worshipper'), who ruled in the fortresses further up the Wakhan.

One of his chiefs, Mobashir, had previously served in Mohamed's army and had informed Kakhkaha of the spread of Islam by the Prophet's forces. Kakhkaha built a watchtower for Mobashir on a hill above Ryn and asked him to control the entrance to the Wakhan and watch out for travellers dressed in green.

One day one of Kakhkaha's men told him that the Prophet Mohamed had visited him in a dream. Hearing the Prophet's name, Kakhkaha became so angry that he gave orders to imprison and kill the man. He escaped, however, travelled to Mecca and told the Prophet of his dream, revealing the location of the fortress and asking Mohamed to conquer Kakhkaha.

Mohamed ordered ten thousand soldiers to march on the fortress under the command of Hashid Ibn-i-Vashid. The army camped in a place named Aspadev, opposite the village of Ryn. The well in this place was poisoned: all travellers who stopped there died from the bad water and Mobashir's men used to divide their property among themselves. Miraculously, however, the army survived.

Moboshir was in the watchtower at the time and saw the army's arrival with their green flags and that they had not died from the poisoned water. He immediately informed Kakhkaha who sent him to request 10 days to prepare for battle.

Hashid Ibn-i Vashid agreed to this request, but Kakhkaha broke the agreement and after only three days launched a surprise attack at night and captured or killed all the soldiers by treachery. One of the captives managed to escape and reached Mecca after a difficult journey of three months.

The Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, Ali, asked permission to go and destroy Kakhkaha. The Prophet granted it readily and Ali set off with only a few followers, arriving in Aspadev where there is a huge stone near a well. Ali picked up the stone and hurled it far up in the air away from the well. Muboshir witnessed all this and informed Kakhkaha who sent him to find out more about the travellers. "We are just players," said Ali.

Mobashir said: "You are not a player, you are Haidari Safdar, the invincible lion – Shohi Mardon, the King of men." Ali asked him how he knew this.

"I was your servant for 11 years until I was taken as a slave by Kakhkaha," answered Mobashir. Convinced of Ali's power he asked to join Ali's men and that Ali should grant him Kakhkaha's daughter as a wife after they had defeated him.

Ali requested Mobashir to tell Kakhkaha nothing of what he knew, and to inform him that the group were only players. Curious, Kakhkaha ordered that they be brought to the fortress, where he gave them dinner and accommodation and asked for games the next day.

That night, in a dream, Kakhkaha saw a snake that came into the fortress. In the morning he called his guests and asked them the meaning of this dream. Ali told him that the snake indicated to Kakhkaha that his enemies would be in trouble. "My only enemies are Ali and Mohamed and I do not think they are any danger to me here," said Kakhkaha.

Kakhkaha asked Ali to begin the games. First Ali showed the game of kolbozi, in which contestants lift and throw heavy stones. Ali threw the stones so far and hard that some of Kakhkaha's people were killed. Some of these stones were gathered by the local people after the contest and were later placed in the shrines of the Wakhan – there are five in the Oston-i Shoh-i Mardon in Namadgut.



Oston-i Shoh-i Mardon in Namadgut

Kakhkaha did not like the loss of his soldiers and asked Ali to demonstrate another game.

Ali proposed a horse race. He rode Sumbi Duldul so hard that one of the horse's shoes broke: Ali pressed the pieces in his hand and repaired the shoe. After this, none of Kakhkaha's men wanted to ride against Ali.

Ali asked Kakhkaha if he had a warrior in the fortress who would compete with his small son Hasan. Kakhkaha told him that this was a strange request and that his warriors had been trained to fight only with Mohamed and Ali. Ali asked if Kakhkaha was frightened to try one of his men against his young son. Furious, Kakhkaha ordered that the giant Muboriz be brought to the playing field. Muboriz was dragged from the dungeon with his hands and feet in chains, restrained by forty men. Muboriz broke out of the chains and knocked over the people holding him.

A horse was brought but it threw off all those who tried to ride or saddle it, including Muboriz. When Hasan approached it, however, the horse calmed down and he was able to saddle it.

Ali showed Kakhkaha the sword Zulfiqar, mentioning its powers, and gave it to Hasan. With one stroke, Zulfiqar destroyed the sword of Muboriz, breaking it into a thousand pieces and killing Muboriz.

Kakhkaha then began to be afraid and offered Ali thirty thousand gold pieces if he would let Hasan join his army. Ali replied that a father cannot sell his child and revealed the real purpose of his visit. Kakhkaha finally understood who stood in front of him: he fled and hid in the fortieth room in the very centre of his fortress. Ali found him there, however, and challenged him to battle.

Ali took Zulfiqar and mortally wounded Kakhkaha; he asked him where he should throw his dead body: on the ground or in the river. "Whoever loses should be buried in the ground," answered Kakhkaha. Ali was worried that if he left Kakhkaha's dead body on the ground it would cover the entire world with its terrible smell and with a final stroke he cut Kakhkaha in two from head to toe and threw him in the Panj, where the body was washed clean.

Ali then freed all the people who had been terrorised by Kakhkaha and went on to defeat the other brothers, taking control over all the Wakhan and converting the people. He kept his promise to Mobashir and gave him Qumrisaymo as a wife.

Since this time, the Oston-i Shoh-i Mardon in Namadgut celebrates Ali's victory over Kakhkaha and the conversion of the fire-worshippers to Islam.⁴⁵



The legend of Zangibar and the Bibi Fotimai Zahro sping

People say that long ago three brothers - Zamri Otashparast (fire worshipper) in Hisor, Kakhkaha in Namadgut and Zangibar⁴⁶ (the oldest of the three) in Yamchun - ruled the Wakhan. They had two sisters: Zulhasham who lived on the left bank of the Panj, and Zulkhomor who married Muboshir (Kakhkaha's watchman who betrayed him to Ali)⁴⁷ and lived in Siyahpushta in Afghanistan. It is believed that some of the local people in Namadgut are descended from Zulkhomor (e.g. the Davlatbekov family).

There were then more than three hundred rooms inside the Yamchun fortress. The walls were built with identical polished stones and the mortar made with a mixture of sand, water and sheep's milk. It was guarded on all sides by the soldiers of Zangibar. On the eastern side of the fortress there flows a stream carrying spring water from the mountains of Vichkut: a bridge over the stream was the only entrance to the fortress.

After Hazrat Ali defeated Kakhkaha in Namadgut, he rode to Yamchun on Sumbi Duldul with his wife Bibi Fotimai Zahro to attack Zangibar. Bibi Fotimai Zahro slipped by Zangibar's guards at the bridge and entered the fortress. A guard inside the fortress asked her what she was doing inside the fortress and how she entered. Not waiting for her answer, he shot an arrow towards her. Bibi Fotimai Zahro grasped the arrow and threw it back at the guard and wounded him.

Bibi Fotimai Zahro told the guard to call his master. He replied that he was sleeping, but she insisted on talking to Zangibar. Finally, Zangibar heard the

uproar and came out, telling her angrily that she had entered the fortress without permission. Bibi Fotimai Zahro said that the fortress was now hers and that he should leave in peace otherwise he would have reason to regret it – whereupon she disappeared.

Zangibar reinforced the guard around the fortress and hid in a secret place. The next day, Ali entered the fortress on Sumbi Duldul and, when Zangibar heard Ali shout for him, he jumped on his horse and fled as fast as he could. In his headlong flight, Zangibar knocked his head against a low-hanging tree branch and received a mortal wound. Ali killed some of Zangibar's soldiers with Zulfiqar and the rest ran away in panic.



Fortress in Yamchun

After this rout, Ali wanted to clean his sword and stuck it in the ground – just then hot water gushed out from the hole. Bibi Fotimai Zahro then came to the bank of the spring and unfolded her sleeves to wash them. From this time, the hot medicinal water in Yamchun is known as the Bibi Fotimai Zahro spring. People with different diseases come to this spring and get treatment: it is said that women who cannot have children come there to pray that they may have a family.⁴⁸



The spring of Shohmuboraki Mardi Vali

The people tell many stories about the graves of Shohmuboraki Mardi Vali and Bobo-i Khok-i in Shidkharv village. In fact these two names are one person. According to the legend, the holy man Bobo-i Khok-i was born after the death of his mother and emerged from her grave: his name means 'Grandfather from the Ashes'.

According to one story, in olden times the population of Shidkharv was very small, although there was much arable land. Unfortunately, however, there was not enough water to irrigate all the land and the summers were very hot.



Oston-i Bobo-i Khok-i

One spring day, an old farmer was sitting on a big stone thinking how and where to find water. Suddenly a holy man appeared and said: “Farmer, why are you sitting here alone instead of working on your land in this season when all Wakhan people are busy planting?”

The old farmer answered: “Reverend and most holy man, as people say: ‘When the poor try to cultivate the land they will not find water.’ I know that just living and doing nothing is a great sin but I am not able to work the land.”

The holy man was surprised and asked the reason. The farmer explained that there was no point in working the land without water. The holy man then gave him a stick looking a little like a shovel and told him to get down from the big stone and plant the stick in the stone – but he must only put it in once.

The farmer planted the stick at the foot of the stone and water gushed out like a fountain. As they say: ‘Men are never satisfied’ or ‘A man’s eyes are insatiable.’ The old farmer was so pleased to see the fountain that he poked the stick into the rock a second time, but when he wanted to take it out of the stone it simply stuck there and the flow of water became less.

He returned sadly to the holy man and asked him what was happening. The holy man replied with a smile: “Did I not tell you to plant the stick only once but as they say: ‘It is no good crying over spilt milk.’ If you had followed my advice, there would have been twice as much water coming out – but now it will come only through the stick; if ever the stick is now removed, there will be so much water that the whole village will be flooded. Tell the people that my name is

Shohmuboraki Mardi Vali and I leave the spring for them to water their lands. Now go back to the village and start your planting.”

Shidkharv people since then use this spring continuously for watering their lands and gardens and call it the spring of Shohmuboraki Mardi Vali. The triangular-shaped stone is considered a sacred place and worshipped by the people. There is a poem written by Mullo Ghulomshoev on the stone.⁴⁹



Near the village of Zong there is a famous shrine called *Oston-i Gesuy-i Balogardon* (literally ‘Gesuy, who prevents harm’). According to legend, in ancient times worship at this holy place prevented the spread of cholera in the upper part of the Wakhan valley, and it therefore acquired this name.



Shrine *Oston-i Gesuy-i Balogardon* in Zong



On a hill just outside Zong village there are the ruins of an ancient fortress called Abreshimqala, meaning ‘silk fortress’ in Tajik – it is known as Vishimqala

in the Wakhi language. It was given this name because its location was as beautiful as silk – some even say that in the olden days it was completely covered in silk.

According to legend, the last ruler of this fortress was a woman called Rukhshona (some call her Ruhona) who was obeyed by all the people of Wakhan. Rukhshona had many slaves and servants and a strong army that defended the Wakhan from foreign invaders. Women's jewelry was produced there and exported to the neighbouring countries on the other side of the Hindu Kush. These and other goods were sold in Nishkat market in Drizh (close to Zong).

Hearing of the large Muslim army progressively taking over the Wakhan, she invited the Muslim leaders for negotiations. The representatives of both sides met in a place called Ishkorish and during the talks it became clear that Rukhshona was not an infidel but someone who believed in the true God. She signed a peace agreement in a place that later became known as Qadamgoh (meaning the site of a historical event) and Rukhshona remained in power. Since then, among the local people, Qadamgoh has been revered as a sacred site.



Vishimqala / Abreshimqala

As well as being fearless, Rukhshona was also very beautiful. Another legend tells that the king of a territory on the other side of the Hindu Kush was told by his courtiers of her courage and beauty and fell in love with her. He sent messengers to ask her hand in marriage but Rukhshona always refused. The king then gathered a huge army and captured the lands around Abreshimqala in a bloody war in which both sides lost many soldiers: Rukhshona's army was about to be defeated. On the battlefield she always wore men's clothes, but during the crucial battle her helmet fell down from her head and her hair became visible. The king immediately recognized her and ordered her to obey him but with the

blade of her sword she pierced her heart, saying: “I can never obey another – it is better that I die.”

It is said that during the capture of the fortress Rukhshona helped her only son La'l to escape through an underground passage, telling him to go wherever he could find safety. La'l escaped with some soldiers to Gharan and, as he was riding through a narrow path in the mountains, his horse stumbled over a stone in the ground. When La'l looked down, he saw something resembling a ruby that was sparkling in the horse's foot.

From that time, the source of Pamir rubies⁵⁰ has been known as Kuhi La'l (La'l Mountain).⁵¹



The Dragon Stone of Shirgin

There is a yellow stone in Shirgin village called the dragon stone. It is said that in the past, the people of Shirgin were constantly quarrelling with one another about land and water. Not even their religious leaders could calm them. One day, Allah in his anger sent a dragon to the Panj River below the village, and the dragon started eating travellers from both sides of the river.

To pacify the dragon, the people took to the river bank every week forty baskets of bread, one animal and one young person who was tied to a tree as a sacrifice. Then the dragon came out and swallowed everything placed there.

One day it was the turn of a family where there were only a father and a daughter. The father reluctantly took his daughter with the bread and the animal to the river bank and returned home in tears. The daughter was terrified and sobbed her heart out, waiting for the dragon. Suddenly, a young man appeared and asked her: “Why are you crying?”

Surprised, the girl told him to go away immediately, or he would also be killed by the dragon. The young man felt no fear, however, and asked only to rest there: he put his head in her lap and went to sleep. After a while there was a frightening movement in the water: first it turned yellow then red and then black; the girl's tears dropped into the young man's face and he woke up instantly.

Just as the dragon was about to swallow the girl, the man raised his sword, mortally wounded the dragon and told the girl to go home. When the neighbours saw her coming back they thought that the girl had run away and when the dragon woke up it would swallow the entire village.

The girl told them what happened and the people ran towards the bank of the river and saw that the dragon was really covered in blood. As it was about to die, the dragon asked the man: “Now tell me the name of your powerful sword and where I should throw myself when I die: in the water or in the ground?”

The man replied: “Know that my sword is Zulfiqar and if you throw yourself on the ground you will be turned into stone and if you throw yourself into the water Zulfiqar will strike you again. The dragon threw itself to the ground and the man touched it with Zulfiqar and said: “Turn into stone.”

He went above the river to pray and planted his sword in the ground. When he pulled it out again, warm water sprang from that place and the man disappeared. At this spot, there is today a *kuk*, a hot spring where people go for swimming and to cure diseases.

The dragon stone itself is situated in a pleasant spot near the bank of the river and is surrounded by trees. Every year pieces of the dragon stone are broken off and used by the people as a medicine for many diseases.⁵²



In Langar we have a very holy shrine, Mazor-i Shoh Kambar-i Oftob, meaning literally ‘Master of the Sun’. Some say that this holy place, like many other ostons in the Wakhan, was revered already in pre-Islamic times - its location is known as Khriz (from the ancient Iranian ‘khvar’ – ‘place of worshipping the Sun’). The garden is very beautiful with old sacred trees and a place where aromatic herbs are burnt.



Entrance to shrine Mazor-i Shoh Kambar-i Oftob in Langar



Interior of shrine Mazor-i Shoh Kambar-i Oftob in Langar



In Kikhcharv, a place in Langar village, there are the ruins of a fortress known as “Shirkhun” (meaning “bloody milk”).

In very old times in Zong village there lived a hunter called Shirmalik. Whenever he went hunting he always caught many deer. One day, as he was about to shoot at a deer, he heard a voice saying “don’t shoot, don’t shoot”. However, Shirmalik paid no attention to the voice and kept taking aim at the animal. Suddenly, a man appeared, captured Shirmalik and took him to the place of fairies (*pariho*). One of them told him: “Next time, when you go hunting, don’t take your dog with you. We will help you to hunt.”

Soon after, Shirmalik went hunting and his dog ran after him. However he tried, he could not make the dog stop following him. In despair, he hid it in his armpit.

When he reached the summer pasture he saw that the *pariho* were are putting the deer in a trance. He walked towards them and suddenly the dog started to bark. As soon as the deer heard the dog the spell was broken and they ran away.

The *pariho* were angry and took Shirmalik up to the fortress above Zong and cut off his head. They mixed his blood with milk and spread it around the fortress. From that day this fortress was called “Shirkhun”. The colour of the biggest stone of the fortress where the *pariho* dropped the blood and milk is red on one side and black on the other.

After this event the *pariho* took the body of Shirmalik and left it next to the shrine of “Chiltan” with two animals. One of the animals could be used for the first day of mourning (*charoghgravshankuni* - lighting the way for the soul in the

other world) the other for the ceremony of the seventh day. Shirmalik's family and relatives went to search for him and found his body in the shrine. They scratched their faces in grief, tore the hair and cried so loudly that even the *pariho* started crying.⁵³



In the village of Shirgin at the end of the Wakhan, the people tell about a lake above the village that is rich in deposits of mother-of-pearl. It is said that, in ancient times, all the mother-of-pearl that the people brought back to the village disappeared during the night.

The people discovered, however, that if the mother-of-pearl was carried by a dog, it did not disappear. Since that time, all people going to the lake take a dog with them and string the mother-of-pearl round the dog's neck.⁵⁴



LEGENDS OF MURGHAB



There is a cave called Matatash located on the banks of Rangkul, a high mountain lake in what is today Murghab district (the name means “rainbow lake”). It is said that long ago a caravan laden with rich goods came by Rangkul and was caught in a snow storm. For fear that the caravan would be attacked by robbers and their precious cargo stolen, the people of the caravan decided to hide it.



Rangkul

They noticed a cave high up in the mountain but could not reach it because the walls of the mountain were too steep. The solution they found was to kill some of their horses and place pieces of meat on the rocks; when the meat froze, it created steps with which they could reach the cave and hide their treasure. When Spring came, the frozen meat thawed and there was no longer any access to the cave.



Dragon's eye entrance to the *Chiraghtash* cave

The cave is also known as Salaktash, meaning in Kyrgyz “Cave of the Travellers.” Yet another legend gives the cave the name “Chiraghtash” which means “Cave of the Lamp,” because at night the entrance to the cave glows in the dark. The entrance to the cave is shaped like an eye and some say that a dragon lives in the cave and that the light is from his eye.⁵⁵



It is said that the Alichur valley was once fertile land, on which rice grew. When Ali spread Islam throughout the Pamirs, the people of Alichur did not want to convert. As a punishment, Ali cursed them with land that would no longer carry crops. The name Alichur is said to mean “Ali’s curse” or “Ali’s desert.”⁵⁶



Near Alichur there is a beautiful clear pool called Ak-balik (which means “white spring” in the Kyrgyz language) where large fish swim; according to legend, any one who tries to catch them will be cursed with ill fortune. People say that that from this pool an underground river flows all the way to the lake at Suman (Yashil Kul). The old people remember that once a calf drowned in the pool and the body was found much later in Yashil Kul, more than twenty kilometres away.



Ak-balik pool



HISTORICAL STORIES



Originally, the Pamirs were ruled by local governors called Khai-yen. Then our land came under Afghan rule. The Afghans were succeeded by the Mangits of Bukhara; and at the end of the 19th century the Russians controlled the Pamirs.

During the early period, our villages were ruled by councils of elders known as “arbabs” (from the Persian for “leader”). Each inhabitant gave the local governor five poods of wheat, one tafsir of oil (a measure equivalent to 1.6 litres) and one head of cattle from every twenty-five in his possession.

During this time the slave trade began. The Khai-yen’s men would come to the villages and take away children between seven and fourteen years of age. In Huf in Rushan, in one night, they carried away three hundred children and sent them to the slave markets in Faizabad, Kabul and Balkh. They say that in Kabul today there are many people whose origins are in Huf.

The laws were very strict and condemned people were thrown into the river from the rocks above the fortress at Kala-i Bar Panj. Others were stoned to death. Repeatedly people rose against the oppressors.⁵⁷



During ancient times there was so much bread in Badakhshan that the people used it, as we did in the Soviet times, to feed the cattle. But there was so much bread that even the cattle could not eat it all.

Once an old man came from Kabul and asked the ferryman to take him to the other side of the Panj. As payment he offered the ferryman a loaf of bread. The ferryman laughed at him: “What do I want with your bread?” he said.

The old man was surprised. “Where I come from, we consider bread as something very valuable, and that is why I thought it would be a good payment.” The ferryman replied: “You silly old man – here we have so much bread that we do not know what to do with it.” And he threw the bread on to a pile behind a big rock.

It was not long before there was a drought. Because the people had so much bread they had not repaired the irrigation channels and the fields were all dry. Before long the people had eaten all their reserves, including the pile that the ferryman had thrown behind the rock on the river bank.

The old man came back to the river and asked to be taken to the Afghan side. As payment he again offered the ferryman a loaf of bread. The ferryman was so hungry he ate it all in one gulp.

“See,” said the old man, “this is the penalty for your lack of respect for the bread. Learn this respect and you will never go hungry.”

Since this time our bread is always placed the right way up on the table, we never cut it with a knife but break it with our hands and we never allow a single crumb to go to waste or be given to the animals.⁵⁸



The Shrines of the Pamirs

Gorno-Badakhshan possesses a wealth of external manifestations of the Ismaili faith (and of some traditions and rites that preceded its introduction) in the form of sacred sites (*Oston*) and shrines (*Mazar*; pronounced locally 'Mazor'). Many of the legends of the Pamirs tell stories related to these shrines or to the holy persons associated with them.

Most of the shrines of the Pamirs are dedicated to Ali, saints and other holy figures from antiquity and they can be found in all districts where the majority of the population is Ismaili. There are also shrines in some remote villages in areas with predominantly Sunni population, evidence that the Ismaili faith once extended to these valleys. An example is Poi-Mazar at the top of the Vanch valley where there is, according to legend, the grave of Ali.

The shrines of Gorno-Badakhshan are characterised by the presence of sacred stones and the horns of ibex and Marco Polo sheep (*Ovis Poli*), symbols of purity under Aryan and Zoroastrian religious traditions; they also show evidence of regular use for fire rituals, in which aromatic herbs ('strachm' or 'yob') and animal fat ('roghan') are burnt. The local traditions and legends attached to some shrines pre-date the introduction of Islam in the Pamirs.

The shrines of Badakhshan can be classified in the following categories:

- sacred places associated with nature, including hot and/or mineral springs, large or unusual trees, caves, and rock formations;
- shrines where eminent religious figures are buried (Ismaili pirs, khalifas, or Sufis);
- shrines in places that are believed to have been visited by eminent religious figures in the past (including figures from early Islamic history);
- sacred places where animals carrying early Islamic figures passed or are believed to have left footprints in the ground or rocks.

Prominent at most shrine sites are collections of animal horns and special stones, which have sacred properties. In general, rituals associated with sacred places are reserved for special holidays such as Navruz or Eid-e Qurbon, rather than the earlier practice of weekly Friday village gatherings.

A non-exhaustive list of shrines in Gorno-Badakhshan follows.



Darvaz District

Yoged: Oston-i Khoja Khizr, Oston-i Shah Awliyo, Oston-i Khoja
Chiltan, Oston-i Khoja Nazar



Vanch District

Poi Mazar: Sardi Saïd, Sardy Bard, Abdulkakhori Sarmast
Vanvan: Khoja-i Sabz Push
Ubaghn: ‘Alexander’s tomb’



Poi Mazar



Rushan District

Derzud: Bobo Alisho



Bobo Alisho shrine in Derzud

Vomar: Oston-i Sayyid Jalol, Shoh Tolibi Sarmast
 Yemts: Mushkil-kusho
 Siponj: Bobo Alisho
 Bassid: Hazrat-i Khoja-i Nuruddin; Safdaron
 Bardara: Farmon



Interior of shrine in Bardara

Roshorv: Borkhatsij, Shoh Tolib, Shoh Husein, Andrim
 Savnob: Hozirbosht, Khojai Hizr, Mahfil Oston, Hazrat-i Daoud
 Yapshorv: Khoja-i Shayuz
 Nisur: Shoh Husein, Pir Nosir, Hazrat-i Daoud
 Bopasor: Khoja Aliamdor
 Ghudara: Shoh Husayn, Shoh Tolib, Hazrat-i Daoud
 Pastkhuf : Bobo Alisho
 Khuf: Mustansiri Billoh
 Yomj: Oston-i Shoh Tolib



Shughnan District

Porshinev: Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadoni (Kushk), Sumbi Duldul (Barchiddara),
 Gumbaz-i Pir Sayyid Farukhshoh (Saroi Bakhor), Pir-i Shoh Nosir
 (Midenshor)
 Tem: Imom Zaynulobidin
 Sokhcharv: Pir-i Dukman
 Suchon: Shoh-i Viloyat
 Sizhd: Shoh Malang
 Ver: Sumbi Duldul
 Vankala: Imom Muhammad Boqir
 Charthem: Malika



Interior of *Gumbaz-i Pir Sayyid Farukhshoh* in Porshinev



Ishkashim District

Garmchashma: Pir-i Foqmamad
 Sist: Masor Khoja-i Lal
 Shambede: Oston-i Shoh Burhon
 Ryn: Oston-i Zanjiri Kaba
 Namadgut: Oston-i Shoh-i Mardon



Oston-i Shoh-i Mardon in Namadgut

Darshay: Oston-i Pir-i Foqmamad
 Ptup: Mazor-i Shoh Isomiddin
 Shitkharv: Oston-i Bobo Khok-i
 Vrang: Osorkhona-i Abdullo Ansori and museum
 Zong: Mazor-i Shast-i Murtuzo Ali, Osorkhona-i Pir Said Karamalishoh (museum), Mazor-i Pir Said Karamalishoh, Mazor-i Khoja Behzod, Oston-i Khona-i Khudo, Oston-i Murodgokh-i Murodoson, Oston-i Gesuyi
 Zugvand: Oston-i Panja-i Shoh

Langar: Mazor-i Shoh Qambar-i Oftob
Hisor: Oston-i Nuri Muhammad



Mazor-i Shoh Isomiddin in Ptup



Roshtkala District

Hichih: Shoh Burhon
Parshed: Khoja-i Zur
Bodom: Khoja-i Nur (sister of Khoja Zur), Sumbi Duldul
Barwoz: Oston-i Pir-i Foqmamad
Tavdem: Sayyid Jalol Bukhari



Interior of *Sayyid Jalol Bukhari* shrine in Tavdem

Tusyon: Shoh Burhoni Vali
Midensharv : Shoh Abdul
Shuvjev: Khoja-i Sabz Push
Baroj: Shoh Burhon
Roshtkala: Pir Yakhsuz, Bobo Mahfil
Ambav: Chiltani Pok
Bidiz: Pir-i Foqmamad

Sezhd: Vorjbid, Shah-i Wiloyat, and Qadamgoh
Nimos: Sho Abdol (Imom Bokir)

In addition there are a number of small roadside shrines, especially in the Wakhan.



Zumudg



Chil Murid shrine in Vnukut (“forty faithful”)



Roadside shrine near Vrang

Glossary

The explanations below may be helpful in understanding the religious and legendary significance of some of the shrines. The reader wishing to study further some of the concepts and beliefs of Ismailism will find a useful glossary on the website of the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London.

Alexander (locally Sikander / Sikandar): In Gorno-Badakhshan there are many legends about Alexander the Great, including the claim that he was actually in the Pamirs. The kings of Shughnan and Roshtkala claimed to be his descendants.

Ali Hamadoni: A 14th century Sufi teacher from Hamadan in Iran, whose mausoleum is in Kulob – famous also in Kashmir.

Alisho: Refers to Ali, son-in-law of the Prophet. There are many sites in Gorno-Badakhshan where Ali is supposedly buried.

Awliyo / Awliya: Plural of Arabic waliyy ('saint', 'protector'), someone who has attained wilayat (q.v.).

Bobo: Means 'grandfather'.

Burhon: One of four Sufi brothers who promulgated the Ismaili faith in the Pamirs in the 16th century. The others were Said Muhammad Isfahani (also known as Said Shahi Koshon), Abdurrahman (also known as Said Shoh Khomush) and Shoh Malang.

Chiltan: A holy group of forty spirits who protect and assist the faithful ('chil' means forty). The Chiltan have magic powers, similar to those of Khizr (q.v.).

Dowud: The prophet and king David.

Firman / Farmon: An instruction or communication from the Ismaili Imam to his followers (Persian farmân meaning 'decree' or 'order').

Fokhmamad / Foqmamad: An Ismaili Pir (q.v.) in ancient times who is the patron saint of hot springs in the Pamirs.

Farrukhsho: An Ismaili Pir (q.v.) from the village of Porshinev.

Gumbaz / Gumbez: Grave or tomb.

Hazrat: Honorific Islamic title used to honour the spiritual status of a person. The literal translation of Hazrat means ‘Great Presence’.

Imam: In general usage, a leader of prayers or religious leader. The Shia restrict the term to their spiritual leaders descended from Ali and the Prophet's daughter, Fatima.

Jalol: Sayyid Jalol Bukhari was the grandson of Shoh Burhon (q.v.), and is also revered for having spread the Ismaili faith in the Pamirs.

Khalifa: A religious leader in Pamiri villages – who also has important functions as a revered village elder, confidant and family adviser. Khalifas were appointed by Pirs (q.v.) and today the position is normally hereditary.

Khizr / Khidr: One of the four prophets recognised by Islamic tradition as being ‘alive’ or ‘immortal’ Hazrat Khizr is famous in Islamic story as a wise and mystical person or angel who helped the prophet and Ali. Islam inherited his story from earlier mythology, and he is associated with, for example, Moses (he corresponds to Elijah/Elisha) and Alexander the Great. In the middle ages he came to represent a form of esoteric mystical knowledge. Although not mentioned by name in the Qur’ān, it is generally accepted that verses 60-82 of chapter 18 refer to him. Khizr or Khidr means ‘green’ in Arabic, the colour of Mohamed’s banner, symbolising Islam. See also ‘Mushkilkusho’ and ‘Sabz push’.

Khoja: A Persian word literally meaning ‘lord’ or ‘master’ – was used in Central Asia as a title of the descendants of the famous Central Asian Naqshbandi Sufi teacher, Ahmad Kashani (1461-1542). In the contemporary Ismaili context, the Khojas are one of the Ismaili communities originating from the Indian subcontinent and now living in many countries of the world.

Khudo: Means ‘God’.

Malang: See ‘Burhon’.

Mahfil: A saint who reputedly freed parts of the Pamirs from ice and snow.

Mardon: People, men. *Shohi Mardon* is a title of Ali.

Muhammad Boqir / Muhammad al-Baqir: The fourth Ismaili Imam.

Murid: Murid is a Sufi term meaning ‘committed one’ or ‘one who seeks’; in the Ismaili context it means ‘believer’ or ‘follower’.

Mushkil-kusho / Mushkil Gusha: Means ‘remover of difficulties’ and is an allusion to Ali and to the Ismaili Imam of the time. Also linked to the mythical ‘Khizr’.

Mustansiri Billoh / Mustansir bil-Lah: The 18th Ismaili Imam.

Nosir / Nasr / Nasir: Nasir Khusrow, 11th century poet and philosopher, credited by the Ismailis of Badakhshan with introducing the Ismaili religion to the region.

Pir: The word ‘Pir’ in Persian literally means an old person; in the Ismaili context it refers to a religious leader appointed by the Imam of the time.

Qadamgoh / Ghadamgah: Means literally “place of the step” – place where a saint stayed. Also a town in Khorasan, Iran.

Sabz Push: Means literally ‘green mantle’ and is an allusion to Hazrat Khizr (q.v.).

Said / Sayyid: A descendant of the prophet Mohamed through his grandsons Hasan and Husayn.

Shoh / Shah: A title of respect meaning ‘king’ or ‘leader’.

Sumbi Duldul: The name of Ali’s horse.

Tolib: Shoh Tolib Sarmast is revered for spreading the Ismaili faith in the Pamirs. Sar Mast is a town in Iran near the west coast of the Caspian.

Wiloyat / Wilayat: In Shia theology, wilayat is the authority invested in the Prophet and his family as representatives of God on earth. In Shia Islam, it refers to the authority that the Imam has over his believers (murids).

Vorjbid: Means ‘footprint’ (of Ali’s horse).

Zaynulobidin / Zain al-Abidin: The third Ismaili Imam.

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- ¹ This legend is of recent origin. It is, however, very popular in the villages and I have included it for this reason.
- ² Source: Nisormamad Shakarmamadov, *Фолклори Памир (Folklore of the Pamirs)*, Institute of Ismaili Studies, Dushanbe 2005, pp. 45-52.
- ³ Shakarmamadov, pp. 56-57.
- ⁴ Shakarmamadov, pp. 60-62.
- ⁵ Shakarmamadov, pp. 282-283.
- ⁶ Shakarmamadov, pp. 283-284.
- ⁷ Shakarmamadov, pp. 65-66.
- ⁸ Shakarmamadov, pp. 88-92.
- ⁹ Shakarmamadov, p. 98.
- ¹⁰ An anachronism, since for the older generation the home of the Imam (*Imamkhona* or *Pirkhona*) would have been in British India, where Aga Khan I established his residence in Sind in the middle of the 19th century (later in Bombay under Aga Khan III). For several years after the establishment of Soviet power in Central Asia, delegations would travel on foot to Bombay to deliver the religious taxes (*Zakat*). In 1993, I was myself asked to take envelopes of cash to the Aga Khan.
- ¹¹ Shakarmamadov, pp. 94-98 with additions by Sayora, Savri, and Khirigul.
- ¹² Shakarmamadov, pp. 98-101.
- ¹³ Shakarmamadov, pp. 101-102. Nosir Khusraw's famous poem about the eagle has in fact a different moral. The eagle is killed by an arrow fletched with eagle feathers, which is interpreted by Nosir Khusraw as a warning to man that his own vanity will bring him to destruction.
- ¹⁴ Shakarmamadov, pp. 127-128.
- ¹⁵ Shakarmamadov, pp. 135-136.
- ¹⁶ Shakarmamadov, pp. 66-68.
- ¹⁷ Shakarmamadov, pp. 68-69.
- ¹⁸ Shakarmamadov, pp. 69-70.
- ¹⁹ From the telling of Hasanbek Shogunbekov, age 47, of the village of Deh.
- ²⁰ From the oral telling of Ghulom Nizorov (65) and Mamadsodiq Mamadsolehov (72) of the village of Shidz.
- ²¹ From the oral telling of Mirdavlat Hojidadavlatov (60) of the village of Wamd.
- ²² From the oral telling of Miralibek Zamirov (79) of the village of Vomar.
- ²³ From the oral telling of Shirin Gulshaeva (69), Bakhtali Sharifov (74), Ayorsulton Jumaboeva (74), and Miranab (66) of the village of Khuf.
- ²⁴ The Hazrat-i-Burkh shrine in the upper Khingob valley, a place of pilgrimage and one of the holiest sites in Tajikistan.
- ²⁵ From the oral telling of Gulosmamad Qurbonmamadov (80) of the village of Yemtz, and Khushvakht Khusravov (45) of the village of Baghu.
- ²⁶ From the oral telling of Pahlavon Mahmudov (38) of the village of Ajirkh.
- ²⁷ From the oral telling of Khojabek Qurbonmamadov (64) and Khudodo Qurbonmamadov (68) of the village of Bardara.
- ²⁸ From the oral telling of Qirghyz Madimarov (76) of the village of Roshorv.
- ²⁹ From the oral telling of Janob Sangilijov (40) and Madimar Qirghizov (74) of the village of Roshorv.
- ³⁰ From the oral telling of Mamadumar Janobov (87) of the village of Roshorv.
- ³¹ From the oral telling of Qirghizboy Tulegov (68) of the village of Ghudara.
- ³² Shakarmamadov, pp. 83-88.
- ³³ Shakarmamadov, p. 201-208.
- ³⁴ Told by Oshurmamadova Muminamo
- ³⁵ Shakarmamadov, pp. 147-151.
- ³⁶ Shakarmamadov, pp. 165-167.
- ³⁷ Recorded from the words of Khalifa Mozimsho Molibshozoda.
- ³⁸ Told by Toji Kurbonkhonova and Muboraksho
- ³⁹ Shakarmamadov, pp. 191-193.
- ⁴⁰ Shakarmamadov, p. 210-212.
- ⁴¹ Shakarmamadov, p. 210-212.
- ⁴² Shakarmamadov, pp. 155-160.
- ⁴³ From the oral telling of Niyozbek Azizshoev (70) of the village of Wamd.
- ⁴⁴ In the Pamirs there are many legends about Kakhkaha. The ruins of a palace in Bunjikat (Istaravshan) and a historical site in Merv/Mary (Turkmenistan) also bear his name. Although the oldest parts of the Kakhkaha and other fortresses in the Pamirs predate by far the Arab conquests in Central Asia, the Pamir legends place Kakhkaha in the context of the conversion of the region from Zoroastrian fire-worshipping to Islam. According to oral

tradition in the Pamirs, Kakhkaha was from Kabul and his real name was Hamza Saïd. Following an insurrection in Kabul, he fled to the Pamirs and chose Namadgut as the place for building his fortress. The name Hamza Saïd would seem to conflate the legend of Kakhkaha with the much better known adventures of the Hamzanama or Dastan-e Amir Hamza originating in Middle Eastern and Persian oral literature.

⁴⁵ From the oral accounts of Safar Shukrenov of Nishusp village, Shugnan district and Azizkhon Bunyodbekov from Namadgut village, recorded by Rukhsora Shirinova, Alovatsho Qurbonshoev and R. Safarbekov.

⁴⁶ Meaning literally “land of the black,” referring to the black dress worn by the fire-worshippers - etymologically linked to the name *Zanzibar*.

⁴⁷ In another account, Muboshir married Kakhkaha’s daughter Qumrisaymo.

⁴⁸ From the oral telling of Merali Safariliev, director of the sanatorium in Yamchun.

⁴⁹ From the oral telling of Pahlavon Qushbegiev, resident of Shitkharv village.

⁵⁰ The Pamir ruby is actually a spinel.

⁵¹ From the oral telling of Yodgor Mulloev and Pahlavon Zarpodshoev, residents of Zong village.

⁵² From the oral telling of Zebjon Qimmatkhonova, resident of Zong village.

⁵³ From the oral telling of Safarbek Rahmatbekov, resident of Langar village.

⁵⁴ Shakarmamadov, p. 218.

⁵⁵ Shakarmamadov, pp. 198-200.

⁵⁶ Shakarmamadov, p. 200.

⁵⁷ Shakarmamadov, pp. 155-160.

⁵⁸ Shakarmamadov, pp. 167-169.