



Shifting Foodscapes in the Pamirs of Tajikistan

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Abstract

This paper uses food as a prism to examine society and the impacts of social change at different scales, ranging from the scale of the region, through the scale of the local community, to the scale of the household. It applies an approach that combines materials gained from archival studies, a literature review, and empirical research conducted in the Western Pamirs of Tajikistan to reconstruct socio-historically and spatio-environmentally situated food-related arrangements (*foodscapes*) in the study region. The main characteristics addressed include *rootedness*, *richness*, *scarcity*, and *remoteness*. It makes visible both continuities and shifts that have occurred to these arrangements in the course of social transformations. The study joins the canon of ethnographic food studies, and, by presenting a regional focus on the Tajik Pamirs, complements the emerging body of food-related socio-scientific research in and on Central Asia.

Keywords

food – geography – ethnography – social transformation – mixed methods – case study – Badakhshan – High Asia

1 Studying Society through the Prism of Food

In 2020, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)

published the results of the third survey of a long-term monitoring of the vulnerability of mountain dwellers in the ‘developing world’¹ to food insecurity and compared these observations with previous situations (Romeo et al. 2020). Starting from nearly 250 million people at risk of food insecurity² living in mountainous regions in 2000, the global figure grew from about 300 million in 2012 to nearly 350 million in 2017, with the majority of these people living in rural areas (Romeo et al. 2020: 31–33). Armed conflict, natural hazards, local impacts of global environmental change, resource degradation, and limited access to markets, social services, and facilities have been identified as the main causes that hamper “mountain peoples’ capacity to cope with the lack of local food production” (ibid.: x). In Central Asia,³ development is in line with these sobering global dynamics. From about 2.5 million in 2000, the number of people in rural mountainous regions vulnerable to food insecurity grew from 3.7 million in 2012 to over 4.5 million in 2017 (ibid.: 44–46). The entry point of this paper is the fact that despite many years of manifold efforts, the question of secure, safe, and just food provision remains a daily challenge for many mountain people in the developing economies and significantly impacts their lives.

This study takes the matter of food as a prism to look at society and to understand socio-historically and spatio-environmentally situated local lifeworlds by means of interpreting what is recorded in historical sources, reported by local and external witnesses, and observed by the author of this paper. The basic idea is that food being a “‘total’ social phenomenon[on]” (Mauss 1990: 3) has such a pervasive position for both human beings and societies due to elementary characteristics such as being a materialization of vital matter, substances, and elements, and possessing social and cultural meanings beyond the basic nutritional function. This means that by looking at food, conclusions can be drawn about living conditions, society, and the effects of social change at different scales (Pottier 2010; Alymbaeva 2017a).⁴ This research joins the canon of

1 The report uses an exclusionary definition of this category that includes all countries except Japan, Israel and Cyprus in Asia, Canada and the US in the Americas, Australia and New Zealand in Oceania, and all European countries (Romeo et al. 2020: 9).

2 Food insecurity is defined in these reports as “the probability of a person or household falling or staying below a minimum food security threshold within a certain timeframe” (FAO 2015, cited in Romeo et al. 2020: 30).

3 Central Asia is defined in both the report and this paper as the five former Soviet ‘-stans’ Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

4 A related approach was taken by van Oudenhoven & Haider (2012) when they critically assess the technocratic and modernist understanding of development, and provide alternative versions based on local perceptions and understandings of both development and imagined futures in the Afghan and Tajik Pamirs through the matter of food.

ethnographic food studies that mainly focus, according to the American anthropologists Sidney W. Mintz and Christine M. Du Bois (2002), on the topics of single commodities and substances, societal change, food insecurity, and food-related rituals and identities, amongst others. By putting its regional focus on the western part of the Pamirs located in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO, or briefly Gorno-Badakhshan) of Tajikistan, this study complements the emerging body of food-related socio-scientific research in and on Central Asia (e.g., Mack & Surina 2005; Zanca 2007; Alymbaeva 2017b).

The Western Pamirs are a high mountain node in Central Asia where the ranges of the Tian Shan, Kunlun, Karakorum, and Hindu Kush converge. This mainly arid mountain region is a particularly suitable location for taking food as the entry point of research because securing food provision has historically been a particular challenge, and both food provision and nutrition have been largely based on local resources since historical times (Vavilov 1964; Baranov et al. 1964; Fig. 1).

Four features of the foodways in the study region become apparent from reading historical sources and secondary literature: a) *rootedness*: there is a historically evolved rich expertise in agriculture among the local population with, at the same time, deep rootedness of primarily subsistence-oriented agrarian food production in quotidian practices, routines, and livelihood strategies; b) *richness*: there is high agrarian biodiversity resulting from the interplay of natural conditions and the longstanding breeding experience of farmers; c) *shortage*: there are scarce and marginally productive arable land resources to serve local demands, as well as limited wage work opportunities, low salaries, and low cash reserves to be used for the purchase of imported products; and d) *remoteness*: there are the challenges related to the remote location and weak connectivity of the region, which depends on imports due to limited regional agricultural productivity.

The principal goals of this study are, first, to illustrate how these features mutually shape the foodscapes in the Western Pamirs, and, second, since food regimes and culinary cultures are never static (Mack & Surina 2005: xiii), to make visible both continuities and shifts that have occurred in the course of social transformations.

The notion of *foodscapes* applied in this paper derives from the understanding of Pauline Adema, an American culinary anthropologist, who saw foodscapes as “personal, social, cultural, political, economic, or historical landscapes that [...] are about food [...] [, and] are symbolic of real and desired identities and of power, social, and spatial relations articulated through food” (Adema 2009: 7). Foodscapes are seen here as situated and contextualized relational arrangements of social and environmental processes, physical matter,

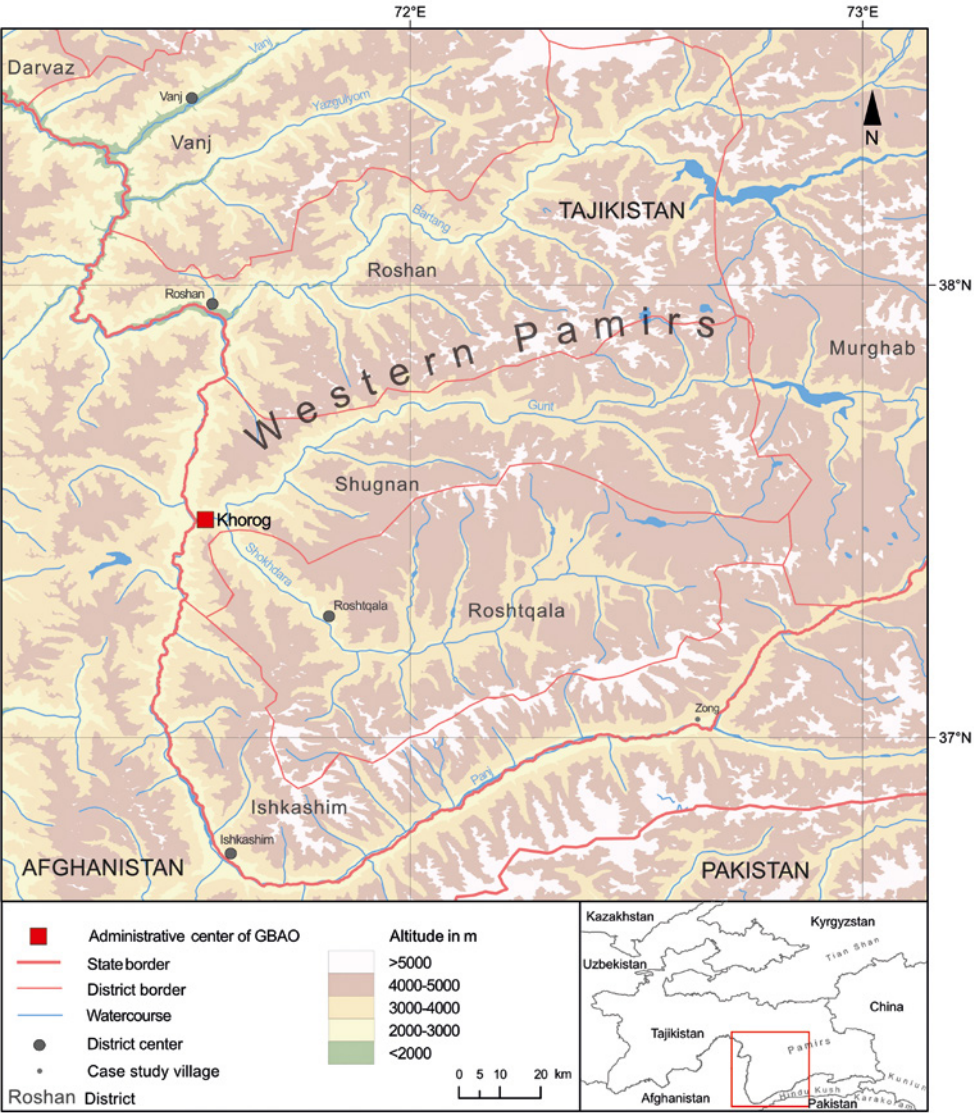


FIGURE 1 The Western Pamirs in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province of Tajikistan. Design: Dörre 2020 based on Jarvis et al. 2008; OSM 2017

actors, and institutions, as well as interactions and activities across different geographic scales. These aspects can be systematically addressed through the analytical lens of the foodscape that comprises the three dimensions of *materiality*, *spatiality*, and *sociality* to structure the complexity of the topic. Materiality addresses physical characteristics of food such as quantity, quality, and the composition and diversity of dishes, as well as the production of the

ingredients of dishes and preparation of food. Spatiality encompasses spatial features of the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of food, which together make a food system (Cannon 2002). The sociality of food refers to actors, institutions, and regulations, as well as cultural meanings, interactions, and practices executed on the ground.

In the next section, the methodological approach will be outlined. It also delineates the historical periods from which the evidence basis of the paper stems from. The third section presents the study region of the Western Pamirs as a remote meeting point of agricultural expertise, crop biodiversity, and scarce arable land resources by discussing the categories of rootedness, richness, shortage, and remoteness in more detail. The collected evidence will be presented and discussed in the fourth part of the paper, which is structured along the lines of the four features presented before. While the general spatial focus is on the Western Pamirs, the village of Zong in the remote Wakhan Region receives particular attention. The conclusion reflects on what historical shifts the foodscapes in the Western Pamirs have historically taken, and how the four features mutually shape them.

2 Combining Historical Research, Literature Studies, and Ethnographic Methods

This study is based on a combination of historical primary sources which comprise quantitative and qualitative data recorded by local and external witnesses and secondary literature, as well as observations and original empirical material collected by the author. The entire material stems from the historical periods of the last pre-socialist decades, the Soviet era, and the time of state independence in Tajikistan. This general division of time marks historical periods in which the respective sociopolitical situation of the study region differed fundamentally. Consideration of both the historical sociopolitical contexts and societal transformations is of elementary importance in the evaluation, interpretation, and classification of the collected material. A brief delineation of the three periods will follow after the introduction of the research methods applied for this study.

Collections and archives in Russia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Germany⁵ were visited to identify and review historical primary sources. These sources

5 Archive of the Orientalists of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Film and Photograph Collection of the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography 'Kunstkamera,' and Archive of the Russian Geographical Society (all in St. Petersburg, Russia); Russian State Military Historical Archive (Moscow, Russia); Central

include reports, recorded observations, and also visual material made by external observers such as military officers, political agents, travelers, explorers and researchers from Russia and Western countries, as well as Soviet Communist Party cadres and administration officials dispatched from the political-administrative centers. If these witness records, as well as early systematic surveys on demographic, economic, and fiscal aspects are read critically and used carefully, they represent a valuable corpus of information on social conditions and situated lifeworlds in the past, even if oftentimes a modernist, civilizing, and Eurocentric perspective directed the view. However, there are also original historical documents and statements from representatives of the local population, which were identified in the material and quoted for this study. The search for historical and current secondary literature not available online was primarily conducted in special collections and various libraries in Tajikistan, Russia, and Germany.⁶ Personal observations and the collection of original empirical data took place during several field research visits to different places in the Western Pamirs starting in 2014. An extended visit to the village of Zong, about which historical data was already available from primary sources and secondary literature took place in spring 2018 with the support of the Mountain Societies Development Support Program (MSDSP) of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), and was followed by short-term visits in both summer and fall 2018, and spring 2020. During these visits, a household survey, guideline-based interviews, open conversations, and transect walks were conducted on the topic of past and current aspects of the foodscapes in Zong Village. The names of conversation partners have been changed or omitted to ensure anonymity.

The earliest identified sources are from the end of the 19th century, when, in the course of the border demarcation agreements of 1872–1873 and 1895 between the British Empire and the Russian Tsarist Empire, the Afghan occupation forces had to withdraw from the right bank of the Panj River in the Western Pamirs, and these territories were awarded to the Emir of Bukhara (MID 1886; Becker 2004: 124; Postnikov 2005; Kreutzmann 2008; Pirumshoev 2011). While the Bukharan governors held the right to raise taxes, the Russian troops took over the securitization of the border and established several bases. De facto, the principality of so-called Eastern Bukhara became a protectorate of Russia (Fig. 2).

State Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan (Tashkent, Uzbekistan); State Archive of the GBAO (Khorog, Tajikistan); Photograph Collection of the Museum am Rothenbaum. Kulturen und Künste der Welt (Hamburg, Germany).

6 Library of the Academy of Sciences, and National Library (both in Dushanbe, Tajikistan); Central Library of the GBAO (Khorog, Tajikistan); Library of the Russian Geographical Society (St. Petersburg, Russia); Staatsbibliothek (Berlin, Germany).



FIGURE 2 Clipping from the Russian ordnance map “Headwaters of the Amu Darya”
Explanation of the main colored markings entered only after 1895: The green line corresponds to the boundary between the Russian-controlled territory of the Eastern Pamirs and the Emirate of Bukhara; the wide yellowish stripe delimits the territories of Afghanistan (south and west); the reddish stripe marks the boundaries of the British-controlled territories (southeast); the blue signatures represent the military bases of the Russian Pamir Detachment. The three posts of Khorog (1), Nyut (Ishkashim) (2), and Langar Kikhn (3) are located directly on the border with Afghanistan on the territory of the Emirate of Bukhara, whose eastern part is squeezed in the map between Afghanistan and the Russian-controlled territory. The names of the posts, as well as the troop strengths of the individual posts have also been entered subsequently: in the winter of 1897–98, the Khorog Post (P. Khorogskii in red handwriting) comprised 25 infantrymen and 15 Cossacks, the four Cossacks of the Ishkashim Post (Nyut in red handwriting) were ordered to Khorog over the winter period due to extremely difficult living conditions, and ten Cossacks were stationed at the post at Langar Kikhn (P. Langarskii in red handwriting) at that time. The garrison strength was subsequently increased (Kivekes 1899: 3–3v, 6v–7v).
SOURCE: VTOGSH 1886, MANIPULATED BY KIVEKES 1899, AND DÖRRE 2021 (REPRODUCED WITH KIND PERMISSION OF THE PAMIR ARCHIVE)

Zong Village lies approximately five kilometers to the west from Langar Kikhn. For the Russian military, it was not only important to monitor events in Afghanistan and the border, but also to become familiar with the living conditions of the local population. Over time, this knowledge enabled diverse interventions that focused on improving the living conditions of the local population. These measures subsequently increased the local acceptance of the presence of the Russian troops and, therefore, also improved their social standing in Eastern Bukhara.

In 1924, the Bukharan People's Soviet Republic, proclaimed in 1920, was officially incorporated into the Soviet Union, and with it the study area. In the long term, the Soviet period brought profound social transformations that affected the foodscapes in the region in many ways. At the risk of being simplistic, it can first be stated that with collective and state ownership of the means of production, the claim of a socioeconomically egalitarian society, a centrally controlled planned economy, and the central role of the communist party in the decision-making, planning, and implementation of social development, central claims of the Soviet model of society, also shaped societal development and living conditions in Gorno-Badakhshan. All major campaigns of restructuring both society and the national economy, from nationalization of the means of production and collectivization to mechanization, consolidation, and intensification of agriculture, were also implemented in the study region. In addition to the enforced sedentarization of the Kyrgyz mobile pastoralists and development of a farm-based animal husbandry sector in the Eastern Pamirs, the collectivization of individual farmer households and reclamation of irrigated land in the Western Pamirs was at the top of the agenda in the early years of Soviet rule in order to both harness the resources of the arable region for the socialist national economy (RaiZemOtdel IR 1940; Kleandrov 1973: 113–137; Antonenko 2005; Kreutzmann 2015: 374–378), and to find “ways to free [Gorno-Badakhshan] from the importation of bread [...], and [...] to identify ways to transform [the Pamirs] from a consuming region into a producing one, and to bring it up to the level of the advanced regions of the Soviet Union” (KSOP 1936: 1, translated by the author).

The period since Tajikistan gained state independence in 1991 can also be considered here only cursorily. It is well known that the post-socialist transformation in Central Asia took very profound, but also divergent paths (Roy 2000; Herbers 2001, 2003, 2004; Luong 2004; Schmidt 2013). For the study region, the collapse of the national economy and the civil war in Tajikistan of 1992–1997 were particularly drastic; in the course of which businesses were dissolved and wage employment opportunities disappeared; the national social security

system, including subsidized food prices, collapsed; large numbers of refugees arrived from the western parts of Tajikistan; and, finally, a military blockade of the region by government forces took place. Only by means of international emergency aid coordinated by the Pamir Relief and Support Program were the people of the study region able to survive the 1990s (Bliss & Mamadsaidov 1998; Herbers 2001: 371–373; Herbers 2003: 88–90; MSDSP 2004; Bliss 2006: 276–291, 297–303; Sherbut et al. 2015: 261–262; Deronov 2016; Bashiri 2020).

3 The Western Pamirs: A Remote Meeting Point of Agricultural Expertise, Crop Biodiversity, and Scarce Arable Land Resources

Securing food provision in the Western Pamirs has historically been a particular challenge, and, at the same time, it has been largely based on local resources. Four aspects seem to play a crucial role in shaping the foodscapes in the study region according to the literature on the Pamirs: rootedness, richness, shortage, and remoteness. This chapter discusses these features in detail.

Rootedness: Cultivation is one of the central pillars of combined mountain agriculture, which is widely applied and has a long history in the region (Olufsen 1904: 110–119; Burkhan-du-Din-khan-i-Kushkeki 1926: 157, 171, 188–189; Robinson 2005: 200–201; Kreutzmann 2011: 42–43). Due to the shortage of natural pastures and hay meadows, animal husbandry historically plays a comparatively minor role within local livelihoods in the Western Pamirs (Baranov et al. 1964: 69). Cultivation instead is strongly rooted in both everyday life and the livelihood strategies of the mountain dwellers. Due to the arid climate, the cultivation of food and fodder crops is based on the irrigation of arable land plots on alluvial soil-covered debris cones and in the valley bottoms by means of meltwater from glaciers and snowfields, as well as water from creeks and rivers. For this purpose, the cost- and labor-intensive construction and maintenance of technical infrastructures is essential, which is why this work is usually carried out in a collective manner. Historically grown local knowledge and long-term proven regimes of the division of labor and management responsibilities are applied in this regard. Thus, irrigation arrangements for local food and fodder production consist of material and immaterial components, are common property resources, and fulfill the function of being a means of social organization at the community level since historical times (Bobrinskii 1908: 78–83; Andreev 1958: 66–72; Mukhiddinov 1975; Kreutzmann 1996: 59–65; Kreutzmann 2015: 179–183; Dörre 2021). Another aspect characterized by the attribute of rootedness is the regional cuisine, which is hardly known outside

the Pamirs.⁷ Regional food is strongly based on locally produced cereals, legumes, fruits, and dairy products, as well as on collected natural products that serve both nutritional and medicinal purposes. Several dishes possess transcendent meanings and sharing them at specific occasions fulfills important sociocultural functions within the communities (Andreev 1958: 236–242, 381–397; Vavilov 1964: 22–23; Steblin-Kamenskii 1975; van Oudenhoven & Haider 2015: 179–199).

Richness: The Russian botanist Nikolai Ivanovich Vavilov developed the widely noticed theory of the “origin[s] of cultivated plants” in the course of several research trips to different parts of the world in the first decades of the 20th century. He argued that Central Asia, and especially the arid highlands, must be considered as one of the global origins of various species including wheat, legumes, and drupes, as well as other cultivated plants:

A close study of South-Western Asia, Asia Minor and Northern Africa has [...] shown [...] that the entire varietal and racial diversity of field and vegetable crops is concentrated in mountainous districts. [...] Mountain districts supply an optimum of conditions for the manifestation of the varietal diversity, for the differentiation of the varieties and races, for the preservation of all physiological types [of plants]. At the same time, mountainous districts are excellent isolators, sheltering the varietal wealth. As the Caucasus, Mountainous Bokhara, Afghanistan [...] are collectors and keepers of the specific and generic diversity of the wild flora, they are also the collectors of cultivated plants. [...] The peas of the Pamirs remind the Siberian and North European forms [...] While studying the world geography of varietal diversity of cultivated plants, we have to recognize the exceptional importance of the mountainous districts of Asia and Africa.

VAVILOV 1926: 218–220

Known today as one of the “Vavilovian Centers of Diversity” (Wilson 2009: xv), the region of the Pamirs has an immense crop biodiversity with many

7 One of the few detailed historical documentations of popular foods and their traditional methods of preparation are the records of the Soviet ethnographers and linguists Aleksandr Leonovich Gryunberg and Ivan Mikhailovich Steblin-Kamenskii from the 1960s and 1970s, which were recorded in the Afghan and Soviet parts of the Wakhan Area (ibid. 1976: 171–196). More recently, a remarkable commented collection of historical, and still popular, recipes based on local products from the Pamirs of Tajikistan and Afghanistan has been prepared by van Oudenhoven & Haider (2015).

endemic species, which is interpreted as a result of natural selection, along with the planting and breeding experience of the mountain farmers which are based, amongst other things, on many years of differentiated observation of plant growth behavior, local environmental knowledge, and acquisition and exchange of seeds by the strategic use of kinship relations and transregional networks (Vavilov 1926: 218–220; Baranov 1936: 5; Vavilov 1964; Baranov et al. 1964; Kassam 2009: 684–686; Nabhan 2009: 45–64; Muminjanov et al. 2015).

Shortage: Inseparable from the first two characteristics is the aspect of shortage. Its physical dimension is formed by the historical undersupply of arable land in the Western Pamirs and its limited productivity (Baranov 1936: 1–4). Due to the mountainous topography and the need for irrigation water, less cultivable land per capita is available today than the national average in Tajikistan (AO PJT 2014; AO PJT 2017; AO PJT VMKB 2016). Much of the land also allows for lower yields than in the lowlands due to low humus content related to slow soil formation and aeolian deflation and a comparatively short growing seasons resulting from high mountain conditions (Sosin et al. 2012; Golosov et al. 2015). This is one important reason why there has been a gap between the amount of regional harvests and the demand for crops since historical times (Dörre 2018). An important social aspect of shortage is formed by the ongoing lack of jobs, salaries being lower than the national poverty line, and a lack of cash reserves. This leads to low purchasing power, which is an obstacle for many mountain dwellers for both increasing the yields by acquiring agricultural technology and fertilizers, and purchasing imported foodstuffs, which are priced above the national average (Dörre 2021: 52–53).

Remoteness: Compared with the wider Inner-Asian transregional mobility and exchange network of the past centuries, the Pamirs in present-day Tajikistan is less connected to the economic centers in the lowlands and played a subordinated role as a transit area. This is attributed to the challenging natural conditions of the high mountains and the associated high mobility costs (Odilbekova 1984). The demarcation and fortification of political boundaries between the Russian Empire, later the Soviet Union, Afghanistan, China, and the spheres of influence of the British Empire in what is now Pakistan in the course of the so-called Great Game complicated the situation (Burkhan-du-Din-khan-i-Kushkeki 1926: 91; Israr ud Din 1995: 44; Kreutzmann 1998; Kreutzmann 2008). Costly large-scale infrastructural development and road and transport connectivity of the region, located on the periphery of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union, was developed only from the late 19th century onwards during the Russian military rule and intensified under the socialist regime (Khonaliev 2005: 191–192; Zakharchyov 2014:

152–164; Kreutzmann 2017; Mostowlansky 2017). Both the historical subsistence orientation and resulting agricultural expertise, as well as the difficult maintenance of transport infrastructure, the high amount of state subsidies during the socialist period, and the high prices for food and consumer goods in Gorno-Badakhshan after the dissolution of the Soviet Union can be attributed to a considerable extent to the difficult accessibility to the region and costly exchange relations (Dörre 2021: 52). Current geopolitical and security-related border closures and restrictions to transboundary exchange relations with neighboring Afghanistan, and its relative exclusion from the benefits of the growing Chinese-Tajik trade reinforce the effect of remoteness, and can be seen as a phenomenon that both shapes living conditions and once again peripheralizes the region of the Tajik Pamirs (Kreutzmann 2008; Dörre & Goibnazarov 2018: 105; Saxer 2019: 190–193; Dörre 2021: 52; Safarmamadova et al. 2020).

4 Foodscapes in the Western Pamirs

Despite the historical depth of the material, the presentation of the results does not follow a strict diachronic pattern but is structured according to the features of the shifting foodscapes in the Western Pamirs presented in the chapter before. Along with the explicit presentation of insights about foodscapes and their shifts, the following remarks have the implicit goal of highlighting the rich potential that the methodological combination of archival studies, literature review, and empirical ethnographic research has for both the study and presentation of complex topics such as the reconstruction of spatially and socio-historically situated issues.

4.1 *Rootedness and Richness*

From early sources, it can be concluded that cultivation represented historically a central pillar of local food and fodder production and was strongly rooted in both everyday life and the livelihood strategies of the mountain dwellers. Especially significant evidence in this regard are surveys and descriptions prepared by external observers such as the reports of Aleksandr Vladimirovich Mukhanov, lieutenant colonel and commander of the Russian Pamir Detachment, on the Pamirs in general (1912), the report and the compilation of statistical data prepared by the Russian military and orientalist Adrian Georgievich Serebrennikov on the wider region of Shugnan (1895a; 1895b), a survey on the Gunt Valley of the Russian captain and earlier commander of the Russian Pamir Detachment Andrei Evgen'evich Snesev (1902),

TABLE 1 Sowing and harvesting of selected crops in Zong Village in pud* in 1902 (Extracted from Galevinskii 1902a: 4v-5)

Farmstead of ...	Household size	Wheat		Barley		Peas		Beans	
		sown	harvested	sown	harvested	sown	harvested	sown	harvested
Karam Ali-Sho	14	15	51	8,25	15	3	10,5	3	12
Davlat Mat	15	8,25	24	5,25	20	3	8,25	3	15
Chikan	11	4,5	15	3	12	0,75	8,25	3	6
Tamat	14	15	45	8,25	15	3	9	4,5	12
Kalandar	7	4,5	16,5	4,5	15	1,5	4,5	nd	nd
Masum Bai	11	4,5	21	3	8,25	5,25	12	0,5	6
Zanzhir	6	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd
Kasym Sho	10	6	21	4,5	15	3	8,25	3	6
Lekmon-Sha	8	10,5	24	3	12	nd	Nd	3	6
Salamat	8	15	51	6	15	3	8,25	1,5	5,25
Kurban	5	8,25	50	4,5	15	nd	nd	nd	nd
Total	109	91,5	318,5	50,25	142,25	22,5	69	21,5	68,25

* Note: 1 pud is equal to approx. 16.4 kg

and material on the Russian-controlled part of the Wakhan and Ishkashim Districts prepared by a soldier named Galevinskii (1902a; 1902b). Mukhanov provides an overview of the features, potentials, and challenges of the Pamirs with specific paragraphs on cultivation practices. Serebrennikov mentions explicitly how much wheat, barley, peas, beans, and millet were sown in the year of survey in the surveyed villages. Snesev and Galevinskii even provide farmstead-specific numbers on sowing and harvesting grain and pulses. Table 1 provides data on sowing and harvesting of selected crops from individual households living in the small Wakhi village of Zong in 1902, which is located nearby the Russian border post at Langar Kikhn at an elevation of 3000 meters, as an example of such statistical compilations (Tab. 1; see also Fig. 1 & Fig. 3).

However, due to the ecological conditions, cultivation was not an easy matter. Cultivation required infrastructure-dependent irrigation, the costly construction and maintenance of which was accomplished through collective effort (Andreev 1958; Mukhiddinov 1975; Dörre & Goibnazarov 2018). Successful farming also required contextualized local knowledge that grew out of long-term observations of the natural environment, experience, experiment,

and exchange of information. The Russian anthropologist and explorer Count Aleksei Alekseevich Bobrinskii who visited the Pamirs three times between 1895 and 1901 provides additional insights in a detailed description:

In the kishlaq of Vrang [a village in Wakhan District], Mubashir and his family [...] have 20 large land plots [...] half [...] is used for wheat, [...] the other half is sown equally with barley and beans. Small areas are used for peas, mustard, and sometimes sorghum.

BOBRINSKII 1908: 79, translated by the author

Bobrinskii's observation of planting barley and beans on one plot points to the notable practice of growing grain and legumes mixed together. The Russian botanist Nikolai Ivanovich Vavilov mentioned before and a team of Russian scientists under the guidance of Pavel Aleksandrovich Baranov, botanist and temporarily director of both the Pamir-biological Station and the Botanical Garden in Khorog, observed that mixed cultivation of grain and legumes, especially of rye with beans (*loshak-boqlo*), was widespread in the Pamirs (Vavilov 1926; Vavilov 1964: 12; Baranov et al. 1964: 89). This practice can be found until today as several interview partners have confirmed, and the author has observed during his visits to the Western Pamirs. It can be interpreted as long-term experiential knowledge of the farmers about the nutritional value of mixed harvests containing both carbohydrates and proteins, the growing conditions and cohabitation behavior of the cultivated plants, and the nitrogen-fixing, fertilization, and soil-improving effects of legumes. Such mixed harvests are used until today as both the basis of the human diet and animal fodder (Arvan 2014; Khomikov July 2018; Masriddinsho 2018; Fig. 3).

Until today, bread (e.g., barley bread *noni jowin*), flat cakes, and porridge made from different types of flour, and mixtures of cereal flour with finely grounded pulses (e.g., flat bread from wheat flour and grated pea *makhin gartha*) represent everyday dishes for many people of the Western Pamirs. Rice-based dishes and black tea were historically considered delicacies and luxury goods accessible only to the wealthy (Burkhan-du-Din-khan-i-Kushkeki 1926: 157, 171–172; Vavilov 1964: 14; Nabhan 2009: 59; van Oudenhoven & Haider 2015: 97–148, 222–232). According to local responses during the household survey conducted in Zong in 2018 and the author's experiences and observations at different places in the Western Pamirs, rice-based dishes are still consumed less often than bread. Instead, bread dipped in salted milk tea served with butter or other fatty matter (*shir choy*) represents one of the main dishes, especially in less affluent households. In the late 19th century, the Danish military and explorer Ole Olufsen made similar observation. He was apparently



FIGURE 3 Mixed cultivation of grain and legumes in the Gunt Valley, and a typical seed mixture used in the study region (top right picture)

PHOTOGRAPHS: DÖRRE IN JULY 2018 & JULY 2014

impressed by the central position bread traditionally has in the daily Pamirian diet, along with the social and nutritional meanings connected to it:

Bread is not, as with us, eaten with meat or other things, but is eaten by itself, and generally eaten hot. It is quite an ordinary custom to invite neighbors to a bread feast, where the dishes consist only of different kinds of bread, the host himself breaking the loaves, and offering them to his guests. The dish called Pillau, [...], is considered a great delicacy. [...] Tea has been known there from time immemorial. [...] It is only a small part of the population, [...], that can indulge in this drink, of which they are very fond.

OLUFSEN 1904: 123–124

In the lower valleys of the study region, grounded dried mulberries (*tut-pikht* or *talkhan*) represent another staple food, but can hardly be found in the higher parts of the Pamirs. Mulberries (*pikht*) provide sugar and vitamins, and, since historical times, helped many people to survive times of hardship and hunger

(Burkhan-du-Din-khan-i-Kushkeki 1926: 171–172; Baranov et al. 1964: 167–168; Steblin-Kamenskii 1975: 194; van Oudenhoven & Haider 2015: 206–210). One impressive evidence in this regard was provided by Mamad Zamun Nagzibekov, an inhabitant of the village of Porshnev in the area of Shugnan, who in 1927 talked to the Russian anthropologist and linguist Ivan Ivanovich Zarubin about his memories about his childhood. According to the recorded narration, mulberries saved the lives of both the respondent and his family:

There was not a single poor person in Upper Khorog like my father. As I remember now: one day there was a famine in Shugnan, and my mother began to advise to go to Roshan, to my father's home, because there, at my father's place they have a lot of fruit, somehow, we can get by with mulberries.

ZARUBIN 1960: 9, translated by the author

Karima Rabiyoova from the village of Dzhamag in the Yazgulom Valley has similar memories. She also emphasizes the high nutritional value of the fruit:

I remember that, even before the October Revolution, the main source of food we had in our village was *pikht*. In the mornings, we ate porridge (*khakpa*) with apricot and for dinner we ate *pikht*. It gave us strength and we never suffered from diseases. It helped us survive the scarcity of the Great Patriotic War (WWII) and, again, during the Civil War after the collapse of the Soviet Union, mulberry saved our lives for several years. And you see: here I am still, over 100 years old, but in good health and without pain, thanks to this tree that came to us from paradise. It is important that we take care of it.

cited in VAN OUDENHOVEN & HAIDER 2015: 208

Vavilov also refers to plant breeding as an additional important aspect of the experiences of local agriculturalists, according to which a farmer from the village of Porshnev brought an early-maturing wheat variety from the Kabul region in Afghanistan to the Pamirs, thus, making his plantations more resilient to climatic changes (Vavilov 1964: 23). This had been possible only on the basis of an extensive informal seed exchange network. Both such transregional networks and kinship relations are institutions that many farmers have strategically used since historical times to expand their seed portfolio (Nabhan 2009: 52–53, 61). According to the head of the village of Zong, it is still common that within extended family networks relatives living in different parts of the Pamirs provide each other with seed varieties from their respective place

(Khomikov 2020). Another important aspect that underlines the ability of the population to shape their life was, and still is, the widespread local knowledge of nutritional and medicinal suitability of wild plants, which are collected in anticipation of times of need (Steblin-Kamenskii 1975: 194; Kassam et al. 2010; van Oudenhoven & Haider 2015: 315–368; Ershov & Kampancev 2016; Tokhboz 2018).

The integration of the study region into the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union, as well as the following intensification of transregional exchange relations also caused a successive expansion of the portfolio of cultivable plants in the Western Pamirs. By the turn of the 19th century to the 20th century, the Russian military forces were the first to introduce new crops such as potatoes and cabbage varieties for their own purposes. Slowly, they were adopted by a few wealthier farmers willing to experiment (Kivekes 1902: 231; Cherkasov 1905: 121; Kivekes 1906: 36–37). The actual breakthrough of non-native varieties in terms of a massive spatial expansion of cultivation, growing harvests, and an increasing popularity among the wider local population occurred in the course of the Soviet socioeconomic transformation (Tadzh TA 1935; Baranov 1938; Radzhabov 1955: 55; Baranov et al. 1964: 76, 106–110; Steblin-Kamenskii 1975: 194 Odilbekova 1984). While the local population seemed to think for a long time that “[t]his land was more willing to give birth to stones than to vegetables” (cited in Gavriljuk & Yaroshenko 1987: 371, translated by the author), the Soviet writer Pavel Luknickii painted a pretty picture in one of his propagandistic travelogues, which is informed by a modernist perspective:

Twenty years ago, people in the Pamirs had not seen cabbage, potatoes, carrots and beet! None of the Pamiris knew what they were. None of the Russians working here believed that these vegetables would grow and ripen here in the high mountains. [...] But already in 1940, the *kolkhoznik* [member of a collective farm] Mirzonabotov harvested up to 800 [?] centners of potatoes from one hectare. And the group leader Leili-Begim Gayurova collected 875 [?] quintals of onions from one hectare.

LUKNICKII 1955, translated by the author; Fig. 4

The propagation of the potato as a new staple food and substitute for mulberries was part of a broader project for the economic development of Gorno-Badakhshan. It was projected to release potential for the production of silk yarn intended for the growing Soviet textile industry (Amdinov 1936: 96; Baranov et al. 1964: 168).

The Pamirs turned subsequently more and more into a showcase of the achievements of the leading socialist country and became increasingly



FIGURE 4 Drawing of Kh. Mirzonabotov, the collective farm member mentioned by Luknickii (1955). Source: Museum of the GBAO, Khorog
PHOTOGRAPH: DÖRRE IN MARCH 2018

integrated into the Soviet national economy. While in both the pre-Soviet and early socialist periods cereals and legumes occupied the largest shares of irrigated land, followed by fodder crops and only small vegetable plantations, the composition of the portfolio of cultivated plants changed more and more

(Baranov et al. 1964: 76, 197). Gorno-Badakhshan became a livestock production center based on a massive expansion of fodder crop cultivation including maize that reached its height in the 1980s, and was accompanied by an absolute and relative decline in cereal and legume cultivation (CARC & SASG 1955:291; GKTSSRpS 1988: 13; Herbers 2001: 371; Robinson 2005: 200–201; AO PJT VMKB 2013: 85, 88–89; Qonunov 2015: 12). The Soviet modernization project also increased the need for skilled personnel, who, after appropriate education and training, were increasingly recruited from the resident population. A growing number of former farmers were engaged in full-time wage labor activities and supplied themselves with primarily imported foodstuffs from state-run trading posts and stores, including both staple foods such as flour and processed products (Luknickii 1955; GKTSSRpS 1988: 33–34). These imports were widely known as ‘Moscow provisioning’ (*Moskovskoe obespechenie*). However, a concomitant effect was that many people lost comprehensive agricultural skills and experiential knowledge (Herbers 2003: 94; Herbers 2001: 371, 375). At the same time, many newly established administrative and educational institutions, enterprises, and social facilities became equipped with canteens and cafeterias that introduced the people to foods and popular dishes from other regions of the Soviet Union. The importance of subsistence-oriented quotidian practices and routines decreased, and dietary preferences changed towards societally higher valued foodstuffs. Ogonazar Aknazarov, the former director of the Pamir Biological Institute in Khorog, reports that:

[...] in the past, people not only sowed more barley because the growing season was shorter, but they were accustomed to making bread with it, as well. Due to Soviet influences, the peasants have become accustomed to thinking that wheat bread is more delicious than barley bread.

cited in NABHAN 2009: 60–61

However, Odinamamad Mirzo, teacher, biologist, and expert on regional history from Namadgut Village in the Wakhan, writes that he and his contemporaries embraced the new developments:

We, the generations of the 20–30s of the 20th century well remember the poor life of ours during our childhood. We have gone through threats of hunger, infectious diseases, darkness, uncertainty, lack of clothing, and lack of knowledge about the wider world. The elder depicted their past lives even worse than our period. Despite the shortcomings caused by local authorities, they considered the Soviet Union as the caring and just state. [...] Every day there was a feeling about changes towards

betterment, and thus we looked at the future with optimism following encouragement by them. There was hope among people and they actively participated in the implementation of state plans.

MIRZO 2010: 118

Coming back to the village Zong, the long-term impact of Soviet politics becomes very clear. After being the administrative center of several collective farms for some decades, the village had grown to a size of more than 180 farmsteads and had become the headquarter of the state farm 'Path of Communism' (*Put' Kommunizma*) in the late 1970s. The farm was the main employer in the area at that time. It specified in livestock rearing and controlled most of the arable lands the inhabitants had used in the pre-socialist times for subsistence farming. This land was nationalized in the course of the delayed collectivization campaign in the Pamirs in the 1930s (Antonenko 2005: 157, 159; TADZHIKGIPROZEM 1988; Shalfatov 2018). Privately usable land decreased radically and was only existing in the form of small kitchen gardens. The vast majority of 144 households had at least one member who was employed and received a monthly salary. Wage work was the main income source (IKZKS 1983–1985; Gholibov 2018). State-subsidized food deliveries with a significantly broader portfolio than local produce covered a big share of local food needs (Khomikov March 2018; Local leaders 2018). Traditional foodscapes based significantly on local production have apparently transformed during the Soviet time into a regime that relied more and more on imported, subsidized, and processed food.

After Tajikistan gained state independence, the national economy collapsed, socialist achievements and long-lasting securities vanished, and the civil war mentioned earlier broke out. Forced by these developments, a renewed shift toward subsistence-oriented cultivation occurred. However, local production was again unable to meet local demand, and many people remained dependent on subsidized food imports, which, until today, oftentimes are purchased by means of remittances. At the same time, limited market integration, monetary incomes lower and consumer prices higher than the national average, as well as a lack of cash reserves exacerbated the already existing difficulties to access imported food, as well as agricultural technology and fertilizers to increase land productivity.

After the turn of the millennium, a remarkable deviating development can be observed in Khorog, the political-administrative and economic center of Gorno-Badakhshan, where several international development organizations operate offices and the construction of the University of Central Asia campus was completed in 2017. Increasingly, supermarkets, restaurants, and cafes

in globally successful styles are springing up to complement established food distribution sites such as the popular Khorog Bazaar. They appeal to a newly emerging clientele with purchasing power and a willingness to try out new things, which can be found primarily in the small group of better paid civil servants and academics, the younger urban generation, the small expat community, and seasonally visiting Western tourists (Hasse et al. 2020). In this context, food is becoming a cultural marker of distinction in a society that is gradually individualizing, at least in the urban context of Khorog.

During the household survey conducted in 2018, massive shifts were revealed in Zong Village in the course of state-independence, which meanwhile has grown to a number of 240 households. Against the background of the challenging living conditions, most households of the sample of 48 households (20%) returned to subsistence-oriented farming, oftentimes applying old cultivation techniques such as mixed cultivation of cereals and pulses (Fig. 5).

Only a minority of 13 households of the sample had at least one person engaged in wage employment in the region. The majority of 28 households had at least one member working abroad as a labor migrant and sending remittances that were used mainly for the purchase of imported food and consumer



FIGURE 5 Privately operated kitchen garden with vegetable and potato beds, and small field with historically practiced mixed cultivation of cereals and legumes (top right picture) in Zong
PHOTOGRAPHS: DÖRRE IN JULY 2018

goods and the funding of lifecycle events. Hardly any of the households surveyed were able to cover their basic needs from their own harvests and were therefore forced to purchase food. Consequently, most surveyed households were indebted. These recent observations lead to the second pair of features of the foodscapes in the Western Pamirs: shortage and remoteness.

4.2 *Shortage and remoteness*

The circumstance of recurring food shortages and famines is a frequent topic in the historical accounts of external observers. It is often attributed to environmental conditions such as harsh winters with little snow, for example, in reports of the commanders of the Russian Pamirs Detachment to the military leadership (Eggert 1897: 696–696v; Anosov 1900: 75v–76; Yagello 1917: 543v). Based on systematically collected demographic and economic data, the Russian military also observed spatially uneven and annually fluctuating crop yields in the Western Pamirs, which, in the overall and long-term view, could not meet the regional needs of food, livestock feed, and seeds for the upcoming season (Mukhanov 1912: 81; Anonymous 1916). Count Bobrinskii, for instance, observed during his journeys that “[...] many mountain dwellers [...] experience times of hunger over and over again. [...] Two to three months a year without bread is normal. [...] During our visit, it was impossible to find any flour or bread in the villages” (ibid. 1908: 82, translated by the author).

A few years later, the commander of the Russian Pamirs Detachment, lieutenant colonel Mukhanov, highlighted in his description of the Pamirs the generally prevailing problem of insufficient food and fodder supplies:

The impossibility of preparing cattle feed for the winter leads to chronic hunger of the animals in the winter time [...] The cattle emaciate strongly in winter. [...] None of the inhabitants of the Western Pamirs keeps food stocks. As soon as it turns out that the Tajik has some leftovers, he hurries to sell them or exchange them for commodities.

MUKHANOV 1912: 59, translated by the author

Burkhan-du-Din-khan-i-Kushkeki's observations from the areas of Wakhan and Goran coincide with those of Mukhanov when he writes that in the event of a military crossing, food should be brought from other locations, as the local population has no significant food stocks (1926: 229).

Other causes identified by the Russians in the pre-socialist time were social and relate to the substantial burdens of taxation on cultivation, livestock rearing, and other aspects of life paid to the Bukharan rulers (BE 1900; Snesev 1903). For example, in June 1901, the commander of the border post near the

village of Langar Kikhn reported to his superior on the causes of the low crop yields, the burdens of Bukharan taxation, and his own reaction:

After a long winter [...], the harvest [...] is far from being as good as it was last year [...] the crops are often damaged by diseases and pests. Since the population is already very poor anyway, I ask [you] to influence the Bukharan Beg to suspend the tax collection. [...] Even under conditions of good harvest, grain stocks last year had already been used up to July, [I] was forced to issue 60 pud of our supplies [...].

BADRICKII 1901: 9, translated by the author

There are also isolated original historical documents from the local population referring to arbitrary measures such as land expropriations by the Bukharan power holders and hoping for help from the Russian troops. A horse messenger (*jigit*) in Russian service wrote to the commander of the Pamirs Detachment in April 1901:

My grandfathers and fathers owned land in Gorjwin [village in the Shugnan District]; when the Afghans harassed us [in the course of the occupation in 1883], we fled to Osh [in the Fergana Basin] [...] When the Russians arrived [1895], we returned [...] Last year, Ishan Said Kumran [a clergy] came from the Afghan [river] bank to us [...] he went to the Bukharan Beg and convinced him to take our land away from us. [...] If this happens, then we must leave our home again and go to Fergana to feed ourselves; you cannot survive here without having land; one remains hungry and barefoot [...].

JIGIT 1901: 136, translated by the author

In the course of a fact-finding mission to the region of the Pamirs three years later, the Russian political agent Count Cherkasov was confronted with many similar complaints from the local population about the exploitative and arbitrary actions of the Bukharan officials (Cherkasov 1904: 91; Iskandarov 1958: 119–120; Becker 2004: 171).

Admittedly, the food problem did not affect all members of the stratified pre-Soviet society equally but was closely linked to the socioeconomic status of individual households. This is exemplified by the household survey mentioned earlier in the districts of Wakhan and Ishkashim (Galevinskii 1902a). In Zong Village, the comparatively poor household of a farmer named Kalandar, consisting of six adults and one child, had about 1560 m² of land per person, which was used for growing wheat and legumes (see Tab. 1). Kalandar's household did

not own fruit trees but did own four cattle and 18 sheep and goats. The harvest in the year of the survey covered just over a third of the household's needs. At the same time, Kalandar was obligated to pay taxes to the representative of the Bukharan ruler and to render services to his religious leader named Pir Karam Ali Sho. A different picture emerges from the endowment of the comparatively wealthy household of this religious leader consisting of six adults and eight children. With over 2200 m² of land per person, Pir Karam Ali Sho's household not only had comparatively more arable land, but also 54 fruit trees, three horses, 24 cattle, and 65 sheep and goats. Although this household can also cover just less than half of its needs from its own harvest, it receives levies from Kalandar and the other followers (*murids*) as additional income (Galevinskii 1902a). There are reports that this Pir also controlled so-called *vaqf* lands, i.e. lands donated to a religious institution. In this case it was the tomb (*mazar*) of a former Pir named Sho Kambar located in the neighboring village of Langar Kikhn. These plots were cultivated by his *murids*. Pir Karam Ali Sho received one half of the harvest and the other was given to his followers on the condition that they organize a general community celebration in honor of the tomb (Mukhiddinov 1975: 10–11; Zarubin 1916: 8). Food sharing, then, seems here to serve as both an interpersonal link in a hierarchical relationship and a kind of social glue leading to loyalty and cohesion in the village community, which frequently experiences food shortage.⁸

For the Russian military, such conditions presented both necessities and opportunities for intervention to improve the situation of the population of the remote region and thus win hearts and minds on the ground. In addition to direct emergency aid, as mentioned above, commanders intervened politically to alleviate Bukharan taxation, promoted land development in all districts of the Western Pamirs by means of both canal repairs and new canal construction, and encouraged the emergence of a money-based regional market for locally rendered services and goods, as well as imported goods by means of a fixed bazaar at the military post in Khorog and guaranteed prices (Kivekes 1902: 231; Cherkasov 1905: 121; Kivekes 1906: 36–37; Iskandarov 1958: 119–120; Fig. 6). In September 1906, for instance, the officially issued price for an average local sheep was 1.50 Ruble, one pud of wheat flour was available for 1.80 Ruble, and the monthly wage of a worker hired by the Russian troops for road construction was 10.00 Ruble (NPO 1906).

The political change in the course of the integration of the study region into the Soviet Union did not immediately bring changes in the local food situation.

8 Holzwarth most recently observed similar phenomena in rural communities in southern Tajikistan (Holzwarth 2017).



FIGURE 6 Bazaar area in Khorog

PHOTOGRAPH: VON SCHULTZ 1911: 14.P.4:53 (© MUSEUM AM ROTHENBAUM (MARKK), HAMBURG).

Foreign visitors and leading representatives of the Communist Party reported about the hardships many inhabitants of the region experienced on different occasions (Burkhan-du-Din-khan-i-Kushkeki 1926: 171–172; Antonenko 1981: 215; Antonenko 2005: 147). Shirinsho Shotemur, Head of the Military Political Command, for instance, informed the Executive Committee of the Turkestan Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic in August 1923 that “[t]he poor and middle class almost never have enough bread—it remains necessary to borrow from the rich and that is why the poor remain under the influence of the *kulaks* [comparatively wealthy peasants]” (cited in Antonenko 2005: 147, translated by the author). The chairman of the Pamir Revolutionary Committee, Mikhail Vasilyevich Sluvis, continued at a meeting of the People’s Commissariat for Agriculture in Moscow in July 1924 that “[t]he people [in the Pamirs] are [still] starving. Usually, 15% of the population starves in spring and early summer. A part of the people lives from roots (rhubarb) and grass only. The usual dish is a mush of water and flour, as well as mulberries” (cited in Antonenko 1981: 215, translated by the author). Against the backdrop of both cereal-based dietary patterns and weak road connectivity, reliable grain supply to the Pamirs was

indeed a structural challenge. In recurrent years of poor harvests in the 1920s and 1930s, annual grain deficits added up to over 7.8 million kg. The Soviet rulers realized that importing foodstuffs and grain products in particular from other parts of the country became inevitable, despite the great logistical difficulties and high costs due to the region's remote location (Antonenko 2005: 154–155). Massive investments in transport infrastructure linking the GBAO to the economic centers were accompanied by land reclamation campaigns; the establishment of agriculture and livestock related research institutes to introduce new crops, generate higher-yielding and more resilient breeds, achieve production increases, and reduce production fluctuations; interventions in the both the organization and practices of agricultural production; and sociopolitical subsidies. These measures transformed both the society and economy of the Pamirs and tied the remote study area both politically and economically closely to the Soviet socialist society (Anonymous 1935: 3; Baranov 1935; KSOP 1936; Raikova 1936; CARC & SASG 1954: 63, 64; Baranov et al. 1964; Aknazarov 2003).

In the course of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the concomitant developments in independent Tajikistan mentioned before, “[s]uddenly the stores were empty!” (Women cited in Herbers 2004: 203) Against this background, a renewed shift toward subsistence-oriented cultivation of grains, legumes, and increasingly potatoes occurred (Herbers 2003: 90; AO PJT VMKB 2013: 85–90). However, local production was again unable to meet local demand, and many people remained dependent on subsidized food imports (MSDSP 2004; Khonaliev 2005; Kassam 2009). At the same time, the problem occurred that limited market integration, monetary incomes lower and consumer prices higher than the national average, as well as a lack of cash reserves started to exacerbate the already existing difficulties to access imported food (Dörre 2021: 52–53). With significant support from the MSDSP of the AKDN, a series of interventions have taken place since the 1990s in the agricultural sector with the goals of, among others, developing local food production and securing it at a high level (Qonunov 2018). The privatization of land tenure rights was followed by the creation of various assistance and education programs for the farming households, which now operate on their own responsibility without government direction (Herbers 2001: 375; Herbers 2003; Bliss 2006). These programs included basic measures such as the establishment of microcredit programs and institutions of local self-governance (so-called village organization), but also interventions directly addressing the food question, such as reactivating lost agronomic knowledge, promoting collectively operated irrigation arrangements, reviving the idea of expanding seed portfolios and seed banks, and even establishing collectively operated seed

storage facilities (*ambary*) (Herbers 2001: 376–379; Tetlay & Jonbekova 2005; MSDSP 2009; Betashoev 2016; Asadboev 2018; Qonunov 2018; WUA OU 2018; Dörre 2020).

Learning from historically recurring experiences of food scarcity, a state-run mill was opened in 2015 in the village of Boghev in the Shugnan District, which mills grain imported from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for the whole Pamirs Region. This measure acknowledges the limited agricultural potential of the study area, and, at the same time, reduces regional vulnerability to flour shortages by stockpiling subsidized products. It also contributes to an economic strengthening of the region by creating value locally and establishing jobs (Caleta et al. 2020: 31–32). An additional and cultural advantage is that it serves the fundamental ingredient needs of the locally anchored bread-based regional cuisine.

Another look at the remote village of Zong shows that nearly all households have again private land rights for irrigated cultivation (Asadboev 2018; Khomikov March 2018; Oshurbekov et al. n.d.g.). In the course of the household survey, the general post-socialist foodscape features of the region could also be confirmed at the local scale of the village, and astonishing similarities compared to the pre-Soviet time and the early Soviet period were revealed. Hardly any of the households surveyed were able to cover their basic needs from their own harvests. More than half of the households had to take on debt to buy food because of the lack of wage work opportunities and low salaries. Three brief statements from the community sum up the tense economic situation in Zong Village, which acts as an example for many other places in the Western Pamirs: “We always have Sunday. What we do not have are [paid] working days” (Khomikov March 2018, translated by the author); “For those things we sell the prices are low; for those things we buy the prices are high” (Shamadbek 2018, translated by the author); and “[You] can’t survive without taking on debt. This is my life. It is impossible to run away” (Zarnakov 2018, translated by the author). These shifts and challenges ultimately have a tremendous effect on households’ food portfolios, as the survey has revealed. Poor households, whose harvests and incomes are structurally below their needs and expenditures, often consume a one-sided and heavily carbohydrate-based diet with few fresh and vitamin-rich ingredients. Nutrition-related health problems due to low-quality food, malnourishment, and other causes are a common reason for visiting the clinic of the village, according to local nurses (Nurses 2018). Wealthier households, on the other hand, are able to purchase higher-priced and less storable fresh ingredients more frequently, allowing for a more varied diet. However, the steadily rising prices of staple foods such as wheat flour are increasingly pushing even households with above-average economic strength

to their financial limits (AS PRT 2022). The local example of Zong shows that again both the question of access to food and food consumption patterns in independent Tajikistan are immediately tied to the people's endowment of financial resources and physical capital.

5 Conclusion

Although much could only be touched upon briefly in this article, it should have become clear that food is a promising approach to understanding socio-historically situated local lifeworlds. Taking food as prism for research also allows differentiated insights about the mundane impacts of historical transformation processes at different scales ranging from the scale of the region, through the scale of the local community, to the scale of the household.

During the pre-Soviet time, first efforts were made by the Russian troops to achieve an increase of local food production and an expansion of locally cultivated species. These measures were undergirded by the reclamation of arable land, an extension of external relations, and a reshaping of social relations between the local population and the external actors. In material terms, there was a massive diversification and quantitative expansion of the foods available in the Western Pamirs in the course of the socialist time due to both the introduction of new crops and the substitution of local produce with imported subsidized products. In spatial terms, a massive upscaling can be observed, in that new areas were developed and an integration into interregional exchange relations within the Soviet national economy occurred (RaiZemOtdel 1940; Ivanov 1947; Gulomshoev 1960; SUGBAO 1975; GKTSSRpS 1988). On the other hand, however, the sizes of privately used land plots have decreased remarkably and subsistence-oriented agricultural production has declined in importance. Many people working in non-agricultural jobs have lost cultivation skills and knowledge. From a social point of view, the shift of power to the central command state and its bureaucracy becomes clear, as local agrarian practices were determined by political decisions and economic guidelines defined in distant centers. In independent Tajikistan, both the access to food and food consumption are again immediately tied to people's individual endowment with financial resources due to the market economy structure of society. Spatially, against the background of privatized land use, continuing land scarcity and changing exchange relations, a multidirectional rescaling is taking place. On the one hand, the relative importance of local subsistence production has increased compared to the Soviet time. At the same time, however,

international import of staple food has to fill the gap between regional supply and demand. In the urban context of Khorog, an international gastronomic culture based on imported foods, preparation techniques, and knowledge is evolving, which, however, is only affordable for the solvent layers of society. In the social dimension, the role of both the state and non-governmental development cooperation organizations have changed remarkably. Especially development cooperation organizations belonging to the AKDN seem to substitute tasks of the state by taking over public and social services.

These findings show clearly that shifting living conditions in the Western Pamirs cannot be explained by themselves but have to be seen as inseparably connected to broader societal change. Food-related economic activities on the ground such as production, distribution, exchange, and consumption are closely nested within the societal fabric and networks where people, labor, matter, knowledge, information, and innovations move and circulate transboundary. While both politics and development interventions change society in general and influence the respective socio-historical and spatio-environmental context, the people on the ground experience the effects of these processes in their everyday lives. Inspired by Woods' concept of the 'global countryside' (2007), it is finally argued that villages like that of Zong can be seen as a part of the 'global province' where economic activities are incorporated in transregional networks; where people move transboundary; knowledge, information, and innovations circulate; the processes and conditions of societal changes affect local social relations and agricultural landscapes in manifold ways; and local communities experience shifts in the socioeconomic stratification of the community in the course of these transitions (ibid.: 492–494).

Due to the complexity of the topic, the presented insights remain cursory. However, it is clear that the foodscapes in the Western Pamirs have not only changed in the course of historical transitions, but that they also show remarkable continuities in terms the four characteristics of *rootedness*, *richness*, *scarcity*, and *remoteness*. Agriculture, despite repeated changes in both the production goals and practices, remains a central economic branch of the Western Pamirs to the present day and a livelihood strategy of individual households that should not be underestimated. These activities are based on the strategic use of crop biodiversity and efforts to expand it, as well as the application of spatiotemporally contextualized experiential knowledge. Despite these historically developed capacities, however, agrarian production potentials have been insufficient to meet local needs since historical times. Transboundary networks and exchange relations, and food imports were and remain essential, but due to the peripheral location and economically difficult situation of the region, they are cost-intensive and can only be maintained

with increased efforts. Together, these features draw an ambivalent picture of the foodscapes in the Western Pamirs, which are characterized by remarkable strengths and potentials on the one hand, but also considerable challenges and restrictions on the other hand.

The continuation of combined archival studies, literature review, and ethnographic research at the local scale such as that of the village of Zong makes it possible to understand the manifold meanings of complex issues such as food, and, in doing so, also to provide local perspectives and perceptions with more space for articulation than in the past. Political actors and development practitioners should consider such nuanced insights in their efforts to improve local and regional conditions for reliable, secure, and just food provision in order to intervene in a focused and purposeful manner, that is, to promote and build on existing potentials and strengths and substitute or reduce lingering challenges. Ideally, this could lead to a reversal of the trend in the growing numbers of mountain people at risk of food insecurity in Central Asia cited at the outset.

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