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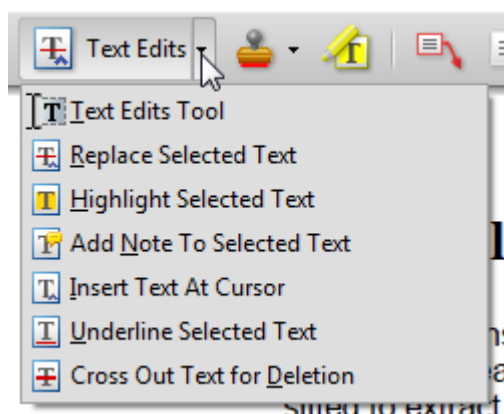
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Journey into paradise: Tajik representations of Afghan Badakhshan

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In 2003, a Tajik film crew was permitted to cross the tightly controlled border into Afghan Badakhshan in order to film scenes for a documentary entitled *Sacred Traditions in Sacred Places*. Although official Tajik state policies and international non-governmental organizations have increasingly stressed freer movement and greater connectivity between the two sides, this 'prescribed community' strongly contrasts with the lived experience of Tajik Badakhshanis. This paper explores narratives of nostalgia and dissonance reflected in the film itself and recounted by the film crew in interviews during film production and screening. Engaging with existing work on the interpretation and temporalization of space and post-Soviet nostalgias, I claim that this particular nostalgia emerges in response to new configurations of power and newly imposed pressures valuing cross-border movement. In this case, nostalgia serves as an affective resource helping Tajik Badakhshanis understand and manage daily life and the new potential for border crossing in a highly regulated border zone.

Keywords: Badakhshan; Afghanistan; Tajikistan; border; film; nostalgia

Introduction

In a darkened editing room in Dom Kino ('film house') in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, we watch footage of sweeping vistas of northern Afghanistan, close-ups of rushing mountain streams and landscapes dotted with shepherds herding flocks across high pasture. The film's research coordinator is seated next to me, and every few moments she sighs. She is struggling to decide which of these images will end up on the cutting-room floor. 'I was in paradise at that time,' she says, 'I was in paradise at that moment . . .'

In far southeastern Tajikistan, the border with Afghanistan is the Panj River (an upper branch of the Amu Darya, or Oxus, watershed), in some places wide and rushing, and in other places shallow and calm enough for a person to wade across. This tightly controlled border separates two parts of Badakhshan, home to a large population of Ismaili Muslims. In 2003, during a special year of celebration in honour of the Ismaili missionary Nasir-i-Khusraw, a documentary film crew from Tajikistan had the rare opportunity to cross one of the newly built bridges into Afghanistan to film the shrine of the prophet's tomb and the landscape and people who surround it.[1] For the film crew, this experience was remarkable, highlighting the great disparity in the daily lives of Ismailis on either side of this border, even as they were charged with documenting the depth of their shared past and present. This paper explores narratives of nostalgia recounted by the film crew through the documentary film, the film-making process and interviews I conducted with Badakhsani residents in Tajikistan, as well as with those involved in the film during production and screening. Echoing a widely explored genre of narrative by 'modern' subjects concerning the putatively pre-modern other (for example Fabian [1983], Wheeler [1994], Chakrabarty [2000], Gupta [2000], Chatterjee [2006]) the film crew saw the Afghan Ismailis as inhabiting an imagined shared past – that is, the Afghan Ismailis remain suspended in a past time

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left behind by the Tajik Ismailis a century ago. The film crew, along with Tajik Badakhshanis more generally, express a strong sense of nostalgia for this 'pure' past: a nostalgia that I claim allows them to understand and manage disparities associated with the border. As Massey (2005, p. 65) suggests, when spatial flows change (or even when that change appears imminent), nostalgia can be a way of mourning old spatial coherences.

The border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan in the Badakhshan region has until very recently been relatively closed to average citizens. Although the Afghan side, and the people living there, were always clearly visible to Tajik Ismailis, individual opportunities to cross the border legally have been rare. At the same time, in the years leading up to the making of the film, there was a marked intensification of political discourse in Tajik Badakhshan focusing on increased connectivity and commonality between the Afghan and Tajik Ismaili communities. The Ismaili development and religious organizations, in addition to playing a key role in the construction of the bridges themselves (at Tem, Ishkashim and Darvaz), began to stress the historical and linguistic connections between the two communities, and actively engage in projects to bring them into contact with one another. Local and regional governments, as well as international-development organizations, ramped up discussions of social and economic connectivity, including increasing localized trade and import/export possibilities. However, these official discourses, prescribing increased connection, have relatively little to tell us about local public perceptions of crossing this border and the role its strictures (and their potential relaxation) play in the lives of Badakhshani communities.

The anthropological analysis I offer in this paper brings to the discussion of migration, movement across borders and the physical realities of geographic boundaries a new perspective on the response of individuals and communities to larger political forces. In particular, nostalgia and longing are, as William Bissell points out, emotions 'shaped by specific cultural concerns and struggles … emphasizing distance and disjuncture' (2005, p. 216). In late modernity, identity becomes unmoored from place, generating a longing for the perceived fixity of the past (Massey 1992, 2005, Wheeler 1994). In this paper, I present a close examination of a documentary film and the narratives that surround its production and circulation as a way of revealing attitudes and affective response associated with crossing the Tajik–Afghan border.

This paper makes several contributions to the study of movement, place, power and inequality in Central Asia. The analytical object is not just movement of people and goods across a border, but the making and screening of a documentary film that required such a crossing. Film itself is a medium enacting a kind of virtual movement, capable of both forging new connections for the (immobile) audience and simultaneously emphasizing differences, enlarged on the big screen. Approaching the creation and circulation of documentary film as a special type of 'movement' allows us to broaden our understanding of mobility itself, and to explore ways that citizens of one state imagine, forge and re-forge their connections to citizens of another. As we will see, it also provides an important window into the ways in which residents of border zones respond to new flows of power and new structures of inequality. I ask how Tajik Badakhshanis may manage or even resist external pressures valuing increasing 'connectedness' through narratives that express nostalgia for the historical divisions between the Tajik and Afghan communities.

In a very real sense, the transformation of the Tajik–Afghan border marks the undoing of the patterns of human movement defined by the highly militarized boundaries of empire for nearly a century. Understanding migration, border crossing and movement of peoples then becomes not only about understanding an increase in freedom to move and to experience, but also about understanding the emotive and intellectual reaction to that movement.

This paper brings together two productive and interdisciplinary bodies of literature aimed at understanding space and movement through space. The first is focused on the questions of the

temporalization of space and the 'taming of space' through understanding places to be situated on a temporal continuum (Fabian 1983, Massey 1992, 2005, Wheeler 1994). The second body of work explored here is concerned with moral geographies and the value associated with mobility, in particular a sense of cross-border 'connectedness' (Watts 1996, Hyndman 1997, Smith 2000, Urry 2007). These two analytical approaches help make sense of the particular nostalgia produced in Tajik Badakhshan, which is not just a variant of the now-familiar post-Soviet nostalgia (Boym 2001, Ghodsee 2004, Yurchak 2006), but beyond this involves a complex affective reaction to new power structures and new types of movement. I ask here how citizens, whether well-connected activists or subsistence farmers, respond to, resist and re-imagine cross-border mobility and the very divisions the border is supposed to embody.

In her work on the changing nature of citizenship, Aihwa Ong has been critical of the claim that 'the intensification of interconnectedness associated with capitalism has created opportunities for the rise of feelings and institutions of global solidarity' (2006, p. 230), arguing instead that increased freedoms also give rise to fraught and clandestine transborder activities, such as terrorist networks. This paper contributes to this critical approach by revealing the uneasiness and sense of insecurity associated with globalizing transformations. In particular, in an environment in which a sense of solidarity and community is being newly prescribed by powerful institutions, I ask here how subjects make sense of the sharp differences that increased movement makes visible (and may have the potential to transform, over time).

Situating Badakhshan

The region of Tajikistan in the far southeast referred to as Gorno-Badakhshan is rugged, mountainous terrain. The market town of Khorog and the small villages in numerous high valleys are primarily populated by Ismaili Muslims. Ismailis believe that their living Imam (the Aga Khan) is a direct descendent of the Prophet Mohammed, and has the sole power to serve as a religious leader and guide the practice of the faithful. This branch of Islam, with at least five million followers worldwide, is notable for its global humanitarian organizations, which provide education, health care and physical infrastructure development to areas populated by Ismailis in Central Asia, South Asia and Africa.

The Ismailis divided by the Tajik–Afghan border straddle the periphery of the former Soviet Union. The documentary filmmakers then find themselves at the intersection of two transnational communities: the global Ismaili structure (Daftary 1998, Steinberg 2010) and the post-Soviet sphere. Necessarily their own experience as post-Soviet subjects deeply colours their sense of (dis)connectivity with Afghan Ismailis.

This region has long been a zone of contestation and was one of the sites of the so-called 'Great Game' between British and Russian expansionism until the end of the 1800s. However, before the emergence of the Soviet Union in 1917, there were few significant differences in daily life for Ismaili Badakshanis on the Tajik and Afghan sides (Bliss 2006).[2] This Ismaili community was part of a larger swath of Himalayan Ismailis throughout what is now northern Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and western China. While each of these communities survived, over the course of the last century they became increasingly divided by heavily militarized national borders (see Shaw and Kassymbekova, this volume).[3] Tajik Ismailis were **Q1** further isolated from the larger Ismaili polity by the secularizing pressures of the Soviet Union. According to locals, movement across the Tajik–Afghan border was strictly controlled after 1937, in some cases dividing families.

However, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the resolution of Tajik civil war in 1997, the border has become gradually more porous.[4] The humanitarian organizations of the global Ismaili community (the Aga Khan Development Network, or AKDN) constructed new

bridges across the Panj and used them to truck aid into the rural Ismaili communities of north-ern Afghanistan. As conflict raged in other areas of Afghanistan between the Taliban and various international forces, this northern Ismaili region remained relatively calm due to its extreme isolation. It was in this particular climate in 2003 that the documentary film under discussion was made and that the Tajik film crew travelled across one of these bridges into Afghan Badakhshan.

Legal movement across this border to this point had been relatively rare and restricted to limited humanitarian aid, government officials and very few civilians (such as the film crew) on specific missions. Although there has been significant attention paid to opium trafficking (see, most recently, De Danieli [2011]), due to the rugged terrain this activity is relatively light compared to areas further to the west. Badakhshani smugglers are described by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime as using fairly 'primitive' techniques and being only 'weakly coordinated' (Marat 2006; although see also Hojibekov [2008] on the impact of trafficking on the region). International aid to border-patrolling units seems primarily focused on stemming the use of the official bridges over the river Panj for drug trafficking (UNDP 2007, UNDP 2008).[5]

Examining the most basic indicators of poverty and standard of living in Afghan and Tajik Badakhsan over the last decade illustrates the very different material circumstances of residents on either side of the Panj. Though both sides feature mountainous terrain and remain isolated from large urban centres, Afghan Badakhshan has not benefited from either the basic infrastruc-ture supplied by the Soviet Union or the subsequent expansive services provided by AKDN. The Afghan Ministry for Rural Rehabilitation and Development estimates that around 1% of the population of Afghan Badakhshan has access to electricity. In 2005, two in five residents were estimated to receive the minimum recommended daily caloric intake and less than half of school-aged children regularly attended school (MRRD 2006). By contrast, in Tajik Badakh-shan, following the initial recovery from the humanitarian crisis stemming from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent Tajik Civil war (1992–97), AKDN estimates that approxi-mately 70% of households achieved food self-sufficiency. The AKDN-funded enterprise Pamir-Energy Company claims that between 77% and 86% of Tajik Badakhshanis have access to electricity (though this may be a gross overestimate, not accounting for those households with restricted hours of supply and little or no power in winter). Primary-school attendance and adult literacy rates, despite falling since Soviet times, still hover at or above 90% (UNDP 2005). Certainly, Tajik Badakhshan is by no means free from hunger and poverty, but the picture that emerges is one in which Afghan Badakhshan has thus far been the beneficiary of far fewer resources for countering conditions associated with life in this rugged, food-insecure region.

Sacred traditions in sacred places: making of the film

To understand the sense of nostalgia with which Tajik Badakhshanis view Afghan Badakhsha-nis, and their response to limited movement across this border, it is particularly illuminating to explore discourses surrounding the making of a documentary film about the Ismaili missionary Nasir-i-Khusraw, *Sacred Traditions in Sacred Places*. My analysis of these discourses is drawn from the period during which this film was in post-production and screening. I was an ethno-graphic observer during initial public screenings of the first version of the film in Khorog and Dushanbe, Tajikistan, in the autumn of 2003. I sat in on discussions between the film crew and various consultants during the final translation and editing process, attended screenings and associated events, and conducted subsequent interviews with the director and research coor-dinator. I have also drawn on material from interviews I conducted through a translator with

Tajik Badakhshani villagers in their homes in Ryn, Jelandy, Porshnev and elsewhere during late summer and autumn of 2003.

This paper is an exploration specifically of the affective response of the Tajik Badakhshani filmmakers, and of Tajik Badakhshanis more generally, to the Tajik–Afghan border. My first interaction with the film crew occurred six months after their work in Afghanistan, and as far as I am aware, the film was never screened on the Afghan side. The film and related circulating discourses on the Tajik side constitute the extent of the ethnographic scope of this paper, and it should not be read as an attempt to provide an analysis of the Afghan perspective on the border. I claim here that the Tajik Badakhshani response to the border and to notions of 'connectivity' newly prescribed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government policies stems from their particular situation and relations both to larger, transnational, powers and to the Afghan side. That is, the Tajik Ismailis are in a position to view the Afghan Ismailis as a certain type of other – the type of other that is the object of nostalgia, longing, and perhaps even pity (see Chakrabarty [2000]). While I do not explore the Afghan Badakhshani perspective here, we might expect it to be quite different, reflecting their different subjectivities and relationships with proximal others.

The film itself was commissioned by the Aga Khan Humanities Project (Dushanbe) and The Christensen Fund (based in Palo Alto, California), as well as the Institute for Ismaili Studies (London). Both the Aga Khan Humanities Project and the Institute for Ismaili Studies are Aga Khan-funded organizations. The film serves as an introduction to the biography of the missionary Nasir-i-Khusraw and to the basic tenets of his writings through English-language narration and English-subtitled interviews with local and international Ismaili scholars. The film also documents local Ismaili practice in shrines and tombs with links to Nasir-i-Khusraw. Devotional music and singing are featured, and particular visual attention is given to the components of ritual: candle-lighting, animal sacrifice, shrine-specific practices (such as placing one's upturned hand through the bars blocking a burial site) and prayer. The female narrator's voice is often accompanied by images of the natural world such as flowers, swimming fish, running water and snowy mountain landscapes. In the years following the screenings in Tajikistan, the film was shown at several American film festivals; its English-language narration and subtitling clearly anticipates those wider international audiences.

The film's research coordinator is a charismatic, highly educated woman from Khorog. She speaks Shugni, Tajik, Russian and English and fluidly shifts between them while working with her colleagues on the film. When I interviewed her about the film she spoke in English, adding a Tajik or Russian word from time to time. Though she sees herself as an activist and particularly an advocate for rural Badakhshani women, she tends to prefer conventional Tajik women's dress. The film's director, on the other hand, wears Western clothing and a beret. He is a well-known figure in the world of Tajik film, being an organizer of Tajikistan's international film festival and director of key documentaries. He chooses Tajik or Russian over English when talking about the film and his work.[6] Other local figures who were key in planning, organizing and overseeing the execution of the film included another Khorog native and noted documentary filmmaker whose political activism pushed him into life abroad.

The mission of the film crew in Afghanistan was to obtain footage of Nasir-i-Khusraw's mausoleum and document ritual associated with the shrine found there. A cave in which Nasir-i-Khusraw lived and wrote some of his most influential teachings is also at that site. The crew filmed Ismailis living in the region and participating in religious ritual at the shrine, as well a great deal of landscape footage. Much of this was ultimately cut in the shorter, 52-minute DVD version of the film.

In interviews the film crew recounted their route through Afghan Badakhshan in detail, placing importance on the geography of the weeklong journey itself. In this savouring of

detail we see that for them, crossing the border was not a mere formalism consisting of passport and border agencies, but instead part of a much anticipated and evocative journey through space and time. They describe their growing excitement as they departed from Dushanbe and travelled east, crossing the river Panj via the bridge at Khorog. They then climbed into the mountains, travelling over the Shiva Pass on their way to the Yumgan Valley, basing themselves in Jurm. Along the way they stopped and shot a great deal of footage at the high-altitude Lake Shiva, which figures prominently in their narratives of the trip. In the Afghan part of Ishkashim, they filmed in and around the Nasir-i-Khusraw shrine and conducted interviews (only one of which appears in the final cut of the film), before returning the way they had come.

Discourses of the pure and the primitive

We can identify two key discourses which emerged as the Tajik film crew screened, edited and discussed the footage of their trip to Afghanistan: Afghanistan as pure, and Afghanistan as primitive. These discourses are in part shaped by the transnational spheres that the Tajik Badakhshanis inhabit. The long, forced separation from the Afghan Badakhshanis, and in particular the industrializing and modernizing projects of the Soviet period, gave rise to sharp differences in daily life and cultural practices between the two groups. And yet in the present moment Tajik Badakhshanis are increasingly encouraged to identify with their Afghan neighbours, despite the restraint imposed by the border.

Further, these discourses emerge not only in the stories and conversations of the film crew, but in the presentation of the film itself. The film's depiction of a people and a landscape is not merely descriptive, but productive, giving voice to the filmmakers' impressions of the nature of the Afghan side. In this way, viewers who may never make the journey to Afghan Badakhshan themselves are offered a new and compelling vision of the relationship between Tajik and Afghan Badakhshan. Without moving from their seats in the dark and stuffy Dom Kino, they are transported virtually across this border, and are audience to a commentary on what the (potential for) normalizing of migration and movement across this border might look like.

Afghanistan as pure

> It is beautiful here on TV, but the reality is so … you just had to be there. (SM)[7]

In the eyes of the Tajik film crew, the Afghanistan they visited was pure and unspoiled. The lack of industry, paved roads, electricity and multi-story buildings left the landscape open and unscarred. The variety of animals shepherded there, the quality of the water and the wide vistas of mountains and sky all prompted the Tajiks to label the natural landscape as cleaner and purer than their own.

> There it is vast – so much vaster than you can see here. The sky is wide and open and there are vast pastures. (TH)

Some of the language used to describe the Afghan landscape echoes wider Islamic motifs of paradisiacal landscapes or of the Garden of Eden.

> In that place there are camels – you know, camels? And horses, also white horses. And donkeys – all kinds. The donkeys were as big as horses; I have never seen such donkeys. (SM)

The film crew repeatedly drew attention to the clarity of streams and rivers.

> Running through there is a stream, you know a spring, and the water – it is not like any water we have. It is like milk. It is like milk it is so pure. You could just drink it. (SM)

Such statements call to mind Quranic descriptions of the garden in heaven, promised to the faithful. The research coordinator of the film made explicit these references when she labelled the landscape 'a paradise', and 'like heaven'.

The film itself features a number of close-ups of flowing streams and high-altitude Lake Shiva, allowing the sound of running water in the background to fade in slowly as part of a segment transition. On the whole, the landscape of the Afghan side figures prominently. Montages of mountain vistas, alpine lakes and grassy pastures are accompanied by traditional Badakhshani music and narration about the history of Nasir-i-Khusraw.[8] Scenes cut from the final version of the film include long pans of pasture dotted with distant flocks of camels, horses, sheep and goats.

Certainly the filmmakers' perception of the Afghan landscape as pure and unsullied suffuses the film itself, and audiences seem to share this impression. The notion that the industrialization and development accompanying the Soviet periods of relative prosperity left their mark on the pristine mountain landscape is a popular one, supporting an imaginary of the Afghan side as less scarred. Drawing on metaphor reminiscent of that employed by the film crew, a villager in upper Ryn compared the Tajik side to 'earth' (*dunyo*) and the Afghan side to 'heaven' (*jannat*).

If the landscape is an important symbolic resource in the construction of sentiments of nationalism and globalism (Escobar 1999, Tsing 2005), it also serves as a focal object of nostalgia (Armstrong 1982, Smith 1986), in particular in its perceived purity relative to the corrupted and polluted landscape of modern industrialized space. There is also a sense in which the film crew frames the *inhabitants* of this landscape as 'pure'. The film's research coordinator related the narrative below that illustrates the perceived innocence of the Afghan Badakhshanis.

> One day, you know, we lost something – I don't remember what it was, a part of the camera. And we told the driver that we lost this thing, this spare part. And we asked if he had seen anything, anybody, you know, take this part. And he said to me: 'They don't steal.' You see, the Afghans there, they don't steal. So we ... we got up very early, early in the morning, five in the morning, to look for this part. And the constable in that place, he talked to us, he told us that the part was at, you know, the office of UNDP [United Nations Development Programme]. At the UN [United Nations] office. And so we went there and they told us that someone brought it there. It is because they do not steal there, and if this part fell down, fell out of the car, they would not take it.

Though certainly many Tajik Badakhshanis view Afghanistan as a source of social ills, intimate interactions with Afghans seem to produce a different kind of reaction. A Khorog resident, in cautioning me not to go out after dark due to 'Afghan drug dealers', remarked that her Afghan neighbours across the hall, on the other hand, were kind, harmless people ('naïve', she added in English).

Though the Soviet period changed the Tajik Badakhshanis, ushering them into industrialized, modern existence, the film crew imagines that on the Afghan side the inhabitants reside in a purer, unsullied physical and moral landscape. In expressing desire for this uncompromised other, the film crew seems to be expressing a sense of loss of their own paradisiacal landscape and innocent selves. It is this longing for the 'impossibly pure' and desire 'for origin, for nature' that Stewart (1993, pp. 23–24) identifies as the core of nostalgic narrative.

Afghanistan as primitive

> To cross that bridge, it was like going back in a time machine. (SD)

The other side of this discourse concerned with the pure and the paradisiacal is a discourse of the primitive. Producing a well-studied narrative of a pre-modern other (for example, Fabian [1983], Wheeler [1994], Gupta [2000], Chakrabarty [2000], Chatterjee [2006]) the film crew (and Tajik Badakhshanis more widely) characterized the living conditions and cultural practices of Afghan

Ismailis as 'medieval', 'primitive' (*primitivnyi*), and 'backward' (uttered in English). These practices were even attributed to 'psychology': 'The language is the same but their attitude is different. Psychologically, they are quite different ...' (TH). In a specific example, the film's research coordinator criticizes the practice of marrying girls as young as 11:

> One thing they do there, it is for girls to marry very, very young. If a girl, her father dies, and if she has no brothers, no older brothers in her family, then they marry her to someone who will take – you know, keep the land. Even if she is so young, only eleven or twelve-years-old. I met the women, in one place, and I said 'Why do you do this?' because I asked them, you know, because these are just kids. They should be playing, or going to school. But for them it is the only way they can do it, to do this, to keep the land.

Similarly, the film's director observed that some villages had schools, 'but not like any schools I have ever seen', indicating that they had limited space and few books or supplies.

The final edited version of the film itself signals this sense of primitiveness in the way that interview subjects are framed. The only interview with an Afghan Ismaili in the film that survived the final cut was that with the keeper of the shrine associated with Nasir-i-Khusraw's burial site. The clips containing him are brief and the scene is poorly lit. He is standing beside the shrine, dressed in traditional, local clothing (loose trousers and a long shirt of the same colour, wool vest and hat). This is in sharp contrast to the many interviews remaining in the short version of the film with religious officials and commentators on the Tajik side. Many of these are conducted with the subject seated inside a well-lit room or office – even behind a desk. Most interviewed men are wearing Western clothing (collared shirt and trousers).

Interestingly, these discourses of 'primitiveness' seem to be widely accessible as a way of describing the contrast in economic conditions on either side of the border, even in academic discourse. In his recent history of economic change in the Pamirs, Frank Bliss discusses how relatively wealthy the Tajik Badakhshanis were up until the Tajik civil war ('Every third house owned a car'), but writes: 'only 100 m away on the Afghan side of the Pyandsh, Stone Age tools were still in use' (Bliss 2006, pp. 4–5; on the use of the term 'Stone Age' in the analysis of 'pre-modernity' see Rutherford [2010]). Residents of relatively prosperous satellite villages outside of Khorog described their sense of separation when they flipped on their electric lights in the evening, only to watch their counterparts on the Afghan side brighten and warm their dwellings by fire and lantern light.[9]

While some differences were described neutrally or nearly so (one village religious leader mentioned that in his understanding Afghans tend not to sacrifice sheep (*dawati*) before performing the candle-lighting ceremony *chiragh rawshan*), others were characterized far more negatively. Keeping livestock indoors and burning wood indoors were singled out by many as particularly unclean practices attributed to Afghan households. One Khorog resident even commented that the site near town that the Aga Khan had recently toured for the construction of the University of Central Asia campus was a poor choice due to the fact that the Afghanistan was in plain view. He suggested that bad winds blew from the Afghan side, and that the proximity of Afghanistan might tempt students to get involved in drugs.

In recent years AKDN and UNDP (sometimes working together) have increased the number and breadth of aid projects in the region. While the integrating power of comprehensive social-service organizations like these is explored elsewhere (Rose [1999], Bliss [2006] and in particular Steinberg [2010]), the film crew viewed AKDN and UNDP as vehicles of modernization, transporting the Afghan Ismailis out of the past and into the modern era. As one man in Lower Ryn village put it: 'If they follow the Imam (the Aga Khan) their living conditions will be improved.' In some sense, the AKDN-funded film is itself is part of this wider effort, aiming to increase the sense of solidarity Tajik Badakhsanis (and Ismailis from elsewhere) feel with long-separated Ismaili populations like Afghan Badakshanis.

Producing understanding of movement and change

These perceptions of Afghan Badakhshan are woven together in narratives of nostalgia and separation. The film crew in particular, and perhaps Tajik Badakhshanis more generally, project the current lives and circumstances of the Afghans onto an imagined past in which the Tajik and Afghan Ismailis were a contiguous, homogenous Ismaili community. The opening of the Tajik–Afghan border represents the beginnings of a reversal of decades of dichotomizing economic and social systems, and the dissolution of a phase of empire that kept the two sides apart. This film and its making provide a window into the reaction of the Tajik Ismailis to this monumental shift.

Doreen Massey has analysed the way in which this particular moment of rupture marks a transition between a world in which both places and nations 'came to be seen as bounded, with their own internally generated authenticities' (2005, p. 64) to a world in which those boundaries become fluid and the connections between place and culture seem to be loosened. Of course, this notion of bounded, circumscribed space was an imagined one, but it is no less wrenching to abandon this illusion. In fact, as Massey suggests, Tajik Badakhshanis are more likely to make use of these types of narratives of modernity in which the spatial is organized temporally when they must provide 'legitimation of a response to their undoing' (p. 65).

The initial reaction of audience members at the Khorog screening of the feature-length version of the film revealed an underlying set of controversies. Those attending the film included international participants in the Nasir-i-Khusraw conference (including myself), local and regional political and religious officials, employees of AKDN institutions, students ranging from high-school to university age, and Khorog (predominately Shugni) residents. While most of the audience was genuinely thrilled with the film itself and praised both its smooth 'professional' look and its tributary content, the director of the Ismaili religious board refused to shake hands with the film's research coordinator following the screening. It emerged later that this public rebuff was the culmination of a series of interactions between the film crew and the religious board in which the board had allegedly discouraged the representation of certain syncretic practices (including the candle-lighting ceremony *chiragh rawshan*), women's traditional devotions and differences in Afghan and Tajik shrine practices. The accusations of censorship on the part of the film crew fit into a wider popular discussion among Tajik Badakhshanis that the religious board sought to introduce greater standardization of practices, bringing them more into line with those of the South Asian Khoja Ismaili elite (Steinberg 2010). Whether or not the allegations of censorship were true, the handshake refusal was a major topic of post-screening gossip among the scholars and students attending the conference. And ultimately, the shorter, 52-minute DVD version of film cut many of the scenes to which the religious board was said to object.[10]

The film crew in some sense saw the film as a piece of salvage ethnography – an opportunity to document diverse religious and cultural practices they believed to be threatened. In discussing the film with me, the research coordinator appealed to me as a 'fellow academic', as one who understands the need to capture 'disappearing' practices. Her nostalgia for the perceived 'purity' of the Afghan context in which these syncretic rituals persist (as yet) unchecked is at the heart of a wider struggle. The refused handshake embodies the tensions that generate strong affective response.

The flavour of nostalgia manifested here is not truly, or more precisely not only, the post-Soviet or post-Communist nostalgia analysed in great depth across a number of disciplines (Boym 2001, Ghodsee 2004, Yurchak 2006; see also the volume edited by Todorova and Gille [2010]), though a longing for the richer provisioning and sense of security characteristic of Soviet times certainly persists (Bliss 2006, Steinberg 2010). While the nostalgia expressed

by the film crew does seem to be harkening back to the perceived sense of temporal and spatial fixity in the Soviet era, it is at the same time a yearning for the seemingly unsullied nature of something pre-Soviet, or perhaps non-Soviet. Some aspects of Tajik Badakhshani imaginaries of Afghan life stand well outside the pre/post-Soviet binary and do not always lend themselves well to an analysis that takes only (post-)communist structures as its scope. Instead here we must look to the larger global organization of Ismailis, the colonial period of Russian expansionism, some longer, contested sense of Islamic history and conversion and the dynamic and fraught status of the current incarnation of the Afghan state. It is diverse pressures from diverse agencies, each wrestling to define what increased connectedness can mean in this space, which engender this nostalgic response (see Ghodsee [2010]). So although certainly the nostalgia I address in this paper overlaps in meaningful ways with post-Soviet nostalgias, it is also something new, and something beyond that well-analysed object.

In the discussion that follows I turn to the ways in which the making and screening of the film produce a set of discourses surrounding movement across the Tajik–Afghan border that are sharply different from those circulated by government entities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the region. As we will see below, documentary film is not only a medium capable of constructing (or deconstructing) imagined connections across international borders. It can also reflect (and engender) a far more complex affective response of border-zone residents to rapidly changing conditions. In a context in which movement across an international border has been so severely restricted, it is these imagined connections that in some ways have the most to tell us about human mobility and relationship to place.[11]

Going nowhere fast: questions of solidarity and identity

The Ismaili Badakhshanis on both the Tajik and Afghan sides of the border are being subjected to a host of relatively new external pressures to identify as a more integral community. These pressures stem from the activities of governments, on the one hand, and from Ismaili development organizations and religious organizations on the other. Though certainly these diverse institutions do not have an identical set of goals, nor do they speak with a single voice, they all seem to be stakeholders in a more fluid relationship between the Tajik and Afghan sides.

At the time that *Sacred Traditions in Sacred Places* was being filmed, edited and screened, the policies of local government and international NGOs were seeking to construct an ever more connected Badakhshan. On both sides of the Tajik–Afghan border in Badakhshan, the European Union and UNDP have funded programmes designed to train border guards and customs personnel as well as build infrastructure for formal border-crossing procedures. Similarly, the Afghan and Tajik central governments suggest that increased legal movement (and increased ease of movement) is a joint goal, to further economic development in this isolated space.

Ismaili NGOs and other development organizations invoke similar discourses of connectivity, albeit to further a different type of agenda. The following is from the website of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN).

> Despite linguistic and cultural similarities between inhabitants of these two regions, their social and economic connections have been almost non-existent ... AKDN is engaging in a number of initiatives meant to increase the inter-connectedness between people on both sides of the Tajik–Afghan border. (AKDN.org)

The religious institutions of the Ismaili network call upon historical linkages between the communities, and the celebration of the missionary figure Nasir-i-Khusraw is meant to be a part of this effort – putting a focus on shared sacred practice across what was once a contiguous Badakhshan. In this way, while government and international aid organizations have focused

on increased economic connectivity, AKDN has added to that an interest in promoting shared moral community.

Anthropologists, geographers and others have in recent decades examined the way in which notions like mobility and connectivity can be assigned a moral value (Hyndman 1997, Smith 2000, Urry 2007, Feaux de la Croix, this volume). David Smith points out that not only the creation of space and place, but also its interpretation, are 'inherently moral projects … imbuing particular places with value according to what they represent' (2000, p. 45). Humanitarian agencies have, in particular, been singled out as newly powerful arbiters of space in post-colonial (and post-Soviet) contexts, in many cases advocating a kind of 'frictionless mobility' (Watts 1996). Among Ismailis, the Aga Khan's proclamations concerning the formation of a more connected community (*jamaat*) are frequently repeated. When the topic of living conditions in Afghanistan came up with a family in Ryn village, the husband expressed concern and opined about the 'unclean' nature of Afghan households. His wife interrupted him to say: 'Hazar Imam (the Aga Khan) says that there should be pluralism', using the Russian word *pliuralizm*. At this time, a stronger sense of imagined community and freer movement across the Afghan–Tajik border in Badakhshan seemed to have been moralized to the point at which it bordered on religious obligation.

However, the border itself was not nearly as permeable as these discourses might suggest. Investigators interested in economic and small-enterprise development in the region have found a litany of ways in which individuals and groups were effectively barred from moving across the border: these included exorbitant bribes required for entry visas; months-long waits for vehicle permits to transport goods; the zealous inspection practices of Russian military forces station at border crossings; and even very basic concerns such as the difficulty of making a direct land-line telephone call between Afghanistan and Tajikistan (USAID/Pragma 2003). The average Badakhshani citizen at the time the film was made and screened was simply unable to move freely throughout this space, and many did not even think of doing so, despite the fact that opportunities to do so had begun to appear. Even those with family across the border were hesitant; one Jelandy resident whose father was Afghan said 'but I can't imagine going there'.

The film *Sacred Traditions in Sacred Places* and its authors add a new and fascinating set of voices to the structuring of this border zone. On the one hand, the filmmakers and their support staff were able to cross the Tajik–Afghan border without incident, meet and talk with their counterparts in Afghanistan in their native language, and return with footage of landscapes, interviews and rituals. They wax poetically about the beauty of the land on the other side of the border, the perceived innocence of the population, and a host of positive aesthetic associations. This strong sense of pleasure and connection, as well as the relative ease with which the logistics of their journey were accomplished, would seem to contribute to the official messages circulating about the Afghan Badakhshanis: they are not far away, they are not so very different from you, you can easily move between these two worlds. On the other hand, the film crew saw their journey as singular and epic (a 'once in a lifetime' experience, as one crew member described it to me). The filmmaking process and its result, the film itself, (re)constitute a view of the border as a true barrier – a divide between radically different communities who no longer even seem to share the same temporal space (Massey 2005). In this sense the Tajik–Afghan border is portrayed as somehow un-crossable, echoing the very practical set of problems faced by any individual attempting to move between these spaces.

This sense of (dis)connectedness, geographically, culturally and historically, is what is at issue not only for the Tajik film crew, but also for the wider population of Tajik Badakhshan – perhaps even more acutely so. Certainly, the film crew does not represent the average Tajik Badakhshani denizen. In fact, the reality of the border plays a much smaller role in the daily

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lives of the research coordinator or the film director, as they are now residents of the capital city. They are part of the Badakhshani elite, with extensive education, high-profile careers and access to prominent institutions as well as considerable cultural resources.[12]

Despite these differences, however, their affective response to the border, to Afghans, to Afghanistan, and to the wider set of transnational forces at work in the border zone, do not seem so very different from the subsistence farmers, khalifas and market-town dwellers of Tajik Badakhshan.[13] Closer examination reveals shared practices of nostalgia, and continuities in the ways in which difference is understood as representing temporal and spatial displacement. Both the film crew and the Badakhshani villagers perceive contrasts in living conditions and cultural forms, and opine about those of which they disapprove. Both groups describe the Afghan landscape as somehow unsullied or more pastoral, though this emerges more clearly from the film crew's narrative than in conversations with Tajik Badakhshanis who have rarely or perhaps never travelled there. Both groups perceive that changing international power balances and increasing AKDN activity will generate increased interaction in the near future, and crucially both express ambivalence about this shift.

Tajik Badakhshanis, elites and non-elites alike, have become increasingly participant in externally imposed discourses of connectivity. Exposure to Afghan Badakhshan, whether through making a documentary film, viewing the film or talking about issues surrounding the film, only serves to underline the perceived disconnectedness between the Afghan and Tajik communities, a disconnectedness developed over long decades of separation by one of the world's most militarized borders.

Going back in time: pastness and difference

The Tajik Badakhshani film crew finds great disparity between their own lives and the condition of the Afghans they encounter. Moreover, they see vast differences between the lives of average Tajik Badakhshani villagers and their Afghan counterparts – perceptions seemingly shared by Tajik Badakhshanis more broadly. And their lives in turn contrast with those of First-World Ismailis living, working and volunteering in Tajikistan. How can these disparities be reconciled with the ever-stronger pressures to identify as a larger Ismaili polity, and as a region of increased trade and interaction?

Nostalgia and longing are not just being produced across an egalitarian space. Tajik Badakhshanis find themselves at the nexus of a set of layered inequalities. Both within the Tajik state and within the transnational Ismaili community, Tajik Badakhshanis are peripheral subjects; moreover, even within the Tajik Badakhshani community, some communities (like the Wakhi or the Khufi, for example) are more peripheral than others (notably the Shughni). Citizens of the global Ismaili assemblage (Sassen 2006) span the First World to the developing world, and Ismailis in the Pamir have a markedly different life experience from those diasporic Ismailis working in development agencies and religious institutions serving in Tajikistan. Tajik Badakhshanis, in turn, perceive themselves to be in a privileged position with respect to Afghan Badakhshanis. And the filmmakers are again in an unequal position with respect to remote village or market-town residents. And yet the discourse of a community culturally and religiously unified, and unified largely according to a normativity prescribed by Khojas, is pervasive. It circulates in religious edicts, vocational training classes, primary school curricula, development-agency mission statements and speeches by local officials (Steinberg 2010). Similarly, the organizers of the Nasir-i-Khusraw conference attempted to establish Nasir-i-Khusraw as a unifying regional figure, linking the Tajik, Afghan and diasporic Ismailis both religiously and historically. Against this backdrop, the documentary film under analysis here becomes a locus of struggle over which understanding of the Tajik–Afghan border, which vision of plurality, and which

valuation of mobility will prevail. Both the processes of production and reception of the film comment on, and in some cases resist, the discourses imposed by diasporic elites, while attempting to (re)structure the relationship with the proximate other.

Perhaps the most striking embodiment of these tensions in Badakhshan at the time the film was screened in Khorog was the Tem Bridge, connecting Tajikistan and Afghanistan over the Panj River at Khorog. Despite the stated intention of both Tajik and Afghan leaders that this bridge (and others like it) facilitate an increase in trade, commerce and inter-connectedness that would benefit all in the region, the span as seen from the bank at that time was usually completely empty, devoid of vehicle or pedestrian.[14] There was no better illustration of the divergence of public rhetoric and everyday life in this space. The underused bridge served as a persistent reminder to Tajik Badakhshanis of how disconnected they truly were from their Afghan neighbours.

Polity building in a borderland

The Tajik Badakhshani film crew members are peripheral subjects of the Ismaili community. We can understand the film about Nasir-i-Khusraw and common traditions across multiple Ismaili communities (Tajik, Afghan, Kyrgyz) as an act of polity building. In this sense, Tajik Badakhshanis are subject to notions of what I have called 'prescribed community' – that is, they are being educated through membership in Ismaili institutions that they and the Afghan Badakhshanis are part of the same transnational community. At the same time, governmental and non-governmental organizations are encouraging increased commercial and economic interaction with Afghan Badakhshan. Through the film project, the Tajik Ismailis are actively participating in an effort to (re)incorporate the Afghani Badakhshanis into the Ismaili transnation and (re)establish the practice of movement (both real and virtual) across this border. Like a range of other technologies from print capitalism (Anderson 1991) to cyber-nationalism (Wu 2007), the film circulates a particular interpretation of transnational and cross-border affiliations.

In describing the sometimes chaotic processes of new transnationalisms, Aihwa Ong writes that 'the explosive growth and destruction of global markets is associated with various kinds of freedoms: freedom from old traditions, old obligations, spatial confinements, and political arrangements' (2006, p. 229). Yet there develops a level of comfort and sense of control with those previous restrictions that is disrupted by new freedoms (Wheeler 1994, Massey 2005).

My core claim here is that the specific form of nostalgia expressed by the film crew is an attempt to reconcile the 'imagined community' they are supposed to inhabit alongside the Afghani Badakhshanis with the striking differences in living conditions and cultural practices they perceive. Assigning the Afghans to an imagined shared past, and valorizing that past, makes palatable the idea of sameness. Nostalgia here is not just a lament for the perceived security of the Soviet era, but instead a response to a particular configuration of international pressures – pressures that would seek to level the vast differences across a rapidly changing Central Asian border.[15] It could be the case that nostalgic subjects are far more effective participants in polity, community and solidarity building – in active endeavours to bring the Afghans into a transnational present, such as filming a documentary of shared sacred practice.

The audience at the Khorog screening of the film *Sacred Traditions in Sacred Places* clearly took pleasure in seeing sweeping vistas of the Afghan landscapes, and in hearing the accented voices of Afghan Ismailis describe familiar traditions and practices. When the screen went dark they erupted in effusive applause. As the policies controlling the border that separates them from Afghan Badakhshan continue to shift, it is the relative impermeability of that border, and the physical distance it maintains, that permit emotions like nostalgia to emerge. If, in fact, cross-border flow begins to increase and the customs halls and cargo-scanning equipment are put to

quotidian use, we may see narratives of nostalgia and longing slowly disappear. These emotions require the maintenance of distance – distance in space and distance in time. As the past encroaches on the present and the 'there' encroaches on the 'here', Tajik Ismailis must now find new affective approaches to explaining the changing dynamics of power and flows of movement in a highly controlled border zone.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Nasir-i-Khusraw was a Central Asian Ismaili missionary of the eleventh century, who produced many of his important literary works while living in exile from Balkh in the Pamirs. He is credited with conversion of much of the region to Ismailism.
2. In fact, up until the era of the 'Great Game', the territory of greater Badakhshan, encompassing valleys on what is now both the Afghan and Tajik sides of the river Panj, was ruled and contested by various smaller emirates and principalities (including the Emirate of Bukhara) for whom the Panj did not necessarily represent a significant boundary. In fact, as Bliss (2006) and Ewans (2010) discuss, the current course of the Tajik–Afghan border in Badakhshan only gradually came to be established by the British and Russian militaries as the strategic relevance of the region increased.
3. Tajikistan has long stood at the intersection of empires, and as a result, the border between what is now Tajik and Afghan Badakhshan has been highly militarized for over a century. During Russian expansion, the Pamir Mountains were a flashpoint of conflict between the Russian and British empires in the late 1800s. Following the establishment of the Soviet Union, the Badakhshan border remained the line of separation, now between Soviet and British polities in Asia, subsequently cast into a newly framed polarity in the wake of the Second World War. Cold War hostilities, the rise of the Taliban, the increase in narcotics trade and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan brought intense militarization of the border as it emerged as strategic zone embodying the divide between American and Soviet geopolitical interests.
4. The brutal Tajik civil war between the existing government and opposition forces broke out in 1992, and although it officially ended with a peace agreement in 1997, there was sporadic violence in many areas through 2001 (Heathershaw 2009). The civil war had a serious impact on Badakhshan, including inducing severe food shortages during which food aid was trucked in from Kyrgyzstan (Bliss 2006).
5. Tajikistan as a whole is a significant site for drug trafficking, in particular the flow of opiates from Afghanistan. Questions of border security and the maintenance of highly militarized border-crossing zones has been a key focus of international aid efforts aimed at stemming the drug trade (De Danieli 2011).
6. For a discussion of the use of Russian and the value placed on Russian language by Badakhshani elites, see Steinberg (2010).
7. Direct quotations or narratives are labelled with the initials of the informant.
8. Belief in the spiritual import and enhanced 'purity' of high-altitude zones is common throughout the Himalayas (Parkes 1987).
9. On several occasions I was told a joke intended to illustrate this kind of highly visible discrepancy. It involved a driver of a jeep on a paved road on the Tajik side speeding past a man riding a donkey on towpath on the Afghan side, just across the river. Minutes later, the jeep breaks down, and its driver is left stranded in the hot sun. Meanwhile the donkey-rider across the river overtakes him and continues on, taunting the jeep driver about the relative reliability of their modes of transport. Whether this joke is meant to rue mechanized transportation altogether, or merely the undependable post-Soviet variety, is unclear.

10. This struggle is clearly visible in the contrast between the official promotional account accompanying the DVD version of the film and the paragraph the research director wrote to describe the film for screening at the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) meeting in 2005:
    DVD text: This respectful biography of the eleventh Century Tajik philosopher, poet and mystic Nasir Khusraw reviews his studies of the Qur'an, his correlation between religion and the human intellect and concept of the perfect man - Insan-al-Kamil. The importance of Islam and religious rituals in the daily life of Ismaili people of Badakhshan region of Tajikstan are shown.
    MESA text: *Sacred Traditions in Sacred Places* is an award-winning documentary that depicts the living traditions of Badakshani Ismailis. The video shows footage of the sacred practice of *chirag roshan*, which has never before been filmed. Also chronicled are traditions of shrine visitations and how the teachings attributed to Nasir Khusraw colour the lives of the people and their connections to nature and the environment.

11. Following the fall of the Soviet Union the control of the Tajik–Afghan border remained in the hands of Russian forces on the Tajik side, which only began to cede activities to Tajik border guards in 2004– 2005. At the time of this fieldwork in 2003, Tajik Badakhshanis expressed anxiety over this impending transition, concerned both about the loss of disposable income of the (relatively) well-paid Russian border patrol, and about potential mistreatment at the hands of Tajik soldiers following the hostilities of the Tajik Civil War. Of course, Russia, the US, and the European Union remain interested in the security of the Tajik–Afghan border, investing millions in training and equipment; recently Russia has expressed renewed interest in returning personnel to the now more porous border zone.

12. During a day of editing and subtitling at Dom Kino, conversation with the research director turned to academic pursuits. 'When I read (Victor) Turner, everything changed for me,' she said.

13. However, it would be a mistake to underestimate the number of remote Badakshani villagers who have travelled extensively abroad or earned advanced degrees in large urban universities during the Soviet era. For instance, in windswept towns near the Chinese border, one can encounter PhDs in biochemistry and Russian literature living in the freezing concrete houses (for more on this see Bliss [2006]).

14. As time has passed (since this original fieldwork was carried out in 2003) the bridges have seen a modest increase in activity. Both the Ishkashim and Tem bridges are now the sites of cross-border Saturday markets, during which traders from the Tajik and Afghan sides can come together to buy and sell goods. Reportedly apart from market day (during which only foot traffic is permitted) the Tem Bridge at Khorog remains relatively quiet, with only intermittent traffic.

15. As an editor points out, there is an additional interesting discourse maintained by development organizations and interested foreign governments claiming that increased integration and investment in connectivity may increase security (and serve to counter terrorism). As a 2005 report from the Canadian International Development Agency puts it: 'Security and development are inextricably linked' (CIDA 2005). Though I do not explore this discourse here, see, for example, Stewart (2004), Beall, Goodfellow, and Putzel (2006), Jackson (2006), Klingebiel (2006).

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