



It is difficult to imagine life in Gorno Badakhshan without music and dancing. Pamiri dancing is highly rhythmic and uses complex and elegant hand movements. (Photo: R. Middleton)

The faces of the Pamiri people bear witness to mass migrations over many centuries. (Photos: R. Middleton)



## A rich historical and cultural heritage

**Robert Middleton**

The territory of present-day Tajikistan was a crossroads for the many different ethnic groups that have controlled Central Asia over the past 3000 years. Cimmerian and Scythian tribes, several Persian dynasties, Macedonian/Greek armies under Alexander the Great, Parthians, Kushan Chinese, Huns, Hephtalites, Mongol hordes, Nestorian Christians, Arabs, Russians, even the British – all have left their mark on the region.<sup>1</sup>

### Arab invasions

Until the Arab invasions, beginning in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century CE, shortly after the death of the prophet Mohammed, most of Central Asia was under Persian influence or control. The Arab conquests in Central Asia under the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties brought a flowering of Islamic thought, philosophy and mysticism and stemmed Chinese expansion in Central Asia. However, Persian influence remained strong, and new Islamic Persian dynasties sprang up, the most important of which was that of the Samanids (875 to 999). The Samanid period, marked by the scientific work of al-Khwarazmi, Ibn-i Sina (Avicenna), al-Biruni and al-Razi (Razes), and the poetry of Firdausi and Rudaki, made a major contribution to the development of the cultural identity of the peoples that were subsequently to call themselves Tajiks.

The defeat of the Samanids by the Turkic Ghaznavid dynasty in 999 marked the beginning of the decline of Persian influence in Central Asia. From the end of the first century CE, there had been sporadic westward movements of nomadic Turkic peoples from the area of what is now Mongolia: the massive military invasions under the leadership of Genghis Khan (Temujin

1167?–1227) and Tamerlane (Timur-Lang 1336?–1405) ended Persian dominance in the region. Largely due to the protection provided by the mountainous terrain, the peoples of what is now Tajikistan were able to preserve their Persian culture. While the languages of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan all have Turkic roots, Tajikistan is the only former Soviet Republic with an Iranian language; music, dance and poetry in the Persian tradition play a major role in Tajik society.

### The “Great Game”

Until the Soviet period, the territory of what is now Tajikistan belonged to the Emirate of Bukhara. In the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, because of its geographical location at the confines of the Russian Empire and contiguous to China and British India, the region had considerable strategic importance. The “Great Game” between Russian and British adventurers, soldiers and diplomats – staking the limits of their respective Empires – was largely played out in the Pamirs and Hindukush (Hopkirk 1990). Subsequently, at the time of the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan (1979–1989), the Pamir region again assumed strategic importance for the Soviet Union as one of the main supply routes for the logistic support of Soviet military operations in Afghanistan.

## The Soviet Union

After the 1917 Bolshevik coup d’état, the expansion of communist power in Central Asia was challenged by the remnants of the White Army and a strong resistance movement organised by indigenous tribes (the so-called “Basmachi” revolt); moreover, the embryonic Soviet state was faced with vigorous opposition (including more or less covert support to the Basmachis) from Britain, with imperial interests to defend in the region. These concerns led to the determined military subjugation and forced sovietisation of the native peoples of “Turkestan” in the 1920s. Under Stalin, the region – in particular the Fergana Valley, the most fertile area in Central Asia – was divided in 1924 between separate Soviet Republics in such a way as to maintain a mix of ethnic groups, the tensions between which could be exploited to justify the necessity of the strong centralising influence of the Soviet system. Tajikistan, initially an autonomous republic within Uzbekistan, became a federated Soviet Socialist Republic in 1929.

The sovietisation of Central Asia, while imposing a degree of communist orthodoxy, did not lead to the destruction of local culture and religion. Soviet rule brought substantial economic and social benefits for the Republics of Central Asia far superior to what was achieved in the former British Empire just across the Wakhan Corridor.

### Independence and civil war<sup>2</sup>

When the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, Tajikistan became an independent state but was immediately faced with the economic problems associated with the breakdown of the centrally planned Soviet economy. At the end of the Soviet period, power in Tajikistan was tightly guarded by representatives of the Leninabad district in the

The Zulkhomor castle above the village of Yamchun dates from the 3rd century BCE and incorporates a Zoroastrian temple. (Photo: R. Middleton)



north. Following the ideas of Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost*, Tajikistan was the first ex-Soviet Republic to hold free elections in 1991.

The new "Democratic Party" had formed an alliance against the ruling Communists with the "Popular Front" (Rashtokhez) and the "Islamic Renaissance Party", a moderate Islamic organisation. The opposition presidential candidate – a popular film-maker with origins in Gorno Badakhshan – was beaten by the communist candidate, but his tally of some 30% of the votes put pressure on the government to open the country to a multi-party system.

This call for power-sharing along with the complex ethnic and regional tensions from the legacy of the boundaries attributed to the new Soviet Republics in 1924 finally led to a civil war in 1992. With support from the southern region of Kulyab (and, it is claimed, of the Russian military forces stationed in Tajikistan), the leaders of the government faction defeated the opposition coalition forces recruited essentially from fighters of Pamiri (Gorno Badakhshan) or Garmi (Karategin/Rasht) origin. Large numbers of people from these mountainous regions had been relocated in the 1950s to the cotton-growing areas of the south-west (Kurgan Tyube); in Dushanbe, the capital, many of the intellectual elite were of Pamiri origin. Exactions against these groups in the aftermath of the civil war forced approximately 50,000 Pamiris and Garmis to return to their traditional homeland. Many fighters fled to Afghanistan and subsequently returned with fundamentalist ideas gained there in the refugee camps, mainly to the Karategin valley but also to a few predominantly Sunni areas in the North of Gorno Badakhshan. The result was a sharp polarisation of national politics and the radicalisation of the Islamic Renaissance Party.

## Peace agreement

After initial negotiations between the fighting parties in 1994, the civil war continued at relatively low intensity – mainly through sporadic cross-border incursions from Afghanistan – until June 1997, when a peace agreement was signed between the government of Tajikistan and the United Tajik Opposition. This agreement opened the way for an interim "power-sharing" government and Presidential and Parliamentary elections; it also provided for the integration of opposition forces into the regular armed forces of Tajikistan. In November, President Emomali Rakhmonov was re-elected for a seven-year term, and, in March 2000, elections were held for the upper and lower houses of parliament, in which the former opposition parties did not make a strong showing (around 10% of votes).

Although the speed in reaching agreement was undoubtedly influenced by the unstable situation in Afghanistan, the peace accord was nevertheless a remarkable achievement; its subsequent relatively problem-free implementation is even more remarkable. After a civil war characterised in its opening stages by extreme brutality,<sup>3</sup> the integration of former fighters in the national armed forces and in civil life has been exceptionally smooth: the process can indeed be held up as a model for other inter-community or ethnic conflicts in countries with considerably higher economic and social resources than Tajikistan.

## History of Gorno Badakhshan

The first traces of civilisation in the Pamirs go back more than 20,000 years. Some 50 human settlements from the Stone Age, together with a number of cave paintings and petroglyphs, have been found in the Eastern Pamir. There are many castles dating from as early as the 3rd century BCE.

Traces of the multicultural history of this major crossroads of the Silk Route can be seen: Zoroastrian ritual sites, Buddhist stupas and ancient shrines.

## Modern history<sup>4</sup>

In 1891, when the tsars founded the city of Murgab as a military outpost, no one could have foreseen that the region's boundaries with China and Afghanistan would continue to be guarded by Russian soldiers up to the present day. At that time, borders as we know them now did not yet exist. Nevertheless, the "Great Game" for supremacy in the heart of Asia had serious consequences for the local population. In 1895 the joint British and Russian border commission established local borders without consulting any local representatives. These borders, drawn in European fashion along the Amu Darya River, cut through the middle of settlement areas and economic regions inhabited by local farmers; they also became insurmountable barriers for Kyrgyz nomads, who could no longer practice seasonal pasture migration. This led to large flows of migration. Today's districts (*rayons*) in Gorno Badakhshan – Shugnan, Rushan, and Ishkashim (Wakhan) – cover merely parts of the territories that once belonged to principalities; the other parts now belong to Afghanistan.

In 1923, Gorno Badakhshan was integrated into the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) as the so-called Autonomous Pamir Vilayat. Two years after the disintegration of the People's Republic of Bukhara and the foundation of the Tajik ASSR, Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast, or GBAO in short, was established. It was given its present form within Tajikistan in 1932 through the establishment of five *rayons* in the Western Pamirs and one in the Eastern Pamirs. Khorog as a regional administrative centre was granted the status of a city.

**Livelihoods and agricultural systems are still very traditional on the other side of the Pandzh River in Afghanistan. Contacts between the Tajik and Afghan Badakhshani are limited, although they belong to the same ethnic groups. (Photo: D. Maselli)**



The *oblast's* autonomous status was intended, on the one hand, to assure conservation of national and ethno-linguistic differences and, on the other hand, to reduce development deficits in comparison with Russia and urban areas.

Shortly after Tajik independence in December 1991, formal and confirmed autonomy as an integral part of the Tajik constitution was demanded in several demonstrations in Khorog. In 1995 the Majlisi Oli (High Council) of the Tajik Republic formally adopted the status of autonomy of Gorno Badakhshan. The adoption of Article 110 of the Tajik constitution led to intense discussions, and fears were voiced that once given limited autonomy, Gorno Badakhshan could gradually separate from the Tajik Republic and finally form an independent state with the neighbouring territories of Afghan Badakhshan.

### Civil war

Gorno Badakhshan was not at any time since 1992 a home or hotbed of hard-line Islamic opposition. Some parts of Gorno Badakhshan (Sagridasht and the Vanch and Yazgulom valleys) were indeed occupied by armed opposition groups until the Peace Agreement was signed in 1997, but did not serve as a base for launching attacks either on government troops or Russian border guards: most such attacks came from across the frontier in Afghanistan. Many Pamiris fought in the civil war alongside the followers of the Islamic Renaissance Party and created their own militia. In 1995, however, the leaders of the Pamiri militia gave a solemn pledge to His Highness the Aga Khan, spiritual leader of a large number of Pamiris, that they would never initiate hostilities against the State or the Russian forces. Despite much provocation – including the poisoning of their leader, Majnoon Palaev, in June 1996 – this pledge was respected.

### Culture and religion in Gorno Badakhshan

The territory of present-day Tajikistan was part of the Iranian Empire, the religion of which was Zoroastrianism. When the Iranian Sassanids were defeated by Umayyad Arab armies in 636, Islam gradually spread throughout the Central Asian region. The religion of the vast majority of Tajikistan's population today is Sunni Islam. In the Pamirs, however, a large number of people profess the Ismaili faith (i.e. are followers of the Aga Khan). The Pamiris were converted to Ismailism in the 11<sup>th</sup> century by the Persian poet, traveller and philosopher Nasir Khusraw.

In a manner reminiscent of Switzerland, Badakhshan is marked by considerable linguistic and cultural heterogeneity between the peoples of the different main valleys. The religion of the Northern districts of Darvaz and Vanch is Sunni Islam; their language is Tajik, with the exception of the Yazgulom valley, where the Yazgulomi dialect is spoken. The religion of the districts of Rushan, Shugnan, Roshtkala and Ishkashim is Ismaili Shia; Shugni is understood in all these districts, but many people in Ishkashim speak Rehne and Wakhi, as do their neighbours across the Wakhan Corridor in Pakistan – these dialects are not understood by Shugni speakers; Rushan and the Bartang valley also have their own dialects, close to Shugni. The people in these districts are ethnically Indo-European and would probably consider themselves European by education and Persian by culture. In the high plateau district of Murgab, the population is mainly ethnic Kyrgyz, of Sunni Muslim confession, with a significant minority of Ismailis. The Murgab people were essentially nomadic herders until the 1950s, when villages were built for them; in the summer a large number still migrate with their herds of yak and a few cows, to set up their yurts in the pastures.

Traces of Zoroastrian traditions remain in Gorno Badakhshan, for example in the role of fire in wedding ceremonies and in the symbolism of certain structural details of traditional Pamiri houses. Such symbols are also found on the beautifully decorated skullcaps. Other typical Pamiri handicrafts include decorative embroidered cloths (*suzanis*) and knitted socks and gloves in bright colours. Old Pamiri jewellery can still be found, comprising primarily necklaces made of coral (which are reportedly found in deposits near Alichur) with silver decorations and rings with spinel stones. There is a saying in Tajikistan that the people from Leninabad govern, those from Kulyab fight, in Garm they pray – and the Pamiris dance. Certainly it is difficult to imagine life in Gorno Badakhshan without the perpetual accompaniment of music and dancing. Every village has excellent musicians, young and old, as well as expert dancers. Men and women dance together, although there is no contact. Women perform as solo singers and occasionally as accordion players.

1 See *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, UNESCO, Paris 1996; *The Resurgence of Central Asia*, Ahmed Rashid, Zed Books, London 1994; *Samanid Renaissance and Establishment of Tajik Identity*, Iraj Bashri, 1997.

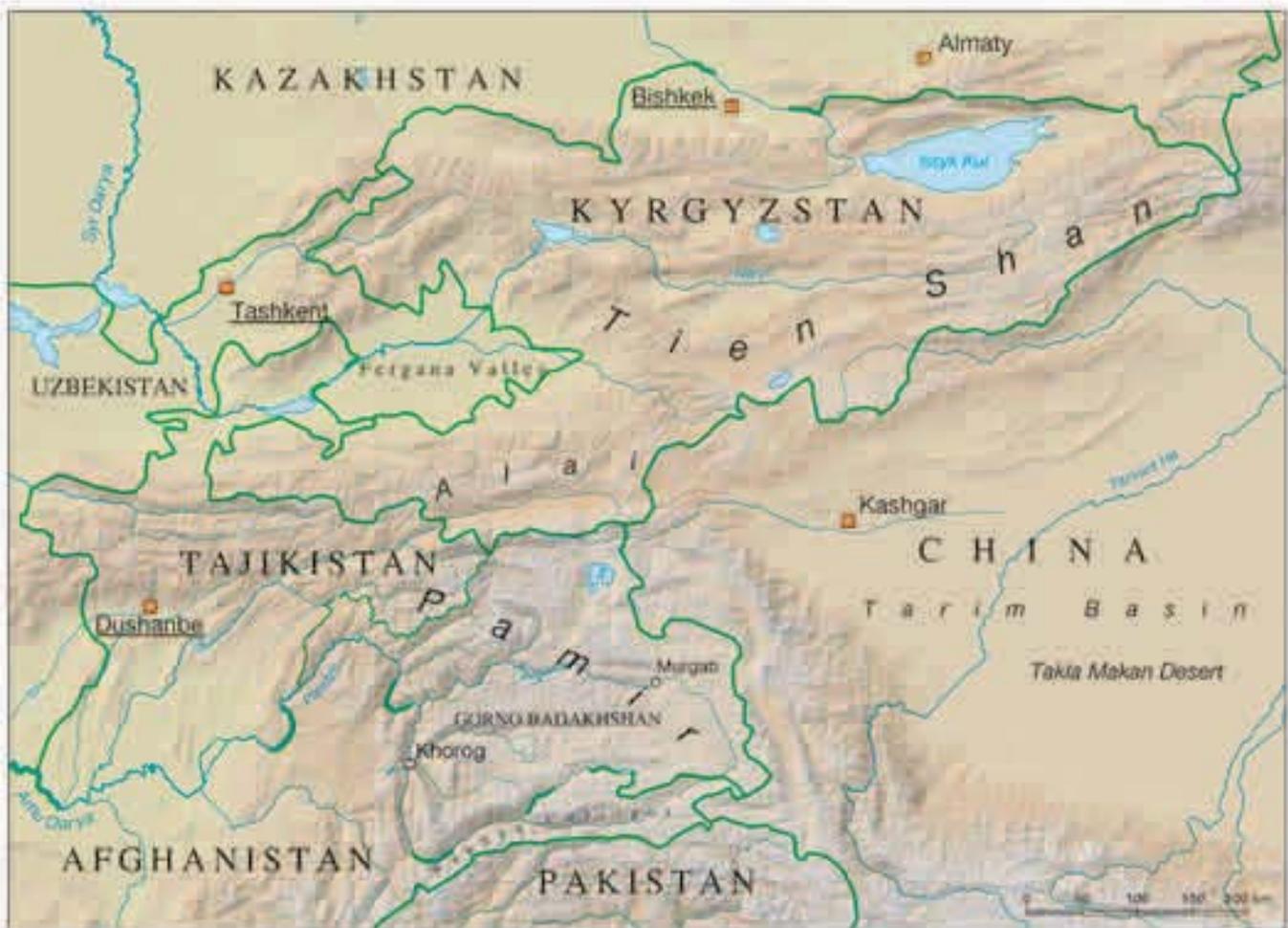
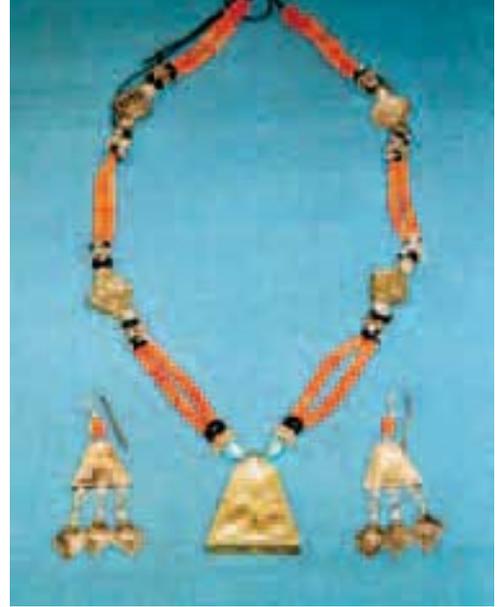
2 See *Tajikistan: Disintegration or Reconciliation?* Shirin Akiner, London 2001; *Rand Corporation, US and Russian Policymaking with Respect to the Use of Force, California 1996 – Chapter 3, Tajikistan*, by Arkady Dubnov.

3 See the *Amnesty International report Tadjikistan – Hidden terror: political killings, 'disappearances' and torture since December 1992, May 1993*.

4 *The paragraph on the modern history of the GBAO before the independence of Tajikistan is mainly based on Kreutzmann (2002)*.



Old Pamiri jewellery and decorative cloths called *suzanis* show the long tradition and high standard of handicrafts in Gorno Badakhshan. (Photos: R. Middleton)



Location of the Pamir Mountains in Central Asia