

## Paradise Lost: Tajik Representations of Afghan Badakhshan

### ABSTRACT

In 2003 a Tajik film crew was permitted to cross the tightly controlled border into Afghan Badakhshan in order to film scenes for a commemorative documentary *Sacred Traditions in Sacred Places*. Although official state policies and international non-governmental organizations' discourses concerning the Tajik-Afghan border have increasingly stressed freer movement and greater connectivity between the two sides, this strongly contrasts with the lived experience of Tajik Badakhshanis. The film crew was struck by the great disparity in the daily lives and lifeways of Ismaili Muslims on either side of this border, but also the depth of their shared past and present. This paper explores at times contradictory narratives of nostalgia and longing recounted by the film crew through the documentary film itself and in interviews with the film crew during film production and screening. I claim that emotions like nostalgia and longing are an affective response and resource serving to help Tajik Badakhshanis understand and manage daily life in a highly regulated border zone.

### 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, 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, the home to a large population of Ismaili Muslims. In 2003, during a special year of celebration 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.<sup>i</sup> For the film crew, this experience was remarkable, highlighting the great disparity in the daily lives of Ismailis on either side of this border, but also the depth of their shared past and present. This paper explores at times contradictory narratives of nostalgia recounted by the film crew through the documentary film, the film-making process, and interviews I conducted with those involved in the film during production and screening. The filmmakers were at once drawn to the ‘purity’ of the landscape and the Afghan Ismaili community and were struck by what they perceived to be pre-modern living conditions and lifeways. They see Afghan Ismailis as inhabiting an imagined shared past – that is, the Afghan Ismailis remain suspended in a past time left behind by the Tajik Ismailis a century ago. The Tajik Badakhshanis express a strong sense of nostalgia for this ‘pure’ past; a nostalgia that allows them to understand and control, in emotive terms, disparities between “then” and “now” (Bissell 2005) and between “us” and “them”.

The border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan in the Badakhshan region is relatively closed to average citizens. Although the Afghan side, and the people living there, are clearly visible to Tajik Ismailis, opportunities to cross the border are rare. Political discourse surrounding the border tends to focus on the future goals of increasing localized trade and decreasing drug trafficking (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2008, Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) 2009), but has little to tell us about public perceptions of this border and the role its strictures play in the lives of Badakhshani communities. The anthropological analysis of emotion 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” (2005:216). In this paper I present a close examination of a documentary film and the narratives that surround its production as a way of revealing emotions associated with the Tajik-Afghan border. I claim that recounting narratives of longing is the response of the individual to the “loose coupling” between prescriptive policies and everyday existence in a border region (Brubaker 2004). This response becomes a resource for understanding and managing these disparities.

## BACKGROUND

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 5 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. It has been described by Jonah Steinberg (2006) as a transnational polity, requiring primary allegiance and tithe from its members, and offering a vast range of social services in return. Many Tajik Badakhshanis express their primary identity as Ismaili citizens and secondarily affiliate with the nation-state they inhabit (Steinberg 2006).

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 polity (Steinberg 2006, Daftary 1998) and the Post-Soviet sphere. Necessarily their own experience as post-Soviet subjects deeply colors their sense of (dis)connectivity with Afghan Ismailis.

This region has long been a zone of contestation and was the site 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). 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 isolated from one another by heavily militarized national borders and from the larger Ismaili polity by the secularizing pressures of the Soviet Union and China. 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. 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 northern Afghanistan. As conflict has raged in other areas of Afghanistan between the Taliban and various international forces, this northern Ismaili region has 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 traveled across one of these bridges into Afghan Badakhshan.

Legal movement across this border is relatively rare and restricted to limited humanitarian aid, government officials, and a very few civilian individuals (such as the film crew) on specific missions. Although there has been significant attention paid to heroin trafficking, due to the rugged terrain this activity is light compared to areas further to the west. Badakhshani smugglers are described by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime as using relatively “primitive” techniques and being only “weakly coordinated” (Marat 2006). 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).

## THE FILM

To understand the sense of nostalgia with which Tajik Badakhshanis view Afghan Badakhshanis, 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 interactions and observations during initial public screenings of the first version of the film in Khorog and Dushanbe, Tajikistan in the fall of 2003, discussions during the final translation and editing process, as well as subsequent interviews with the director and research coordinator.

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 the basic tenets of his writings through English-language narration and 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. The film is ethnographic in its style and leaves the viewer with an affective and aesthetic documentation of local ritual.

The mission of the film crew in Afghanistan was to obtain footage of the mausoleum of the revered missionary figure Nasir-i-Khusraw 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, fifty-two minute 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. This savoring of detail tells us that for them, crossing the border was not a mere formalism consisting of passport and customs 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 traveled east, crossing the river Panj via the bridge at Khorog. They then climbed into the mountains, traveling 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, before returning the way they had come.

### DISCOURSES OF THE PURE AND THE PRIMITIVE

Two key discourses emerged as the Tajik film crew screened, edited, and discussed the footage of their trip to Afghanistan. These discourses, infused with emotion, are 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 lifeways between the two groups. And yet in the present moment Tajik Badakhshanis are increasingly encouraged to identify with their Afghan neighbors, despite the discipline imposed by the border. I will explore the way in which a longing recollection of a shared past emerges from these tensions.

#### Afghanistan as pure

“It is beautiful here on TV, but the reality is so.... you just had to be there”. (9/03)<sup>ii</sup>

In the eyes of the Tajik film crew, the Afghanistan they visited was pure and unspoiled. The lack of industry, paved roads, electricity, and multistory 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.

“It is so fresh and so clean”. (9/03)

“There it is vast – so much vaster than you can see here. The sky is wide and open and there are vast pastures” (10/07)

“The weather is pure.” (10/07)

Some of the language used to describe the Afghan landscape echoes wider Islamic motifs of heaven 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” (10/07).

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 ...”. (9/03)

Such statements call to mind Quranic descriptions of the garden in heaven, promised to the faithful.

Therein are rivers of water that does not alter, and rivers of milk the taste whereof does not change, and rivers of drink delicious to those who drink, and rivers of honey clarified and for them therein are all fruits and protection from their Lord.  
[Qur’an 47.15]

The research coordinator of the film made explicit these references when she labeled the landscape “a paradise”, and “like heaven” (9/03).

In the film itself, images of the Afghan landscape figure prominently. Montages of mountain vistas and of Lake Shiva are accompanied by traditional Badakhshani music, and narration about the history of Nasir-i-Khusraw.<sup>iii</sup> Close-ups of running mountain springs allow to the viewer to examine the water's clarity and purity. Scenes cut from the final version of the film include long pans of pasture dotted with distant flocks of camels, horses, sheep, and goats.

Up to this point I have addressed the way that the film and film crew have framed the Afghan landscape as "pure". There is also a sense in which the inhabitants of this landscape are viewed 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. At the UN 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. (10/07)

The notion of the pure, remote Afghan landscape and its innocent denizens provokes a sense of both longing and loss in the Tajik Badakhshanis. They perceive the Afghan space and its citizens as uncorrupted, and express desire for this 'purity', while mourning the loss of their own uncorrupted selves. The landscape is nearly heavenly in

its physical beauty. Though the Soviet period changed the Tajik Badakhshanis, ushering them into industrialized, modern existence, they imagine that on the Afghan side the inhabitants persist in a purer, unsullied landscape. In expressing desire for this uncompromised other, the Tajik Badakhshanis are 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 (1993:23-24) identifies as the core of nostalgic narrative.

#### Afghanistan as primitive

“To cross that bridge, it was like going back in a machine of time”. (10/07)

In sharp contrast to the discourse of the pure and the paradisiacal is a discourse of the primitive. The film crew also perceived the Afghan Ismailis to be living in a kind of pre-modernity, and characterized their living conditions and cultural practices as “medieval”, “primitive”, and “backward”. These practices are attributed to ‘simplicity’, or to psychology: “The language is the same but their attitude is different. Psychologically, they are quite different...”. In a specific example, the film’s research coordinator criticizes the practice of marrying girls as young as eleven:

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. (9/03)

Similarly, the film's director observed that some villages had schools, "but not like any schools I have ever seen" (10/03), indicating that they had limited space and few books or supplies. Overall, the film crew reported a lack of infrastructure in comparison with Tajik Badakhshan, including less access to medicines and health care, and poorly maintained roads and irrigation channels.

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. 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 2006:4-5).

According to the film's research coordinator, recently 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 (Steinberg 2006, Manetta and Steinberg 2008), the film's research coordinator views AKDN and UNDP as vehicles of modernization, in some measure transporting the Afghan Ismailis out of the past and into the modern era.

#### ANALYSIS: WHY NOSTALGIA?

These two seemingly contradictory discourses about Afghan Badakhshan are woven together in narratives of nostalgic longing. The Tajik Badakhshanis project the current lives and circumstances of the Afghans onto an imagined past in which the Tajik and Afghan Ismailis were a contiguous, homogenous Himalayan Ismaili community.

Nostalgia itself, as Bissel (2005) has pointed out, is a complex emotion that goes far beyond simple longing for the past. It is important that we understand nostalgia to be an affective response to a set of present conditions. Narrating nostalgia is a practice by which individuals and communities can engage signs of pastness to make sense of the current moment. If we take seriously the notion of nostalgia as a “social disease” (Stewart 2003:23), we can begin to see the way in which nostalgic narratives serve as an emblem of the disjunction in space and time imposed by the border and its constraints. That is, nostalgia is a symptom or manifestation of the dis-ease and discomfort experienced by residents of the border region. In this section I point to some of the specific properties of the nostalgic narratives of the film crew, before turning to a discussion of how this project might inform our understanding of the divide between public policy and lived experience in a changing border zone.

#### Going back in time

The Tajik Badakhshani film crew finds great disparity between their own lives and the condition of the Afghans they encounter. How can this disparity be reconciled with the ever stronger pressures to identify as a larger Ismaili polity, and as a region of increased trade and interaction?

Locating the Afghans in the past allows the Tajik Badakhshanis to bridge the gap between these imposed discourses of unity and the reality they perceive on the ground. The physical act of crossing the newly constructed bridge to the Afghan side is likened to time travel. The Tajik Badakhshanis associate their familiar space with the “progressive

or future-oriented present” (Munn 1992: 114). As they leave this space, they inflect the remote, non-industrialized Afghan Badakhshan with pastness.

Some of the cultural practices and lifeways that cause the Tajik Badakhshanis to view the Afghan villagers as living in the past are assigned a negative value. The film crew expresses disaffection with marriage practices, for instance, or with the lack of availability of health care. However, it seems that there is room here for “different kinds of pasts” (Munn: 113). The absence of the trappings of industrialization and physical infrastructure – another measure of pastness – is idealized. Overall, the pastness at work in the Tajik Badakhshani understanding of Afghanistan is positively valued, as can be seen from the discourse of the “pure”.

Finally, understanding the Afghan communities they visit as inhabiting a kind of pastness is way for the Tajik Badakhshanis to structure cultural differences. On the one hand, through development institutions like AKDN and religious institutions like the Ismaili Tariqah Religious Education Committee, Tajik Ismailis are explicitly encouraged to see themselves as part of a community with Ismailis worldwide (Steinberg 2006). Yet, the visible inequality across the transnational assemblage, whose citizens span the first world to the developing world, challenges this construction. Ismailis in the Pamir have a markedly different life experience from those first world Ismailis working in development agencies and religious institutions serving in Tajikistan. At the same time another – perhaps more salient – inequality emerges: Pamiri Ismailis witness a sharp contrast between themselves and their Afghan counterparts. And yet the discourse of a community culturally and religiously unified is pervasive. It circulates in religious edicts, vocational training classes, primary school curricula, development agency mission

statements, and speeches by local officials (Steinberg 2006). In fact, the documentary film itself establishes Nasir-i-Khusraw as a unifying regional figure, linking the Tajik and Afghan Ismailis historically and by way of shared ritual practice. However, the Tajik Badakhshani film crew does not seem to experience this sense of unity as individuals. The response to this dissonance is to see the Afghan Ismailis as inhabiting a lost – yet in some ways desired – world.

#### Landscape as symbol: An attachment to purity

The celebration of the Afghan landscape itself is part of the construction of nostalgia. According to John Armstrong, nostalgia is a yearning for a past Golden Age that rests in a kind of ‘collective memory’ (Armstrong 1982). He claims that this nostalgia is in some sense lodged in landscape: for instance, in images of vast desert expanses plied by nomads or the “Central Asian ideal of luxuriant pasture with cool mountain conifers” (Smith 1986:183). If the landscape is an important symbolic resource of nationalism, it also serves as a focal object of nostalgia, in particular in its perceived purity relative to the corrupted and polluted landscape of industrialized space.

The research coordinator’s narrative of her Afghan journey explicitly draws on positive condensation symbols (Graber 1976) when describing landscape, such as *milk*, intended to have the audience recall rich Quranic descriptions of gardens in Eden and Paradise. The sweeping pans of the Afghan pastures invite the viewer to consider what he or she is not seeing: power lines, concrete structures, paved highways, cityscapes. This celebration of ‘pure’ space is what drives nostalgia. It turns pastness into desired

pastness, and turns looking to longing. Only through establishing that past as ideal, in fact as paradisiacal, can Tajik Badakhshanis relate it to their current present.

#### Paradise lost, identity found

The missing link that persists is how *other* becomes *self* – that is, how the Tajik Badakhshanis can experience nostalgia for Afghan Badakhshan, and how an imagined shared past is constructed. The Tajik Badakhshani film crew members are “frontier” subjects of the Ismaili transnation. 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, the film crew is participating in a “prescribed community” – that is, they have been educated through membership in Ismaili institutions that they and the Afghan Badakhshanis are part of the same transnational community. Through the film project, they are actively participating in the (re)incorporation of Afghani Badakhshanis into the Ismaili transnation. The film itself is in this sense a *lieu de memoire*, or a symbolic artifact serving as a focal point of transnational allegiances (Nora 1984).

I claim that the specific form of nostalgia expressed by the film crew is an attempt to reconcile the “prescribed community” they are supposed to inhabit alongside the Afghani Badakhshanis with the striking differences in living conditions and lifeways they perceive. Assigning the Afghans to an imagined shared past, and valorizing that past, makes palatable the idea of sameness. Nostalgia is in this situation not so much serving as a machinery of nationalist sentiment, but a coping mechanism allowing reconciliation of vast differences. Nostalgic subjects are then far more effective participants in polity

building – in active endeavors to bring the Afghans into a transnational present, such as filming a documentary of shared sacred practice.

### EMOTIVE RESPONSES IN A BORDER ZONE

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 state and national governments, on the one hand, and from Ismaili development organizations and religious organizations on the other.

On both sides of the Tajik-Afghan border in Badakhshan, the European Union and UNDP have funded programs designed to train border guards and customs personnel and build infrastructure for formal border crossing procedures (the Border Management Badakhshan Afghanistan (BOMBAF) program in Afghanistan and the Border Management in Central Asia (BOMCA) program in Tajikistan). Both programs cite the importance not only of increased effectiveness and improved border management practices along the lines of modern European standards, but also “facilitating the licit flow of persons and trade” (BOMBAF report 2007). Similarly, the the Afghan and Tajik central governments suggest that increased movement (and increased ease of movement) is a joint goal, to further economic development in this isolated space (Economic Cooperation Organization 2009).

Ismaili NGOs and other development organizations invoke similar discourses of connectivity, imposing another version of prescribed community. 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 interconnectedness 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 film itself is meant to serve as documentation of shared religious symbols – primarily the missionary Nasir-i-Khusraw – and shared sacred practice.

This explicit reference to connectedness, geographically, culturally, and historically, is what is at issue for not only the Tajik film crew, but also the wider population of Tajik Badakhshan. The border represents a very real and very visible physical divide between the spaces and their inhabitants. In the Post-Soviet period, Tajik Badakhshanis have become increasingly participant in externally imposed discourses of connectivity, while increasing exposure to Afghan Badakhshan only serves to underline the perceived disconnectedness between the communities.

The prescriptive policies of local government and international NGOs construct an ever-more connected Badakhshan. However, the border itself is not nearly as permeable as these discourses suggest, nor does it seem likely to soon become so. The report “Afghanistan Market Research” by the Enterprise Development Project under United States Agency for International Development (USAID)/Pragma addresses a litany of ways in which individuals and groups are effectively barred from moving across the border, including exorbitant bribes for entry visas, months-long waits for vehicle permits, and the difficulty of making a direct land-line telephone call between Afghanistan and

Tajikistan (USAID 2003). The average Badakhshani citizen cannot simply move freely throughout this space. Moreover, the present differences between the communities seem to loom far larger than any sense of connectedness.

The narratives of the Tajik film crew describing their reactions to travel in Afghan Badakhshan have much to tell us about how these countervailing discourses are reconciled. On the one hand, national and local policy, international aid organizations, and transnational religious structures prescribe a more unified community. On the other, disparities in lifeways, cultural practices, and economic opportunities enhance feelings of separation. Struck by these disparities, Tajik Badakhshanis could reject Afghan Badakhshan entirely, demonizing the landscape and its inhabitants. However, they choose to engage this community, albeit not in a way we might expect. Locating the Afghan Ismailis in an idealized past, a past for which one feels a pleasurable surge of nostalgia and longing, is a way of negotiating and managing the perceived gap.

In his account of life in a mixed Ismail-Sunni community in Pakistan, Magnus Marsden (2005:237) describes ways in which emotions can be a method of “actively explaining and thinking about difference in a way that makes it reasonable to be plural”. In the case of Badakhshani Ismailis, a rapidly shifting political climate and changing border policies have constructed a set of discourses of connectivity and sameness across the Afghan-Tajik border. And yet these discourses do not seem to reflect the lived experiences of the border and the sharp differences it has created. Just as Rogers Brubaker claims in his analysis of nationalist political rhetoric in Eastern Europe, they are “unmoored from their putative constituencies” (2004:361). This gap has engendered an active social practice of nostalgia – a way of understanding and coming to terms with a

plurality in a newly prescribed community. Mobilized as an affective resource, nostalgia allows the Badakhshanis to justify and organise difference constructed by international border policy in a non-threatening way.

Perhaps the most striking symbol of these tensions is the Tajik-Afghan Friendship Bridge, connecting Tajikistan and Afghanistan over the Panj river at Khorog. Despite the stated intention of both Tajik and Afghan leaders that this bridge facilitate an increase in trade, commerce, and inter-connectedness that would benefit all in the region, and despite the claim by American diplomats that the bridge “is the missing link of the ancient silk road” (“US-Made Tajik-Afghan bridge opens”, 2007), its span as seen from the bank is often completely empty, devoid of vehicle or pedestrian. There is no better illustration of the divergence of public policy and everyday life in this space. The underused bridge serves to remind Tajik Badakhshanis of how disconnected they truly are from their Afghan neighbors.

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 shiny new customs halls and cargo scanning equipment are put to 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 will need to find new affective approaches to explaining life in a highly controlled border zone.

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<sup>i</sup> Nasir-i-Khusraw was a Central Asian Ismaili missionary of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, who produced many of his important literary works while living in exile the Pamirs. He is credited with conversion of much of the region to Ismailism.

<sup>ii</sup> Direct quotations or narratives are labeled with the month/year recorded.

<sup>iii</sup> Belief in the purity and spiritual import of high-altitude zones is common throughout the Himalayas (Parkes 1987).