



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

The Music of Tajik Badakhshan
Jan van Belle*

Abstract

This brief article, based on fieldwork conducted in 1992 and 1993, concentrates on the rich musical traditions and instruments of the Ismailis of Tajik Badakhshan. The author focuses on the *madah*, a genre of sung religious poetry of the Pamiri Ismailis, which has survived communist suppression, and whose main themes are those of mystical love and praise.



Keywords

Tajikistan, Badakhshan, Khorog, ethnomusicology, poetry, music, song, Ismailis, Ismaili Studies, Islamic Studies, *madah*, *madahkhani*, instruments, Pamir, Soviet Studies, performance, devotion, tradition, religion, Religious Studies.

Ey dil ba dunya dust-i zist afsus dunya raftani-st
Pursand ba ghayr az dust kist afsus dunya raftani-st

Oh my heart, you are the friend of this world. Alas, the world is fleeting.
They ask: who is other than the friend? Alas, the world is fleeting.
(Muhibbi)

The Ethnomusicological Endeavour

In July and August 1992, a Dutch team made a field research trip to the Pamir Mountains in Gorno-Badakhshan, an autonomous region of Tajikistan, with the object of recording the poetry and music of its mainly Ismaili Muslim population. The research team, which returned for a second visit in 1993, consisted of the following members:

This article was originally published in *The Ismaili United Kingdom*, No 33 (December 1998), pp. 18-19.

*Jan van Belle is a Dutch clarinet and saxophone teacher and an ethnomusicologist. His current research concerns the music of the Ismaili communities of Tajik and Afghan Badakhshan.

The use of materials published on the Institute of Ismaili Studies website indicates an acceptance of the Institute of Ismaili Studies' Conditions of Use. Each copy of the article must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed by each transmission. For all published work, it is best to assume you should ask both the original authors and the publishers for permission to (re)use information and always credit the authors and source of the information.

© 1998 The Ismaili United Kingdom
© 2003 The Institute of Ismaili Studies



- Gabrielle van den Berg of the Centre for Non-Western Studies (CNWS) at the State University of Leiden, who is specialist in Persian languages with particular reference to Pamiri languages and has recently completed her PhD thesis on minstrel poetry from the Pamir Mountains;
- Jan van Belle, a musicologist, music teacher and specialist in the study of folk music and culture in Muslim countries, with special interest in Ismaili music of Central Asia; and
- Coen van Hall, a filmmaker specialising in news reports and documentary films on minority peoples.

To record music in the Pamir Mountains was by no means easy in view of the harsh geographical conditions, the absence of electricity in the remote villages, and the economic and political crisis during our trips. However, with the help of our local guide and the friendly people, especially the musicians, we succeeded in finding a truck, petrol and a driver to visit villages in four valleys.

Historically, the music of Badakhshan has a lot in common with the surrounding Islamic cultural area, as reflected in the use of Arabic names for musical instruments like *rubab* and *tanbur*, and the Persian names of *setar*, *nay* and *daf*. On the other hand, the inaccessibility of the Pamir mountains has been an important factor in preserving the unique musical practices, forms and instruments of Badakhshan.

Instruments – Lutes

A general observation that can be made about the music of the Pamiris is that they have a strong predilection for plucked short- and long-necked lutes. Among the variety of lutes used by them, the most specific to Badakhshan is the *rubab-i pamiri*, an unfretted three- (double) stringed short-necked lute, played with a wooden plectrum.

Other common lutes are the *tanbur*, a seven-stringed lute with a varying number of sympathetic strings; the *setar*, which has a fretted long-necked lute with three melody strings and six or more sympathetic strings, and imported lutes like the Afghan *rubab* and the Azerbaijan *tar*. The Kirghiz minority, living on the high plateaus in the eastern part of Badakhshan, uses the *komus*, a three-stringed unfretted lute.

The lutes are mostly made from the wood of the *tut* (mulberry) or apricot trees, and plucked by means of a wooden or metal plectrum. With the exception of the metal-stringed *setar*, all lutes have gut or nylon strings. Instrument-makers and musicians appeared to be very inventive in developing new forms of lutes, such as the double-necked *rubab*, the *bulandmaqam* and the *nayrud* which has an electric keyboard.



Other Instruments

Apart from the plucked lutes we found the *ghijak-i pamiri*, a spiked fiddle with three gut strings and in most cases a tin-can as a resonator. The only wind instrument we heard was the *nay*, a small longitudinal flute with six holes, chromatically tuned with a high, penetrating sound. According to our informers, the mouth harp was much in use in earlier times, but we could only find a single female player amongst the Kirghiz minority.

The most widespread percussion instrument in Badakhshan and used in most genres of music is the *daf*, a circular-frame drum. The only important Western instrument in the folk music is the accordion, brought by the Russian army during the Soviet era and very popular in the areas we visited, but unfortunately its full sound often drowned completely the playing of the lutes.

The Pamiris were always willing to perform for us and didn't ask for money in return. They gave a lot of information, orally as well as from texts and written notebooks, about their Ismaili and musical background. But in many cases they were unable to tell us much about tunings or musical scales; most of them could not read notes and had learned text and melody by ear from their parents or family.

There are a few professional musicians, like the *setar*-player Mamdato Tavalayev from Khorog, who make a living out of their performances and have become famous throughout the country. But the majority are amateurs who regard their performances as a service to the community. Each village has its own musicians, who are in many cases excellent and experienced players with an exceptional memory for text and melody, capable of playing and singing for long hours.

The *Madah*

In spite of all their musical instruments, the most important medium for expressing the real meaning of Pamiri music is the human voice, which is characterised by a throaty and nasal sound. Although we recorded many genres of music and song, religious as well as secular, most of our research was dedicated to the religious genre of *madah* (literally 'praise'), which performs an important role in expressing Ismaili thought and sentiment.

From a musical point of view, the *madah* is essentially a vocal composition, accompanied by one or two *rubabs* and/or *tanbur* with rhythmic support of one to two *dafs*. The main part of *madah* is sung by a solo voice with the support of choir singers in refrain or in the last feet of a *misra*. The accompanying instruments are also used for preludes, interludes and postludes, and as such they are important means of structuring the *madah*.

Without going into musicological details, we discovered that there is a consistency in the musical characteristics of the *madah* songs we recorded in the different valleys:

- introduction in free rhythm and slow tempo (often a *ghazal*);



- progressive narrowing of the melodic range of the voice and often passage into a higher pitch range;
- a steady increase of tempo towards the end;
- progressive density of the rhythm; repetitive pattern and regular rhythm to structure the duration.

A specific feature of Badakhshan music is the use of a minor-like scale, with a minor second between the first and second step of the scale, and an augmented second between the second and third step. Another typical feature is the use of many chromatised tones, especially in the *falak* genre and mostly in a very narrow melodic range. This is a characteristic that the *madah* shares with Sufi music like that of the Qalandars in Baluchistan and the Qadiris in Kurdistan.

Musical Themes

In common with Persian Sufi poetry, Ismaili poetry and music deal in general with themes of love, often employing the imagery of lover and beloved, wine and taverns, either in a literal or mystical sense. There are many poems too in praise of the Imam ‘Ali and, more recently, of Shah Karim, the present Imam of the Ismaili community.

Other historical figures who feature prominently in the poetic tradition of the Pamiris are the famous Ismaili poet and philosopher Nasir Khusraw, who is reputed to have converted the ancestors of the Pamiris to the Ismaili faith in the 11th century, and the great Sufi poet of the 13th century, Jalal al-Din Rumi and his spiritual mentor Shams Tabriz, who are popularly regarded here to have been Ismailis.

The religious character of the *madah*, the fact that the whole community participates in its performance, and the devotional attitude of the performers towards this genre, are some of the features which give rise to the hypothesis that *madah* is meant to lead to a state of spiritual elevation, comparable to the religious ecstasy (*wajd*) of the Sufis.

The *Madah* in Post-Soviet Badakhshan

We were very lucky to arrive in Badakhshan in the post-Soviet era of independence and religious revival, as we could travel freely even to the most remote villages. We were astonished to discover that the tradition of *madah* singing was very much alive after 70 years of communist suppression. In fact, for the Ismailis of Badakhshan the *madah* is the most important means of expressing their rich cultural background.

Some attempts have been made to preserve this cultural heritage. In Khorog, the capital of Badakhshan, there is a museum with a splendid collection of musical instruments. Also in Yamg, Mr Muborakqadam is building with the help of the villagers an interesting local museum



containing manuscripts, carpets and other cultural objects of the Pamiris. But much more work needs to be done.

We all hope that the Ismaili culture and traditions of the Pamiris will be safeguarded in the future and that there will be financial support from abroad to realise this objective. We also feel that we are just at the beginning of our research (which I extended last year to the Ismaili communities in Afghanistan); and the more we learn, the more questions arise, which for me is the attraction of research.

Finally we would like to dedicate this short article to the inhabitants of Badakhshan, whose hospitality and friendliness were an unforgettable experience for us, and without whose help our research would have been impossible.

Notes

Our research trip in 1993 was made possible by a grant from the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO).

For a detailed study of the folk music and poetry of the Ismailis in Badakhshan, see Gabrielle Rachel van den Berg, *Minstrel Poetry from the Pamir Mountains: A Study of the Songs and Poems of the Ismailis of Tajik Badakhshan*, PhD thesis, State University of Leiden, 1997.