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Traces of Ancient Iranian Culture in Boysun District, Uzbekistan

Abstract

Despite the beginnings made during the Soviet period, there are still isolated regions of Central Asia outside the nominally “Iranian” republic (Tajikistan) where material and societal evidence of pre-Turkic Iranian culture has yet to be collected and studied systematically. Dr. Rahmoni, as yet one of only a few Tajik folklorists actively collecting and publishing such material, presents here a sample of contemporary folk traditions from a rural area of southern Uzbekistan. These include mourning customs; various instances of the veneration of fire; an elaborate procedure (“Solomon’s lamp”) in which a sacred fire is used by wise women to counter mental illness supposedly caused by inadvertent pollution of running water; and local tales derived from the Iranian national epic, the *Shāhnāma*.

Keywords: Tajik folklore—Iranian folktale—Uzbekistan—water taboos—fire worship

THE REPUBLIC OF UZBEKISTAN has over 22 million inhabitants. Of these, the (Iranian) Tajiks comprise a small minority compared with the (Turkish) Uzbeks. The twentieth century wrought changes in their cultural destiny, which we will not go into here (for details, see MASOV 1995 and ŠAKURĪ 1996). However, during the present crucial period it behooves us to study the culture of the Tajiks of Uzbekistan, so that future generations may not be left frustrated and nonplussed that their forebears did not take the trouble to collect their ancient lore. If we fail to do this, many folk traditions that have survived in one form or another up until today will disappear in this age of technological innovation.

The Boysun district lies on the road from Dushanbe to Bukhara, about 200 km west of Dushanbe, in the territory of Uzbekistan.¹ Looked at in another way, the Hisor mountain range stretches between Dushanbe at one end and Boysun at the other. The southern reaches of Boysun are within 170 km of the border with Afghanistan, and the district lies athwart the intersection of roads leading to Dushanbe, Tirmiz, Samarkand, and Bukhara. Boysun is mentioned in the tenth-century Persian geography *Hodud al-‘ālam* as one of the towns of Caḡāniān: “Bāsand [or Basvand]: a borough with a numerous population, on the road of Bukhārā—Samarqand. It is a strong place; the inhabitants are warlike” (MINORSKY 1980, pp. 38–39, 114).²

According to official statistics for 1996, Boysun has 77,000 inhabitants, of which some 40,000 are Tajiks. Some of the villages on the mountain slopes of present-day Boysun were formerly small towns. Distances between them vary from twenty to sixty km. We will not attempt a detailed account of the archeological, anthropological, and folkloric relics of all these villages, but will confine ourselves to a few of the main points, the “tip of the cream,” as the locals say (*az nūgi xamir fatir*). The folklore of this region has not yet been fully studied; even such investigations as have been made were of an individual and amateur nature.

In the late 1930s archeologists commenced examining the ancient relics in Boysun, with valuable results. Among these were the finds of A. P.

Okladnikov, of which the great Tajik historian Bobojon ĠAFUROV wrote:

“The cave of Tešiktoš...is located near the city of Tirmiz, in the Turġondaryo oasis of the Boysun hills. In this cave, five successive levels of intermittent habitation by Neanderthals have come to light. Some 3,000 stone artifacts were excavated, of which 339 are complete. They include two very common types of stone implements, the knife blade and the hand ax. The knife was used both as a cutting tool and a hunting weapon, the hand ax for felling and trimming timber and scraping hides. Numerous bows were also found. The principal quarry of Tešiktoš hunters was the Siberian mountain goat (*Capra sibirica*), which used to be plentiful in the mountains of Central Asia; in addition they hunted deer, bear, leopard, and smaller animals. The chance discovery here of a skeleton from the Mousterian period—that of an eight- or nine-year-old boy—was of worldwide significance.”

(1983, 15)

A few years later the journalist Nurali RAJAB (1994) recalled an episode from this excavation, which took place near the villages of Darband and Mačay, and in which some of the inhabitants of Darband (all of whom are Tajiks) took part.

...the archeologists unearthed the bones of an ancient man in the [Boysun] mountain slopes. The [Darband] villager Mahmadvuli Ikromboy, an eye-witness of the event, reported it as follows. “The first archeologist to come to Darband for a dig was Parfionov. He explored the mountains and valleys for a few years, digging test pits. He lodged at our house. After he left, Okladnikov came with his family and also stayed with us, for three years. I always helped with their work. Okladnikov asked me to get a few donkeys for a trip to the village of Mačay. There were twenty-five of us in all. We took food and water to the archeologists, hunted on the way, and when necessary helped them to dig. Once when Okladnikov was digging, I was the one who carried out the dirt and debris and disposed of it outside the cave. Suddenly my spade struck a human skull.

“I called Okladnikov, and he himself took over digging it out. He spent four days with trowel and brush, extracting and cleaning the skull and bones, which turned out to be those of an eight- or nine-year-old boy. Then we packed the remains into crates, loaded them onto six donkeys, and reached Boysun town by way of the Katmančovdī road.”

This discovery was made in 1938, and the results were published by Okladnikov, in Russian, in Moscow in 1949, after World War II. It is noteworthy that these modest archeological excavations and incomplete anthropological expeditions in Boysun and neighboring districts provided evidence that early Iranians lived in this region.

The Boysun district comprises many villages inhabited solely by Tajiks, some solely by Uzbeks, and others in which both Tajiks and Uzbeks live together. Though most of the villages bear Tajik (Persian) names, others have Uzbek or Arabic names. Of the following examples, most are recognizably Tajik: Sayrob, Panjob, Darband, Tūda (Tūdī), Avlod, Sariosiyo, Kūčkak, Pasurxī, Bibiširin, Rabot, Kofirin (Kofurun), Šayid (Šahid), Daštiğoz, Puli Xokin (Puli Hokim), Sari Hamiš, Dūğoba (Duoba), Qūrğonča, Deyi / Dūyi Bolo (Dehi Bolo), Hava, Alačapon, Nazari, Deyi Malik (Dehi Malik), Šar-šar, Gumatak. The many and varied toponyms of the district have not all been collected. If the names were recorded, together with the stories behind them, we would be acutely aware of how our older citizens have passed down their ancient culture orally from generation to generation. For instance, some of the names of hamlets in the Darband rural area (Isfandiyor, Zubardaka, Jovdī, Sesanga, Kūčak) are Sogdian in form.

A few years ago, Jumaboy Očilov, a neighbor of the present writer's brother, unearthed a large clay urn while digging on his land. In trying to clear the earth away he was over-hasty; the point of his spade struck the urn and broke it. Out fell a human skeleton. Očilov was frightened, and took ill for several days. He buried it again and told nobody for some years. Now, a number of religious believers make regular pilgrimages to the site, as if to a shrine, and pray to the divinity for help with their troubles. As the villagers of Pasurxī told me, on several later occasions people digging wells have turned up urns containing bones. Burying the dead in clay urns was typical of ancient Iranian peoples, a custom going back to the cult of Mithra.

The veneration of earth, water and—especially—fire is very apparent throughout the region of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and the other Central Asian republics. These ancestral spiritualities, which up until today inform the beliefs and taboos of the peoples of these lands, share common aspects but also exhibit differences in detail. The veneration of water and fire can be seen among the old of both sexes in all areas of Boysun: they insist, for instance, that (running) water is not to be dirtied, a bride and groom are to walk around a fire, and votive candles are to be lighted. The young, however, influenced by everyday modern culture, are gradually consigning these rituals to oblivion.

In any case, we will give a few examples of behavior associated with the veneration of water and fire. In the village of Pasurxī, a young man suffered

for months from depression and listlessness. His mother went to consult a soothsayer (*fol-bin*), who told her that her son might have urinated in running water. She and the other “wise women” deduced that the water fairies and sprites (*jin-u parī*) had afflicted him with this state. Accordingly they took the youth to the bank of the supposed stream, set alight some twisted cotton wicks, recited some prayers, and “burned” the evil spell, thus breaking it. I have actually witnessed several cases where the relatives of a sick (especially a mentally sick) person consulted the folk physicians, who immediately prescribed some medicinal use of fire or water, as being sacred entities.

One ancient custom in which the sacred nature of water is paramount is known as “Solomon’s lamp” (*čaroği Sulaymon*). A brief description of this procedure is merited here. “Solomon’s lamp” is applied to someone whose behavior has become erratic or who is in mental distress. In the form in which I observed and recorded it in Pasurxī village, an old woman (Norgul Qosimova by name, born 1922, illiterate) came to see the patient and asked the head of the household to bring a napkin and a water-jug,³ a branch of a fruit-tree bearing fruit, some [raw] cotton, seven strands [of straw or twigs] from a broom, three lengths of yarn colored yellow, red, and blue, three old rags colored white, blue and black, some flour, some rice, some sweets, a cup of water and a bowl of grease.

When I asked her, she told me the symbolic significance of each of these objects, as follows. The napkin represents a veil, personal honor, a full belly, well-being and fortune; the ewer represents King Solomon’s water, lest the patient has polluted any water; the branch bearing fruit symbolized progeny; the cotton is to make a wick with which to light the sacred fire, called the “lamp”; the seven strands from a broom symbolize pollution and disaster, around which is bound the cotton wick, so as to drive away with its flame the Ahrimanic powers (*jin*, *parī*, and *dev*). The three yellow, red, and blue threads represent the maleficent demons and sprites of those same colors; these threads are tied to the broom strands with the cotton. The three white, blue, and black rags are to drive away fear; flour symbolizes whiteness, i.e., purity; rice symbolizes infinity, i.e., eternal life; sweets represent a sweet life; the cup of water is to be poured over the ashes of the sacred fire, and the bowl of grease is to be rubbed on the seven tapers made from the strands of the broom.

Next the old woman (known as *bibi-mullo*, or in some villages *qušnoč*) prepared seven tapers. To three of these she tied a string twisted from the yellow, red, and blue threads. Two tapers were left white, and the remaining two she smeared with soot from the kettle. Next she covered the patient’s head with a white cloth. She passed the tapers three times over the patient’s

head, his shoulders, the small of his back, and his knees, pronouncing forms of exorcism such as “O villain, o evil one, begone! Come forth! Depart!” to banish the evil powers. Then she greased the white, blue, and black rags that had been plaited together, picked them up with the tip of the fruit-bearing branch and set light to them; she waved them in a circle around the patient’s head and body, so as to burn and thus drive away the noxious powers that plagued him. When the rags had almost burned out, she poked the fruit-bearing branch into the spout of the ewer, picked up the smoldering rags with it, and placed beneath them the cup of water, so that the ashes of the sacred fire would fall into the water. With that, the ceremony ended.

The most important thing is not to let the remains of the “lamp” spill onto anywhere unclean, but rather to toss them into running water. Noteworthy, too, is that although these rites have nothing to do with Islam, the old women who perform them always recite a few verses of the Koran for good measure.

I asked the old woman why they called this “Solomon’s lamp.” I was told, “Because these rites have come down to us from our forefathers; we use fire; fire is a powerful thing, it cleanses a person’s surroundings of calamities.” I often heard people swearing by fire, as for instance “May the fire prove that I am innocent,” or “If I am lying, may I burn up in this fireplace” (citing Xolova Oyim, Pasurxī village, born 1911, illiterate).

The rites of Bibi Sešanbe (Lady Tuesday) and Bibi Muškilkušo (Lady Problem-solver) are still practiced today with faith and devotion in Bukhara, Samarkand, Dushanbe, Khujand, Tirmiz, Hisor, and many other places. These rituals, which are more closely related to Islam, will not be discussed here; but a common feature of their performance is the use of wicks or tapers (*pilta*, in some places called *nuḳča*), or candles, for the sacred fire. In the villages of Boysun district, the burning taper is placed upon the *qayroqsang* (a long, polished stone of about 20–30 cm, used as a whetstone) and care is taken not to let it go out before the end of the ceremony.

Twenty or twenty-five years ago, the villagers of Boysun district used to live in two seasonally specialized locations, one of which (called *qišloq*) was appropriate to late autumn, winter, and early spring, and the other (called *boḡ*) to late spring, summer, and early fall.⁴ At *boḡ* they would plow and sow and gather the harvest. At the end of fall they would load their essential possessions on donkeys and migrate to *qišloq*. Whenever they set off from one location to the other they would always light a handful of straw or a few sticks of firewood and drive the loaded donkeys over it. The transhumants would follow the animals across the fire, so that it would burn up harm and ill fortune and they would not be carrying it with them to their new home. Nowadays, with the increasing population, people live in one place. I have

been told by people over fifty that fifty or sixty years ago fire was something holy that accompanied people at every significant juncture of their lives.

In Boysun district, wrestling, likewise an ancient custom, is still very popular. Even today, at a wrestling meet, they will sometimes light a small campfire and dance or play around it before the formal bouts. The wrestlers (*pahlavon*) after limbering up will stretch out their hands toward the fire and then rub its warmth over their faces, as if praying to the fire for victory.

The custom of venerating fire can be seen today in the rituals of weddings, circumcisions, *navrūz* [the Iranian New Year's holiday at the vernal equinox, 21st March] and similar rites of passage. As in other parts of Central Asia, Iran, and Afghanistan, it is still alive among the Tajiks of Uzbekistan, including those of Boysun. In general there is no ceremony in Boysun at which traces of ancient culture are not evident. Even funerals, if examined carefully, exhibit some non-Islamic elements. For instance, in Pasurxī village, on the death of a close relative, the women of the bereaved household let down their hair, tie a kerchief around their waists, raise their arms high and clap their hands, lacerate their heads, faces, and bodies, and jump up and down singing a lament. Usually the mourning period (for women) lasts for one year, during which time they wear turquoise blue (*ķabud*) clothing. At Pasurxī, the women's mourning costume is actually sky-blue, or at least a blue floral print on a white field. In Ferdawsi's immortal *Šohnoma* (Shāhnāma) we read the following verses, which show parallels to the above:⁵

Down from the throne he came, lamenting.
Rending his body to pieces with his nails.

Or again:

They dressed all in turquoise blue,
Their eyes full of blood, their faces ashen.

According to Ferdawsi, our ancestors stayed in mourning for the departed for one year (a custom still observed among Tajiks everywhere, including those of Boysun):

They sat thus grieving for one year;
The behest came from the Judge, the Creator.

Otherwise, a lamp is kept burning for forty days after a death in the house where the body lay (or if a lamp is not available, a candle or taper), as can also be seen in all parts of Central Asia.

Other interesting elements of ancient tradition still alive are songs, dances, storytelling, and arts and crafts. In the villages of Boysun district, the wellsprings of these arts, as of people's daily work, go back to their ancient roots. We will not mention all of them, but will note that during evening get-togethers a prominent feature is the telling of stories from Ferdawsi's Shāhnāma. From this it is clear that the people still love and enjoy their ancestral epic. Not only do they recount these tales, but they have such an affection for their favorite hero, Rustam, that they even make later heroes and kings pay their respects at his tomb. In one of the tales about Rustam, which I recorded from Rahim Šarif (Pasurxī village, born 1925), Iskandar [Alexander the Great] expresses a desire to see Rustam's tomb, which is at the *daxma-i šohon* (ossuary of the kings). According to the narrator, Zol [Zāl, Rustam's father] lived a very long life, up until the time of Alexander; he supposedly drew a circle around the *daxma-i šohon* that no one could breach save with his help. Iskandar, with Zol's help, enters the *daxma-i šohon* and reads Rustam's testament. According to our narrator, the tomb of Jamšed [Jamshid] is also there. There is supposed to be a great treasure buried beneath the tombs of Rustam and Jamšed, which even financed the building of the Great Wall of China. Although based on materials in the Shāhnāma, the folktale version has been vernacularized and its conceptual context changed in interesting ways.⁶

In the village of Pasurxī they claim that Barzu, Rustam's son, was originally a landowner from Boysun; the old men still talk about him as "Barzu the *dehqon*."⁷ In another issue of *Mardumgiyoh*, I published an account of a conversation at a social gathering, about Rustam and his sons Barzu and Suhrob, which provoked a lively argument among the participants.⁸

Such elements of Iranian folklore are plentiful not only in Boysun district but all over Central Asia, even among non-Iranian populations. It should thus be incumbent on all who cherish this culture, as a matter of conscience and faith, first of all to collect and preserve these valuable relics, and secondly to subject them to systematic study. In conclusion, let us not forget that in this short article we have merely skimmed a part of the surface, whereas a complete book could be written on each aspect of these elements of our ancestral culture. At present I am virtually the only one collecting this folklore, bit by bit; if material assistance can be found, I shall publish a documented record of some of my collection and present it to the scholarly community.

Translated by J. R. Perry

NOTES

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1. Translator’s note: *Nohiya* “district” translates *raion*, the former Soviet administrative division. The Tajik text has *šimol* “north,” a mistake for “west (by southwest).” Boysun (Baisun) is also the name of the chief town of the district.

2. In the Dushanbe edition (1983), p. 70; see also LE STRANGE 1966, 440 and Map IX. Tirmiz (Termez, Tirmidh), near the Uzbek-Afghan frontier, is about 50 km from Mazar-e Sharif in northern Afghanistan.

3. That is, a *sufra* (dialect, *surfa*) “tablecloth” to spread on the ground and an *oftoba* “ewer, water can” for washing of hands, the prerequisites for a meal.

4. Translator’s note: That is, Turkish *qışlaq* “winter quarters” (in most of Tajikistan and northern Afghanistan, the generic term for a mountain village) and Persian *bāg* “orchard” (the corresponding term for summer quarters among transhumants in Iran is Pers. *garmsir* or Turk. *yaylaq*).

5. The three couplets (with slight variations) may be found in the 1987 edition (Dushanbe: Irfon), vol. 1, pages 48 and 49; in the 1988 edition (Khaleghi-Motlagh), vol. 1, pages 23 and 24. The context is that of King Gayōmart (Kayumars) and his court mourning the death of his son Siyāmak.

6. Translator’s note: This folktale version, “Rustami Doston,” was published in *Mardumgiyoh* 5(1-2): 226–31 (1997); the story is transcribed from dialect (in Perso-Arabic and Cyrillic). In Ferdawsi’s literary *Shāhnāma*, Jamshid belongs to the primeval era of mythical culture-heroes which long antedates the legends of Rustam, while Alexander belongs to the quasi-historical period long after Rustam (though much of Ferdawsi’s Alexander is legendary). Neither one is made to interact with Rustam.

7. Translator’s note: In Ferdawsi’s time, *dehqon* referred to one of the hereditary landed aristocracy of Sasanian Iran; in contemporary Tajik (and Iranian Persian) usage, the word means “peasant” or “villager.”

8. *Mardumgiyoh* 1(2): 91–95 (1993) (in Perso-Arabic and Latin transcription).

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