3 (Im)mobility between *Meruya* and *Weruya:* Locating Emotion in Family Stories of Soviet GBAO

It was a cosy evening in my friend's second-floor apartment on the side of the mountain; above the place I would later live for several weeks. I have fond memories of this place: sitting on the balcony watching the sun rise, viewing the preparations in the stadium for the presidential visit which never took place, hearing the two roosters in the neighbouring yards squawk at each other at 5am. The sun had already set, which was becoming increasingly later as we approached the summer, but still relatively early due to the tall mountains. At least at this time of year, the neighbourhoods in Shosh, UPD, etc, got a few hours of sunlight and could forget their dark winter days. As I sat on the floor, waiting for the tasty home-cooked meal made by my friend and colleague Aylar, I heard my flatmate Farishta ascend the wooden stairs to the apartment, accompanied by Suhrob and Nekruz laughing loudly.

In his early 30s, Nekruz was a friendly, animated man who came from Yomj, a village not far from Khorog on the side of the mountain looking directly over towards Afghanistan. Nekruz loved Yomj and, although he had lived elsewhere, he found Yomj to be the most beautiful place in the world; a thought I indeed share with him. A popular place to go swimming in the hot summer months, Yomj is one of a handful of villages in the region which lies extremely close to the border. Indeed, after our visit to the Spring of Nāṣiri Khusraw and dropping Nekruz home, Suhrob and I were on the way back at dusk when a green laser shot from across the river and followed our car as we drove. "Don't worry, I'm sure it's just children playing around," said Suhrob, laughing my obvious tension off. For, while Yomj was a beautiful place with lime trees lining the road and dramatic snow-capped mountains at certain times of the year, its close proximity to Afghanistan brought with it a strong reminder that the situation on *weruya* was very different, with the Taliban's recent seizure of power and an existing uncertainty as to what that would mean with regard to the border. The border, which was the hot topic at this time due to the increased military presence in GBAO following the Taliban's takeover in Autumn 2021, had not always existed. It was one effect of rupture which had survived periods of shifting geopolitics, regimes, and uprisings. Prior to the ruptures of the late 19th and 20th century, the River Panj had not been a symbol of the separation of countless families and communities, and places like Yomj were not divided. Before the border, *meruya* and *weruya* had very different meanings.

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3.1 *Meruya* and *Weruya* as Articulations of Pamiri Cultural Identity

Taken literally, *meruya* means "this side" in Shughni, deriving from the word for face or side (*ruya*) and the proximal demonstrative pronoun; conversely, *weruya* means "that side." While *ruya* can refer to any side or face, the two terms are used specifically to designate banks of a river from one another, determined by where the speaker is standing in relation to the river. In practice, however, the two terms have become synonymous with one specific river: the River Panj. The westward-flowing River Panj, getting its name from its five tributaries, is the "geographical centrepiece of the Shughni-speaking region" (Parker 2023, 3), having served as a vital water source for thousands of people in Tajikistan and Afghanistan since time immemorial. This river is central to the geography of the southern limits of Central Asia, stretching from the heights of the Wakhan Corridor, finding its basin through the regions of Ishkoshim to Vanj, where soon after it meets the Vakhsh River to create the source of the Amu Darya (or Oxus).

The importance of the River Panj in Pamiri lifeworlds is undeniable. Prior to the introduction of national borders to the region, families and communities would live along both sides of the river, not divided by geopolitics, but united in sharing the same interconnections with each other and their environment, the Panj being part of this. Sharing common languages, cultural and religious traditions, and finding sustenance from the same environment, Pamiri communities living along the River Panj would inhabit both sides if conditions allowed. In addition to Yomj, other villages such as Darmorakh on the road to Ishkoshim also serve as good examples of this, with the river being so narrow in parts that it is possible to speak across the current.

The occurrence of the ruptures of the past centuries greatly altered Pamiri lifeworlds, attempting to sever interconnection across a newly drawn border. In accordance with the Pamir Boundary Commission of 1893–5 in which British and Russian imperialists demarcated their spheres of influence, the right bank of the River Panj became Tajikistan, and the left bank Afghanistan. This designation, which represented shifts in power and, from the mid-1920s had a dramatic impact on the daily life of Pamiris, had a lasting effect on the meaning of *meruya* and *weruya.* What had been a linguistic way of differentiating between sides of a river now became markers for nation states. For Pamiris on the right bank of the River Panj, *meruya* became Tajikistan, and *weruya* Afghanistan. For Pamiris on the left bank, the case appeared in perfect symmetry.

The terms *meruya* and *weruya* are not only a practical way to differentiate between banks of the river, but are expressions of positionality which are historically-informed. By using *meruya*, Pamiris articulate a belonging to a specific side

of the river, and thus to a Pamiri community which has had a varied historical experience from the other side. Following the creation of the Soviet Union and the militarisation of the border, Pamiri communities then under the jurisdiction of the Soviet Union underwent processes of social and economic reform in line with those of the rest of the Soviet Union (see Kalinovsky 2018; Kassymbekova 2016; Akyildiz and Carlson 2014). In contrast, Pamiris living on the left bank, protected slightly due to their distance from the administrative capital of Kabul which had formerly been the seat of invading Afghan forces, had a very different experience living through the internal ruptures Afghanistan faced during the 20th century as a religious minority. By using *meruya*, Pamiris therefore position themselves in relation to these events, expressing a shared experience greatly affected by, in the case of GBAO, a Soviet heritage.

In short, *meruya* can be viewed as an expression of a cultural identity. Defined by Hall (2003, 225) as "the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past", cultural identity is formed by continuous interactions and negotiations of similarity, difference, and heritage. With the help of "frames of reference and meaning" (Hall 2003, 223), members of a group or community develop an understanding of "what we really are" (Hall 2003, 225), creating a cultural identity which Hall sees as "the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture." (Hall 2003, 226). In this way, *meruya* is a way of articulating the cultural identity of being Pamiri, with the river as a point of reference to the historical ruptures which were inflicted upon the once unified communities.

In this way, the distinction between *meruya* and *weruya* is historical and culturally informed as it alludes to separation and the development of contrasting experiences. Just as *meruya* can be understood as an articulation of "we", so too can *weruya* be replaced with "they". The division caused by the border demarcation, therefore, is undeniable. The deviation in Pamiri identities follows a similar path to the conceptualisation of Tajik ethnic identity in the region. As Brasher (2011, 115) observes, while communities on both sides of the river shared similarities and historical connections pre-Soviet period, "they did not conceive of themselves as members of a clearly delineated ethno-national group", and what is perceived as Tajik differs greatly in Tajikistan and Afghanistan.[1] The same can be said for Pamiri identity; there is no singular definition of who is Pamiri. Articulations

1 This text is from 2011 and, since then, there has been a noticeable rise in pan-Tajik ethnic identity in Afghanistan within the context of resistance to the Taliban regime post-2021. These sentiments are, to my knowledge, largely not shared by Tajiks in Tajikistan.

of Pamiri identity differ greatly throughout Pamir, regardless of being *meruya* or *weruya.* For example, in addition to the term "*pomere*" which has been previously discussed in the introduction, cultural heritage objects such as *toqe* (national hats) can vary greatly throughout Pamir in terms of colour, shape, and fabric. What is commonly referred to as a *toqe* in GBAO, for example, is more closely associated with one specific area in Pamir, namely Shughnon and Rushon, rather than representative of an all-encompassing *pomere toqe.*

In GBAO, which is the focal point of this study, *weruya* has come to be associated with a strong sense of fear. This fear did not suddenly come into existence with the Taliban's emergence in the heights of Badakhshan Province, but finds its roots in the history of the region. The Mirdom of Badakhshān, references to which date back to the 7th century (Beben 2023, Nourmamadchoev 2015), existed in various forms of (self-)governance until its formal division in 1895. Before the emergence of British, Russian, and Qing imperialist interests in the region, which began in the 18th century, Badakhshān was under repeated threat from the Emirate of Kābul (Emirate of Afghānistān post-1855), with their leaders, stemming from the Durrānī Dynasty and House Bārakzaī, sitting in Kabul. The invading forces, who came to be known as "*afghon*" in reference to their origins in the lower regions of Afghanistan, formed the base for imaginations of Afghanistan and Afghans which still prevail to this day. There were many periods when Badakhshān was invaded and ruled by foreign rulers, such as Murād Baīg of Qundūz who annexed Badakhshān in 1829, and Dūst Muḥammad Khān of House Bārakzaī who led several campaigns to capture the northern limits of Afghanistan (Beben 2023). Pillage and enslavement were widespread in such annexations (Iloliev 2013; Mastibekov 2014) and the situation of Badakhshān worsened greatly (Beben 2023). While the threat of Afghan invasion was not the only issue facing Badakhshān prior to the imperialist period, most notably the pressure from the neighbouring Emirate of Bukhārā (Mastibekov 2014; Beben 2023), the events of the pre-Soviet period have become ingrained in the collective narrative of Badakhshan and therefore play a central role in Pamiri cultural identity. While many details are often left out, the core of such tales portray the Afghans as foreign invaders and oppressors, edifying an imagination of Afghans and Afghanistan as a threat.

Upon the emergence of Russian imperialist interests in the region, the rulers of Badakhshān practised warm international relations with Tsarist Russia, exemplified by the pirship of Yūsuf Alī Shāh, in coordination with Azizkhān. As an Ismaili Muslim religious authority, Shughnān-based *pir* Yūsuf Alī Shāh himself conducted political correspondence with Tsarist Russia, seeing it as potential support against a possible invasion by the Emirate of Bukhārā (Mastibekov 2014, 59). While Pamir officially became part of the Russian Empire in 1905, Ismaili practices continued to be observed and zakat was continued to be paid to the Bombay-based

Aga Khan (Mastibekov 2014, 59). The activities of the *piren* during these times were pivotal in securing the well-being of Ismaili Muslim communities living under Russian imperialist rule (Iloliev 2013). While Tsarist Russia had maintained a relatively tolerant approach to Ismaili Islam, the Bolshevik Revolution and subsequent incorporation of Western Pamir into the Soviet Union brought with it an increased disregard for Ismaili Islam and religion in general. Following the foundation of the UzSSR, of which the autonomous region of Gorno-Badakhshon existed within the boundaries of the Tajik ASSR, and the redrawing of these boundaries to the Tajik SSR which included GBAO, the south-eastern boundary of the Soviet Union posed several issues for Soviet leadership and therefore became the focus of certain policies which have left their remnants to this day. The ongoing Basmachi Revolt (1917–26), which saw a movement of anti-Soviet uprisings all across Central Asia, thematised the disdain felt by many who did not accept the new doctrine being propagated. Soviet discourse on the Basmachi Movement focused on discrediting the Basmachi as a mix of bourgeois land-owners or ignorant peasants, financed by the exiled Emir of Bukhārā from his refuge in Afghanistan, with the revolution being eventually exhausted due to the prevalence of class solidarity and acceptance of non-Muslim Communists (Nourzhanov 2015, 178). While the Basmachi Revolt was not only religiously motivated, with other issues such as land ownership coming into play, it still today occupies a multi-layered position in Tajikistan's national historical narrative (Nourzhanov 2015). The initial fear of invading Afghans was then further developed in the early years of the Soviet Union: then, the Afghans were seen as harbouring the Emir of Bukhārā, i. e. the great *kulak* (landowner) who had been a very recent threat to peace in Pamir.

With religion undergoing increasing control in the Soviet Union, Central Asian Muslims came under intense scrutiny beginning in the period known as Stalin's Great Terror (1936–8) which left a lasting imprint on the lives of those living in Pamir. During this period, characterised by crackdowns on religion and political opposition, there were many actions which could lead one to being labelled an "enemy of the people" (Rus.: *vrag naroda*) and subjected to persecution such as forced labour or capital punishment. Being sent to Siberia, among other threats, shaped the experience for many living in the Soviet Union, especially in those early days. For Pamiris, however, I would argue that this threat was heightened due to their proximity to the border. While others could adjust to the newly imposed Soviet regulations and expectations of the state, many Pamiris were living beside a constant reminder of the life they had once had and which they were no longer permitted to have. Furthermore, their proximity meant that they, like the border, were intensely monitored and therefore had a heightened precarity of, even if unintentionally, being subjected to policing measures and punishment.

These dark times are described by Tasar (2017, 14) as leaving a shadow on the remainder of the Soviet times, marring the Soviet Muslim experience by anti-Islamic violence which did not occur to this level in other postcolonial contexts. As is argued in this chapter, the events which characterised the breakup of Pamir and early days of the Soviet Union caused fear in the bodies of Pamiris which hindered them from crossing the River Panj and maintaining connection with their loved ones on the other side. This immobility, as an effect of rupture, exemplifies how fear controls the body and the memory of this fear can last several generations and outlive the actual threat itself. Turning to the three family stories presented in this chapter, collected during various meetings in Khorog and online, it becomes evident that both the fear of the imagination of *weruya* and threat of repercussions continues to affect the movements of young Pamiris. All interlocutors are young men from GBAO who were born at the very end or after the collapse of the Soviet Union and therefore have no personal experience with the events themselves, yet have grown up informed of their history and are affected by it. In this sense, the focus of this chapter is not the factual correctness or attention to detail of the family stories they share but rather the way in which the memory of fear continues to be transmitted through these stories.

This memory of fear, which has been passed down from generation to generation through oral histories such as those presented here, still affects the lives of younger generations of Pamiris. While the initial threat of Soviet persecution has since passed, the fear of what lies on the other side of the river has been further developed in recent years by global discourses of Islamic Extremism and the war in Afghanistan, creating a multifaceted fear which restricts the movements of Pamiris. This fear of *weruya* and what it represents is a key part of Pamiri lifeworlds and is a shared experience for many living in close proximity to this border. In this sense, the fear which restricts Pamiri bodies also brings the community closer together through a shared experience and history. Just as the ruptures of the 20th century are key to understanding Pamiri lifeworlds, so too are the feelings which they triggered and continue to trigger.

This chapter borrows heavily from the approach outlined by Levine Hampton's (2022) discussion of locating emotion in oral history narratives in her thought-provoking paper on her family's relocation from Glasgow to East Kilbride and the domestic violence entwined within. As Levine Hampton highlights, her closeness to the interlocutors, in this case immediate female family members, adds a further layer to the retelling of this sizable migration wave from the impoverished tenements of the crowded city to so-called New Towns in the 1960s. Combining the emotional retelling with the spatial dynamics of migration, Levine Hampton argues that emotion helps to situate such marginalised narratives spatially, connecting oral history and critical geography through emotion. The three

family stories presented in this chapter have much in common with Levine Hampton's case study in that (forced) migration defines each narrative and the temporalities of rupture it evokes. For all three family histories, the great ruptures of the creation of the Soviet Union and its collapse are featured strongly, but so too are moments of relocation, exile, and separation which come to define the pathways of these three families.

Fig. 5*:* View from Yomj towards Afghanistan. Smith (2022).

3.2 Overcoming Fear in Nekruz's Journey to *Weruya*

The perfect host, Aylar poured cups of tea for Farishta, Suhrob, and Nekruz as they took their seats on the floor beside me. The smell of the tasty food which Aylar was preparing with her husband, Hugo, filled the room and our stomachs started to rumble. Opening his bag, Nekruz pulled out a laptop and sat it on the sofa behind his back. Equally excited to share his family history, Nekruz had ac-

cepted our invitation to dinner and even brought his laptop to share some photos of Yomj. The photographs Nekruz shared were actually not of his family, but of Yomj following the infamous Barsem Flood Disaster in 2015. Between 16th and 20th July of that year, hot weather combined with extremely high rainfall led to a massive mudslide which destroyed around 80 houses in the area (see Zafar and Uchimura 2023). Following this environmental disaster, many families were forced to relocate to a newly-created settlement nicknamed 'Rahmonobod' after the President.

> Yomj is on the other side of the mountain from Barsem so we had huge rockfalls due to the flooding. Once the rains stopped, I went with my father to this area [shows photographs] and really there was nothing, just hundreds and hundreds of rocks. Thank God our house was not destroyed. You know, we Shughnis are strongly connected to the land. The Russians sent expeditions to Murghob but they had to return because they felt too sick with the heights. But for us, we are used to living in these conditions.[2]

Nekruz's words make-up one of the central points of this book that I owe to the people in Pamir who shared their experiences with me: Pamiris are strongly connected to the landscape. This can be seen in how the landscape and changes to it are present in almost every aspect of daily life. Be it planning a trip to Dushanbe depending on the rainfall, to moving to relatives in the winter months to avoid avalanches, and even describing where one is in relation to the river, the landscape plays a key role in Pamiri lifeworlds. The unpredictability of the harsh weather conditions coupled with poor road and vehicular maintenance lead to substantial migratory hurdles for many living in Pamir, exacerbating existing difficulties associated with (in)mobility (Blondin 2020, 2021). The immobilities of fear, as will be discussed in this chapter, are therefore not the only migration issues facing Pamiris, and environmental and economic factors, such as labour migration, play a much greater role.

Just as Pamiris are closely connected to the landscape, so too can environmental disasters play a pivotal role in historical ruptures. Nekruz was not the first person to reference the Barsem Flood Disaster; it was a common fixed point in time which people in Pamir referenced. Another example of this would be the 7.2 Bartang Earthquake which followed a few months later on 7th December, destroying hundreds of homes and causing the Bartang Valley in Rushon District to be cut-off from the rest of GBAO for several days and involuntarily relocation of many inhabitants (Blondin 2021). Further back in history, the Sarez Lake Disaster of

2 Excerpt from ethnographic fieldnotes. Reworking of conversation in English with Nekruz in Khorog.

1911, in which a substantial earthquake caused a natural dam to be formed in Rushon and resulted in the sudden deaths of countless villagers. This disaster, which caused the creation of Lake Sarez, a natural dam which poses a constant existential threat to large areas of Central Asia (Bliss 2006), is also often referenced in relation to family histories due to the many refugees who were then permanently displaced and forced to resettle in other areas of Rushān and Shughān. In both cases, the devastating effects of these natural disasters left a lasting imprint of the ordering of history in Pamir, with many Pamiris seeing these as an important event which changed the course of history.

Environmental disasters are ruptures as they present a point of disconnection and force redirection. During my stay in Tajikistan, there was a devastating avalanche in Khorog which destroyed many homes in UPD and Shosh, two neighbourhoods at the foot of the mountain. Anticipating an avalanche, many families had taken to leaving their homes during the snowy months and staying with relatives in other neighbourhoods. 15 people were killed in this avalanche, and three others in similar avalanches in the greater GBAO region (Asia Plus 2023a). While aid was limited due to ongoing governmental restrictions and the inaccessibility of the region due to weather conditions, residents themselves formed rescue missions to pull victims out of the snow and community-organised fundraising quickly followed over social media. Here, we see moving due to the fear of rupture, innovation out of urgent need in the formation of rescue missions, and social media engagement for those who could not physically aid in the area. While the rupture of the avalanche itself brought with it death and destruction, the event brought many Pamiris together in the form of community initiatives and fundraising which had in recent times been dissuaded due to the unspeakable events of recent years. Hence the disruption caused by the avalanche brought social movement among the community.

3.2.1 Tenacious Emotions in Oral Narrations

Environmental disasters signal disconnection because the landscape is an anchor for historical narratives through its materiality. The River Panj, for example, is central to Pamiri lifeworlds in Shughnon and its neighbouring regions. It was interesting to see how, in the case of Nekruz's family, the river had played a key, defining role in his fate. As I sat with my friends in this cosy apartment, we listened intently to the life story of Nekruz Sr.:

> *Let me tell you the story of my family. My grandfather, I'm named after him, came from the other side of the river, Afghanistan. There was a rebellion in the 1920s, I'm not sure exactly*

> *when it was but it was around the time of the creation of the Soviet Union. The people on the other side had a revolution because they wanted to remain united; they wanted Badakhshan to remain as one. Unfortunately, the Russians told the Afghan Emirate about this planned rebellion and it was crushed. Many men were killed in the fighting, and women and children fled to Tajikistan. My great-grandfather sent my great-grandmother and their 8-year-old son across the river to safety. No one saw my great-grandfather after that; he must have been killed in the fighting. […] So my great-grandmother is trying to cross the river with her child but the water is very strong and it was very dark so she loses him in the river. She reaches this side but my grandfather is stuck on the Afghan side. So my grandfather, a small child, is scared and begins to cry out for his mother in the darkness. Thank God that he cried out in this moment because a man heard him, wrapped him in a sheepskin, and carried him across the river to his mother. I can imagine my grandfather standing there, cold and afraid in the pitch-black, crying for his mother. But thank God that he did because otherwise that would have been the end of the story. But, well, here I am.*

Nekruz narrates a clear connection between rupture and the fate of his family, with the River Panj as a fixed point of reference. In a time when Pamir was going through an intense rupture, faced with imminent separation and uncertainty, the only option seen by families was to send women and children across the river. Risking death by crossing the icy waters of the River Panj, many women and children did indeed reach safety, like Nekruz's great-grandmother and grandfather. For Nekruz, he understands that the actions of his relatives directly led to the continuation of his family tree. By crossing the river all those years ago, the lives of his family members changed forever as they left the Emirate of Afghānistān and fled to what was to become GBAO. Symbolically, crossing the River Panj was a rupture to Nekruz and his family for the complete change in trajectory it caused.

The rebellion Nekruz refers to is known locally as *maram bolwo* (Engl.: Maḥram's Rebellion) of 1925, named after the rebel leader Maḥram Baīg. According to Emadi (2005), in early April of that year, around 800 armed men in Shughnān rose up against Abd al-Rahmān's oppression of Ismaili Islam. The rebellion was quashed, resulting in many deaths and thousands of refugees fleeing to Tajikistan. As evident in the letters collected by Boyko (2002) from this time, to which Emadi (2005, 179–80) refers, the rebels appealed to the Soviet Union to accept the refugees and grant them citizenship, citing the oppression they experienced under the Afghans. The aftermath of the rebellion saw the River Panj strictly controlled by Pashtun officials from the south of Afghanistan and a weighty prize put on the head of Maḥram Baīg (Emadi 2005, 180). From this point on, the lifeworlds of *meryua* and *weurya* grew even further apart, with Pamiris in Afghanistan experiencing several decades of oppression and marginalisation due to their Ismaili Muslim beliefs and practices, and Pamiris in Tajikistan undergoing a Sovietisation focused on the eradication of religion altogether.

Pausing for a moment, Nekruz was evidently experiencing many emotions and, as a listener, I too felt sad upon hearing how he described his grandfather as a small child crying out for his mother all alone in the darkness. In the time since this one conversation, whenever I have shared this part of Nekruz's family story in discussions, colloquia, etc., I have often noticed the impression of sadness on listeners, even those who have never met Nekruz and are even unfamiliar with Pamir. It seems that there is something in the way Nekruz told this story which affects the universal listener. The image of a small child crying out for his mother in the darkness with nothing but crashing waves around him perhaps speaks to the desire in us all to protect children and those most vulnerable. Nonetheless, the emotion in this moment of desperation is somehow preserved powerfully in the oral narrative of Nekruz.

Continuing his story, Nekruz detailed what happened to his great-grandmother and grandfather after they settled in the newly-defined Soviet Union:

> My great-grandmother was very beautiful and she was able to marry a widower, so my grandfather grew-up with step-siblings and half-siblings. So even though just my great-grandmother and grandfather survived, we have a huge family. My grandfather died just before I was born, so sadly I never got to meet him, but I still feel a strong connection to him. You know, he never went to the river to see his family over there. At that time, in the Soviet Union, if you went too close to the river they said you would get a 'trip to Siberia', meaning that you would be arrested and sent to a forced labour camp. The local elders also advised against trying to track family down. They said, 'No good will come of it.'

What Nekruz describes here was the reality for many Pamiris who were cut-off from their families due to the border's presence. After the creation of the Soviet Union and the lasting political division of Pamir, the Soviet government under Stalin's leadership sought to cut any family ties which existed among border communities. For Pamiris, this meant that the border itself became something to be feared. The threat of being sent to Siberia, i. e. to a forced labour camp, was enough to make communities extremely wary of going near the border and trying to maintain any contact with their relatives on the other side.

Again, emotion plays an important role in the transmission of Nekruz's family history. The fear of approaching the border is a lasting emotion which still exists in GBAO today. While in the Soviet times, the threat was of governmental punishment, today's Taliban presence has made *weruya* synonymous for a forbidden and dangerous place. This can be seen further in Nekruz's narrative:

> My family also didn't want me to go, but there was no stopping me. In 2014, I worked on a small project together with a friend and one of our professors. The idea was to collect stories and traditions which had been lost during the Soviet times. We would compare fairy tales for example, and see what had been left-out by the Soviet censorship. I have so much data

> from this on a hard drive somewhere but I've never used it. We weren't really interested in the project, we just wanted to find a way to cross the river and find our families. So we crossed the bridge here at Tem without any real idea where they could be. I was a little scared; I thought, what if I find them and they say, 'No, go away. We have no relatives.' I was quite apprehensive. So my friend and I crossed the bridge and asked around to see if anyone knew our families.

As can be seen here, the fear of *weruya* was enough for Nekruz's relatives to dissuade him from crossing the river and trying to track down their relatives. The Soviet campaign of disconnecting families and communities in border regions has indeed stood the test of time and still affects bodies to this day, coupled with historical imaginations of Afghanistan as a dangerous place. It is interesting to note that the same fear was felt by Nekruz when he was crossing the river. Perhaps it was more a fear of the unexpected, but it still made him hesitant to make this journey to *weruya.*

When we think of Soviet heritage, we think of material objects such as the striking architecture which is slowly being demolished in Dushanbe (Asia Plus 2022b), or Tashkent's stunning subway stations. Nekruz's story, however, highlights another aspect of materiality, namely emotion. The emotion, in this case fear, he felt crossing the river was inherited. As someone who was born after independence, Nekruz himself had no direct experience with Soviet campaigns and the threat of detention which aimed to severe communities. Instead, Nekruz heard stories of those times and the emotions felt by his elders were transmitted along with the narratives themselves. Emotion, therefore, is located within the communicative memory of oral narrations and is an "affective tie" (Assmann 2008) which connects the community through a shared identity.

3.2.2 Reconnection through Names

For Nekruz, his journey was not in vain and, despite his fears and hesitation, he was able to reconnect with his family:

> After a while, someone directed us to a house. I knocked and introduced myself, and they knew I was a relative because we looked so alike. It's funny, this house I knocked at, I can see it from my village. I must have seen it everyday, but I had no idea that my relatives lived there. So I go inside and my cousin introduces himself and his family. I laughed because they had exactly the same names as us. He goes, "I'm Nekruz," but I said, "No, I'm Nekruz." [Nekurz laughs a lot] And there was Hikmat, Nemat, Farrukh…I asked, "Where is Muslim?" And then my cousin calls Muslim and a young boy comes in, "Here he is." Crazy, it was like I knew them already.

As confirmed in further interviews, it was common for families on both sides of the river to continue family names. As one colleague from Roshtqa'la, Umed, told of his own family:

> They gave the same names to keep the memory alive. So that they wouldn't forget. I know that I also have a cousin called Umed from Afghanistan, in fact there are many Umeds in our family. It was just a way of maintaining this connection and, well, I guess it worked because it does make it a lot easier to trace your relatives.[3]

These are just two small instances of people in Shughnon relying on family names to find their relatives. Names in Tajik Shughnon follow a patrilineal structure inherited from the Soviets, with the family name often being the great-grandfather's name as the head of the household during the introduction of ID cards and other official Soviet documents. This name would of course carry the russified ending '-ov/ev(a)', depending on the preceding letter and gender. In recent years, however, President Rahmon has encouraged his citizens to drop the russified endings, he himself having done this in 2007, with a law passing in 2020 to ban the endings on newborns' documents (Altynbayev 2020). While I was told by some interlocutors that it is still possible to keep the russified endings if you pay a small bribe when registering the birth of your child, many people throughout Tajikistan had already opted to drop the russified endings independently. Names in Afghan Shighnan, however, are less strictly regulated and surnames are often selected when applying for an ID card (taskira). Due to this flexibility and lack of patrilineal naming structure, names such as 'Pamirzad' (son of Pamir) or 'Arya' (Aryan) are very common but serve little function as even siblings can have different surnames. In Afghan Shighnan it is, however, the first name of the father which is more discerning, something which is not to be underestimated in Tajik Shughnon. Family, as one friend, Jamshed, told me, is everything in Pamir:

> When you're a kid and you do something wrong, the adult telling you off will say 'Who is your father?' They don't ask your name, they ask the name of your father. It's because in our society, the parents are responsible for the child's education, how they are brought up etc. So if I do something bad, the blame doesn't go on me but on my father because he should have raised me better.[4]

3 Excerpt from ethnographic fieldnotes. Re-working of conversation in English with Umed in Dushanbe.

4 Excerpt from ethnographic fieldnotes. Re-working of conversation in English with Jamshed, Khorog.

Names in Pamir, therefore, are not only a useful tool in maintaining a family connection, but bring with them a societal weighting. In a place like Khorog where everyone knows everyone, a name can mean everything. It is therefore interesting, thinking of the consequences of the separation of Shughnān, that the interrelation of Pamiris halts at the River Panj. What had been, in places like Yomj, one shared community structure where everyone knew everyone else, was destroyed by the creation and subsequent militarisation of the border. While Nekruz did not know that his cousin lived only a few hundred metres away from his house, prior to the creation of the Soviet Union, this shallow part of the river would have been crossed regularly and the two sides would have not been neighbours, but part of one community. It is in these family histories, therefore, that the effects of the separation can be so acutely highlighted. By scaling down to the smallest instance, i. e. the body, the intimate, everyday effects of the separation can be viewed through an emotional, affective lens.

The emotion in Nekruz's retelling of his grandfather's story was palpable. Not only could we in the cosy apartment feel his joy at explaining the names of his reunited cousins, but also his sadness at his grandfather's distress, crying out for his mother in the dark as a scared, lost child. While Nekruz Jr. and Sr. never met, the emotional connection between the pair is undeniable and could lie in how the story was told to Nekruz by his relatives who had met him. This love, sympathy, and gratitude towards his grandfather turns Nekruz's retelling of the story into an emotional experience for the listener; something which speaks to the experience of emotion in communicative memory.

3.3 Ismaili Repression in Abdulloh's Narrative of Soviet GBAO

The family stories I collected during fieldwork, of which these three were selected, were full of palpable emotion. Separation, persecution, and violence were commonplace in the historical experiences of people living in Shughnon. Abdulloh's story was no exception to this. Abdulloh was a close friend of my friend and colleague, Davood, who insisted that we meet. I was sitting on the terrace of a small coffee shop next to the *jamoatkhona* in Khorog where we had arranged to meet. Indeed, Davood and I had tried to track Abdulloh down the day before, going to his place of work. But sadly his neighbour had died in the night and he was at the funeral, a regular occurance in a small town such as Khorog where everyone knows everyone. Just as the heavens started to open and Davood and I began to give up hope that Abdulloh would venture out in the rain, a slim man with a head

Fig. 6: Toqe displayed in the Khorog City Museum. Smith (2022).

full of blondish hair arrived, shaking the water off of his coat. After exchanging greetings, Davood insisted on buying the coffees:

> It's part of our culture. He's a Saidzoda; I should give him anything he asks for. If he turns up at the house and asks to marry my daughter, I should give her to him. There is even a special place in the Pamiri house where the Saidzoda is meant to sit. If I go to sit there, my grandmother will shout at me and say, 'That's the *joyi Said.* Leave it free for the Said!'[5]

Abdulloh, one of the most polite and patient people in Khorog, waited for Davood to finish, trying to suppress his chuckle. With a dry demeanour, Abdulloh replied:

> Actually, I have never heard of this. Perhaps your grandmother was messing with you? In any case, yes I am a Saidzoda. This means my family can trace their lineage back to the family of the Prophet. Davood told me you have some questions about my family, so I'll tell you what I know. Back before the creation of the Soviet Union, Badakhshan was led locally by the Pirs. They were learned religious authorities who could read and write. At that time,

5 Excerpt from ethnographic fieldnotes. Re-working of conversation in English with Davood and Abdulloh, Khorog.

> there was a Pir for each district: Shughnan, Rushan, Wakhan, etc, one for both sides of the river because at that time there was no great divide. While not all Pirs are Saids, my relative was the last Pir of Shughnan and he lived in Porshnev. When the Soviet Union was created, as I'm sure you've heard, the Pirs fled to the other side of the river. So many of my relatives fled to Afghanistan, but we stayed on this side of the river.

With this, we turn to the topic of Ismaili Islam in GBAO during the Soviet times. Due to fear of persecution, religious leaders fled the newly formed Soviet Union and resettled in the Emirate of Afghānistān, where they remained for the rest of their lives. From this point on, Ismaili Islam on *meruya* and *weruya* followed two very different paths.

While listening to Abdulloh, I was reminded of a similar story I had been told, not in Khorog, but in Dushanbe. I had been living with a Tajik family and would often discuss my research interests with them at the kitchen table. My host father, Zohir, had some family roots in Bukhara and told me the story of his grandfather's death at the hands of the Bolsheviks:

> So my grandfather was a mullah and, when the word came that the Bolsheviks were coming, he decided to flee to Afghanistan. Actually, he ran to Pamir first and wanted to get to Afghanistan that way by crossing the river. So he fled, leaving behind his many wives and children. He got to the border but the soldiers were already there and were checking everyone. He had the idea to hide himself as a woman and put on a paranja [veil covering the whole body] so the soldiers could not see him and joined a group of women. Unfortunately for my grandfather, the soldiers took one look at the group of women and thought, 'Wait, why is this one woman so much bigger and taller than the others?' and so they shot him. And that is how my grandfather died, a mullah dressed as a woman.[6]

While Zohir intended for the story to be entertaining, delivering it with much laughter, the reality is that religious figures, faced with the rupture of Revolution and the creation of the Soviet Union, fled to Afghanistan in the hope of avoiding persecution. Similarly to Nekruz's relatives, rupture once again forced mobility, but in Abdulloh and Zohir's cause the direction was to *weruya.* The escape of religious figures in this time highlights how fear can affect the body by forcing mobility. With an approaching threat, the body's reaction is to flee to a perceived safe place. In the case of the *piren* and other Ismaili elites, Afghanistan, while fraught with persecution from the Emirate's Sunni majority (Emadi 1998), was deemed to be a safer option than remaining on the Tajik side of the river. In this moment, *weruya* represented a safe haven and the border enabled a level of protection

6 Excerpt from ethnographic fieldnotes. Re-working of conversation in Tajik with Zohir, Dushanbe.

from the approaching threat of the Bolsheviks. Those days leading up to 1930 therefore show how flexible the imaginaries of *weruya* and *meruya* can be, and how this perception is deeply connected with the lifeworld. Years later in 1992, many people would again cross the Panj into Afghanistan, fleeing the civil war or trying to find a safe route to Pamir which was then under blockade. Despite the decades in between these events, the view of *weruya* as a safe haven, and the border as a kind of protection, prevailed.

Being Ismaili in the Soviet Union

Western scholarship on Islam in the Soviet Union has at times focused on dehumanising Soviet Muslims, portraying the religion and its followers as a threat which needed to be maintained. This is exemplified in Bennigsen and Broxup's (1983) *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State* in which the authors, the former of which was much revered in the field of Islam in the Soviet Union and Central Asian Studies, argue that the networks and connections in which Soviet Muslims moved posed an existential threat to the Soviet Union due to their conflicting loyalties. This and similar approaches, based on the simplification and generalisation of Muslim bodies, calling loyalties into question, have since been challenged by the wider academic community which aims to deconstruct the colonial frames Muslims have been placed in (e.g. Said 1997; Shooman 2014; Amir-Moazami 2016, 2022; Morey and Yaqin 2010, 2011). One work which challenges the notion of competing Soviet Muslim loyalties is the historian Tasar's (2017) *Soviet and Muslim* which approaches its subject matter by investigating the moments of interaction, rather than conflict, between the Muftiate and the Soviet regime in the post-War years, arguing that this relationship gave way to a moderate Soviet Islam. Perhaps most controversial in recent years has been Ro'i's (2000) *Islam in the Soviet Union* which, while criticised for its focus on Soviet narratives and leaving little room for Soviet Muslim experiences (DeWeese 2002), nonetheless provides an extensive historical survey of Soviet records, including committee meeting minutes and other official documents, and argues that there was a definite shift in Soviet policy towards Islam after the Great Patriotic War following the creation of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM). Ro'i and Tasar's work, when read together, paint a fuller picture of the post-1941 Soviet period in Central Asia, yet pay only passing attention to the unique situation in which Ismailis found themselves. To fill this gap, Aksakolov (2014, 2024) and Mastibekov (2014) provide a definitive assessment of the situation of Ismaili Muslims during this time, highlighting the varying relationships between Ismaili authorities and government officials and drawing from both archival research and interviews with many key figures. Similarly, Iloliev (2022) approaches the

lived experiences of Soviet Ismailis, e.g. through the example of observance of *panjtani.*

Prior to creation of the Soviet Union, Ismaili Muslims in Pamir stood in connection to the Imam through hereditary pirs who had pledged their allegiance to the Aga Khan. In the 1920s, a reformist movement known as *Panjabhai* (five brothers) stemming from Greater India held influence in some parts of Pamir and created division amongst the Ismaili religious authorities until it was halted by the Aga Khan III (Aksakolov 2024, Iloliev 2022). Ismaili Muslims in Pamir were therefore influenced strongly by a religious authority sitting in British-occupied India, following the teachings of the local *piren* as an extension of the Ismaili Imamat. This would suggest that, as the process of Sovietisation began, efforts to curb Ismaili Muslim practices would rest on breaking any connection to the Aga Khan. It was this connection to Aga Khan III, who at this time was based in Mumbai, which opened them up to suspicion, largely due to the fear that he was plotting to orchestrate a rebellion among the Ismailis of Badakhshon (Tasar 2017, 44). Indeed, it was only after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 when Ismaili Muslims could find connection with *Hazar Imom* once again (Aksakolov 2024).

Once the Soviet authorities had consolidated power by the end of the 1920s, Ismaili Muslim religious authority became their point of focus in GBAO. Under Stalin, the *piren* were targeted, causing many to flee to neighbouring Afghanistan, while their followers remained the subject of aggressive propaganda (Aksakolov 2024, 372). In an attempt to harness support for the Great Patriotic War, *khalifa* as leaders of smaller local associations became responsible for many aspects of Ismaili Muslim religious life such as funeral rites. However, according to Ro'i's (2000, 423–3) study of Soviet reports, these men, who were chosen locally, had largely not been trained in the Qur'ān, nor had they been in the presence of the Aga Khan. Nonetheless, Aksakolov (2024, 376) points to general difficulties of the Soviet authorites in obtaining figures, though the number of officially registered *khalifa* more than halfed due to the renewed anti-religious campaign under Khrushchev (1953–64), while there continued to exist a number of illegal *khalifa.* In contrast to Ro'i's (2000) study which presents the authority of the *khalifa* as increasingly peripheral, Aksakolov's (2024, 377–8) research highlights the active role the *khalifa* played in representing Ismaili Muslim interests in the face of Soviet repression, with several voicing criticism of Soviet policies and acting independently of the *piren* and Ismaili Imamat due to the impossibility of maintaining contact. The existing scholarship therefore paints a picture of repression and a de facto Ismaili religious authority operating separately from the hereditary powers outside of the country.

Family stories like Abdulloh's provide a human perspective to this historiography and offer emotional, experiental insights. It should be noted here that Ab-

dulloh is very softly-spoken, more out of his polite mild-mannered personality rather than the effects of silences or unspeakableness. While Abdulloh does not use strong language in the quotations which follow, this should not be interpreted as a lack of emotion. For Abdulloh's family, the anti-religious measures of the Soviet regime greatly impacted their lives and were experienced by them daily:

> Life was not easy for my family in these times. Everyone knew that the Saids were important religious figures and this is why they were heavily monitored under the Soviet regime. They were viewed with suspicion and lived within many limitations. They were not even sent to fight in the War, in case they defected from the Soviet Union.

It is interesting to note that the supposed threat of Islam, propagated by the Soviet regime, led to very real restrictions on movement for its citizens. Just as Nekruz told of a fear of approaching the river due to possible persecution and imprisonment, Abdulloh's family's movements were also restricted, but to a different end. For most families, it was to sever any kind of familiar connection, but for the families of the *saiden* it was to keep them inside of the Soviet Union and thus under control.

As Abdulloh continued to explain, matters changed nearing the end of the Soviet Union:

> The condition improved a little in the 80s. The Soviet Union was opening up and they had some international relations with Afghanistan. Once, a delegation came to visit from Afghanistan. Suddenly, these men from the government came to our house and brought carpets. We had never had carpets before. But they wanted to show, 'Look, we treat our religious people well. They are living comfortably.' It was all for show.

The time Abdulloh refers to, often categorised as the Perestroika and Glasnost period from 1985 to the end of the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev, saw an easing in the repression of Ismailis, with families like Abdulloh's being invited to events and the possibility of reconnection with the *piren* who had fled (Iloliev 2008, 2013). The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan also offered a temporary easing of border controls. Following the Saur Revolution (1978), in which President Daoud Khan was overthrown, Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan via bordering regions the following year. Emadi (1998), in his detailed chronology of the situation of Ismaili communities in Afghanistan throughout the 20th century, argues that, through the politicisation of the Ismaili intelligentsia and their support for the pro-Soviet government, Ismailis were able to preserve both their religious knowledge and identity in spite of their position as a minority. Part of these opportunities was educational mobility, and many Ismailis studied in the Tajik SSR and thus traversed the border (Emadi 1998, 115). Furthermore, through these connections

with the Soviet Union, many Ismailis supported the development of border communities in Badakhshan Province, for example with the construction of transborder power lines in Shighnan (Emadi 1998, 115). These instances of cross-border connection, made possible by the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, are one of the few state-level instances of *meruya* and *weruya* coming together during the Soviet period.

Similarly in Tajikistan, many Ismailis held important positions in the government, usually pursuing careers as teachers or government officials due to the lack of agricultural opportunities in GBAO (Herbers 2001, 371). For example, one of the country's national heroes, Shirinsho Shotemur, originated from a poor family in Porshnev and pursued a political career, being credited with Tajikistan's independence from the UzSSR in 1929, before himself falling victim to Soviet repression in 1937. Varying negotiations of identity could explain the discrepancy between the treatment of religious figures, and the positions held by many Ismailis. Emadi's (1998, 103) analysis of Ismailis in Afghanistan is conducted through the lens of *taqiyya*, which he defines as "a precautionary dissimulation of their faith in a hostile environment," arguing that this principle helped Ismaili Muslims to move into favourable positions and ultimately support themselves post-occupation. The option of *taqiyya* was perhaps not available to religious figures like *saiden* who, by birth, were revered among Ismaili Muslims communities. Other Ismaili Muslims, such as Shotemur, maintained a public appearance that was void of religion, keeping matters of belief private. I would propose moving away from the concept of *taqiyya*, which is religiously laden, and instead approach these negotiations of identity as a result of rupture. Due to the distance felt following the creation of the Soviet Union between both *meruya* and *weruya*, and the *piren* and their Soviet *murid*, a distinction between Ismaili as religion and Ismaili as experience developed in Soviet GBAO, with Soviet Ismailis adopting a form of *taqiyya* as a way to protect themselves and fashion a lifeworld in this new context.

Abdulloh's family story therefore provides an intimate perspective on a widely discussed issue relating to Islam in Soviet Central Asia: the treatment of religious figures and the practise of religious rites. While many in Pamir were able to practise their religion in secret, confining religious activities largely to the home or behind closed doors, those known to be influential in religious matters could simply not hide. Against the background of the Bismachi Movement which saw religious and landowning elites form a resistance against the Bolsheviks throughout Central Asia, Abdulloh gives a small hint as to life for those who did not flee to Afghanistan and continued to live *meruya.* While previous systems of religious authority were not compatible with Sovietisation, for example the authority of the Aga Khan III, some practices were able to withstand the rupture of Sovietisation. Thinking back to Davood's introduction, he had learnt from

his grandmother that the *saiden* were special people who should be given full, unconditional respect. The religious authority of the remaining *piren* in Afghanistan, some of whom re-established contact with their Soviet *murid* post-Independence (Iloliev 2008, 2013), changed drastically after the collapse of the Soviet Union when, in 1995, Aga Khan IV visited the region for the first time. Indeed, in the years which followed, great reforms were introduced as Ismaili Muslim communities in Tajikistan and Afghanistan joined the global Jamat. Having been largely unified several decades prior, the rest of the global Jamat had already experienced sweeping reforms which, upon introduction to Pamir, required the retirement of Pirship in place of increased training and responsibilities for *khalifa*, each selected in cooperation with Jamati institutions which were also introduced. This great shift in religious authority and increased institutionalisation of Ismaili Islam, in line with the global Jamat, meant that the very term *pir* largely became a thing of the past, used only to denote historical Ismaili figures such as Pir Nāṣiri Khusraw. However, *Saidzoda* and the weight it carries, is still in use, as can be seen from Davood and Abdulloh's interaction, meaning that, although some articulations of religious authority died out, the lineage to the family of the Prophet upheld its significance in GBAO.

3.4 Azizkhon's Narrative of Stalin's Great Terror

It was a dark winter night in Khorog. The kind of night where all you can do is stay inside and hibernate, escaping from the piercing cold and potential wolves outside. From under the thick *lef* (synthetic blanket) next to the *pechka* (electric heater), I was checking my social media when a message appeared from a name I did not recognise. The user explained that he followed me on another platform and was interested in my research on Pamir. As it turned out, we had many mutual friends in Khorog, including my flatmate Farishta, and this is how I came to know Azizkhon. A researcher, Azizkhon had left Tajikistan several years ago to study and had since settled abroad. After exchanging messages while I was in Tajikistan, we found time upon my return for a long zoom call in which he could finally tell me the story of his family.

Initially, we came into discussion because of my research but Azizkhon soon revealed that the other side of the river had always sparked great interest in him:

> For me, Afghanistan was always this place I associated with culture and music, but also my family homeland, as well as this desire to see my relatives. [...] As a child, my sister and I were very interested in Afghanistan. We listened to Afghan music a lot. We would climb onto the roof of our house and adjust the antenna, trying to get the Afghan channels on

Fig. 7: Flowers left at an abandoned shrine in Khorog. Smith (2022).

> TV. My father was so annoyed because we disrupted the signal and he couldn't watch the Russian channels.[7]

The image of two children messing with the TV antenna is not only amusing, but highlights the interconnection experienced at the heights of Pamir. In one position, the antenna allows an audio-visual connection to a country hundreds of miles away, while the other position brings the neighbouring country a step closer. In both cases, the antenna allows the children to overcome various national and physical borders, all through their interaction with the materiality of the antenna itself. Azizkhon and his sister were not alone in connecting with Afghanistan in this way. Before the Taliban took control of the country in September 2021, it was relatively common to tune-in to Ariana TV or Tolo News for alternative Persian-language programming to Tajik state channels such as Safina TV and Televizioni Tojikiston. Through a mutually-intelligible language, *weruya* became instantly accessible and the divide of the border was temporarily overcome for the

7 Excerpt from ethnographic fieldnotes. Re-working of conversation in English with Azizkhon, online.

length of one news segment or programme. Unfortunately for Persian-speakers, following the events of September 2021, the broadcasting language of most programmes switched to Pashto and thus Tajik viewership appears to have dropped. TV broadcasting, for now, appears to not have survived this particular rupture.

3.4.1 Faith to transcend Borders

As Azizkhon explained, his family was scattered across both sides of the River Panj:

> My family on my grandmother's side are from Rushan, up a valley. My great-grandfather was one of 6 brothers. My great-grandmother was married to a man on the other side at a young age; she was so young that she used to call her husband 'uncle'. My great-great-grandfather, her father, decided to migrate and wanted to get his daughter back, so he made a deal with her husband to release her from the marriage in exchange for some hectares of land. So he got his daughter back and then married her to his nephew, my great-grandfather. He moved closer to Khorog, but then he was relocated to Ghund by the ruler at the time. [...] Some relatives came from the Afghan side and they still managed to maintain this network, for example some of my relatives travelled about 200 km to visit a shrine in Afghanistan and make a sacrifice. Afghans in general settled on the Tajik side of the river but used to take animals and dried fruits to Afghanistan. But this stopped when the crackdown began.

As can be seen from this small excerpt of our conversation, families lived along both sides of the River Panj prior to the creation of the Soviet Union. What is particularly interesting here is the use of place names to position the narrative so it is understandable to the listener, i. e. me in that moment. Khorog, at the time Azizkhon recounted, had little significance. As a city, Khorog was developed extensively during the early Soviet years, being the administrative capital of GBAO and therefore an important centre. Before this, however, when the River Panj held far less significance, Khorog was a small village sitting at the convergence of three rivers. Due to its proximity to Afghanistan, Khorog became a Russian military outpost in 1895, and gradually grew throughout the Soviet period, gaining key infrastructure such as a hospital, airport, and the addition of several schools (Middleton 2016). The reference to Khorog, as a fixed point on the map with which the listener can locate the narrative of Azizkhon's family more easily, would have been less relevant at this time, reminding us of the importance of context-sensitivity when dealing with multiple temporalities.

The same can be said for Azizkhon's references to the sides of the River Panj. While not completely irrelevant in this time, the river today plays the role of a national border, dividing not just land but many families and communities. By em-

phasising the mobility of many people prior to the creation of the Soviet Union, Azizkhon highlights the irrelevance of the border from a contemporary perspective. This is not to say that the river held no importance whatsoever: as a central point in the geography of Shughnān and other areas in its proximity, the River Panj has greatly impacted Pamiri lifeworlds. Still, the apparent ease with which Azizkhon's relatives could cross the river speaks to the politics of the border regime which came to be imposed on Pamir, a border regime which focused its attention on halting the physical movement across *meruya* and *weruya.*

As Azizkhon continued, the Soviet times were not easy for his family and the repressions of Stalin were strongly felt:

> My grandfather was born at the start of the 1930s, during the beginning of Stalin's crackdowns. [...] My great-grandfather was even sent to Siberia. He was accused of domestic abuse but really he had some kind of problem with his neighbour and this guy accused him. There is a shrine in Afghanistan called Polkhoja. It is believed to have the footprint of Nāṣiri Khusraw. In 1941/2, when my great-grandfather was taken to Siberia, my great-grandmother faced towards this shrine and prayed through the whole night, standing on one foot.

From this excerpt, it becomes apparent that there is a clear shift in Azizkhon's narrative, not before the creation of the Soviet Union per se, but following the beginning of Stalin's Great Terror. This rupture is what orders Azizkhon's narrative prominently, appearing to be the cause of his family's division and change in trajectory. From this point on, the narrative enters into a new period, the Soviet.

Azizkhon's narrative offers a different perspective from Abdulloh's as his family were not known religious figures, but rather nondescript followers and therefore their experiences give a glimpse into non-elite issues during the Soviet times. Similar to Nekruz's account, Azizkhon offers a story of separation but focusing more on Stalin's Great Terror as the initial rupture. This is presumably because Azizkhon's family experienced this time directly, whereas for Nekruz's family it was rather the ever-present fear of what could happen if one stepped out of line. Therefore, Azizkhon's narrative offers an account of what would happen if one, indeed, stepped out of line.

For Azizkhon's great-grandmother, the fear for her husband's fate caused her to enter into an intense act of prayer and devotion. Standing on one foot, she prayed throughout the whole night for the protection of her husband. This highlights the desperation felt by Azizkhon's great-grandmother in this moment and demonstrates how Stalin's repressions held an affective power over the bodies of Pamiris. When one experiences fear, according to Ahmed (2014), the body seeks a place of safety, i.e. something familiar which offers stability and defence against the threat. By turning to prayer, Azizkhon's great-grandmother was seek-

ing refuge in a turbulent time, i. e. asking *Xutho* (Engl.: God/Allah) for help. Moreover, the desperation of standing on one leg for the whole night articulates the desperation she felt at the prospect of losing her husband. In this way, the fear of what could happen to her husband, and by extension her and her family, caused her to use her body in an extreme act of prayer, demanding physical determination and ultimately exhaustion and pain.

Azizkhon's great-grandmother's prayers also highlight the importance that certain sites in Afghanistan still held, post-rupture. While standing on one leg and praying, she was facing a sacred site several hundred kilometres away on the other side of the river in what was then an even more distant place than was before. Despite the extensive political boundaries and borders which now encompassed her and hindered her pilgrimage to that sacred site, she still prayed in its direction and thus placed herself in connection to it through prayer. This would suggest that this shrine and perhaps others like it were capable of withstanding the ruptures which had otherwise disconnected the lifeworlds of Pamiris in the region.

I would argue that it is due to the shrine's materiality that it withstood the rupture of Stalin's regime. The shrine mentioned here, which is one of several throughout the region attributed to miraculous events concerning either Nāṣiri Khusraw himself or other *doi* or *piren*, is a location associated with great religious significance and therefore holds importance in the lifeworlds of many Pamiris sharing the same belief. While the militarisation of borders and policing of communities can pose great hurdles to overcome, the shrine as a fixed point of reference remained for Azizkhon's great-grandmother and she was able to orient herself towards it in a personal act of prayer. This suggests that, like many others, the shrine was part of her lifeworld, even though she could no longer visit it.

Such shrines, similar to the Spring of Nāṣiri Khusraw, therefore present an interesting case study when approaching ruptures, especially in the context of Ismaili Islam during the Soviet period. With the creation of national borders comes an immobility which makes partaking in a pilgrimage almost impossible. Furthermore, the anti-religious campaigns of the early Soviet period also caused a degree of immobility as, even if one could in theory partake of a pilgrimage, the threat of repercussion was too heavy for many believers. Additionally, the policing of border communities, as can be seen in the narratives of Abdulloh and Nekruz, prevented Pamiris from having any connection with the other side out of fear of retribution from state security. Nonetheless, Azizkhon's great-grandmother found her own way of maintaining a connection with this sacred place in spite of the growing barriers around her. By praying towards the shrine, as she believed, she was fulfilling her religious duties while begging for the protection of her husband.

It is interesting to note here that, since Pamir became part of the global Jamat and thus underwent a series of reforms to unify administrative matters and some religious practices, the significance of many shrines was also affected. In Khorog, for example, there was once a small shrine by the side of the road which connects Gulaken with Barkhorog, in an area called Choynak. The shrine, consisting of a tree and stone which were believed to have been the site of a miracle, used to be visited by local pilgrims who would offer prayers there. After Aga Khan IV's first visit to the region in 1995, however, the practice of praying at shrines was discouraged and thus the shrine fell out of use. While the meaning of the shrine changed, that did not change its materiality, i. e. the tree and the stone still stand there to this day. On one visit to the former shrine, I also noted that people had left flowers and small stones, suggesting that the shrine is still occasionally in use. Therefore, while the interpretation of a material object can change, the actual material existence of it does not, highlighting the role that subjectivity plays in the veneration and perception of material religion (Gamberi 2021).

3.4.2 Lost Connections from (Im)mobility

Despite his great-grandmother's prayers working and him leaving the Gulag, it was much longer until Azizkhon's great-grandfather was free to return to Pamir:

> After Siberia, he was sent to Vakhsh to work on the cotton fields together with many Volga Germans. After the death of Stalin, he requested to go back to Pamir saying, 'I just want to listen to the flowing water and die.' And so, he returned to Pamir. He would often disappear in the summer months, leaving my great-grandmother alone. No one knows where he went.

There is something of a symmetry in the fate of Azizkhon's great-grandfather. From his exile to Siberia, then forced migration to the cotton fields, and then back to Pamir, he appears to have wanted to be in Pamir, but on his own terms. The restrictions he had suffered during his exile were now lifted, and he wanted perhaps to experience the freedom of movement he had missed out on all those years ago.

Restriction of movement was a running motif in Azizkhon's family story. Sadly, the fear of the border meant that, for Azizkhon's family, there was no happy ending:

> My father was born in the 1960s and he used to wonder why my grandfather didn't know anything about his family. [...] He could have probably gone to Afghanistan to look for our relatives in the 1980s when things were more relaxed, but he was too afraid. In the 1990s, we came into contact with a man from Afghanistan but he told us that we had no rel-

> atives left there. That part of the family had had only daughters, apart from one relative who was killed in a wrestling match, so the family name died on that side of the river. […] Actually, this is attributed to our family curse. I was told that my I-don't-know-how-many-great-grandfather, who was blind, once met a fairy king who cursed our family so that every generation would only have one surviving male son. That lasted until my generation, it seems, because I have a brother.

The story of Azizkhon's family is testament to the real consequences the Soviet politics of fear had on communities living along the River Panj. The ever-present threat of persecution for approaching the border or maintaining connection with one's loved ones was enough to sever family relationships and, in the case of many families, cause these connections to be lost forever.

In closing, Azizkhon shared his own thoughts on the fate of his people, highlighting the lasting effects the ruptures of the 20th century have had:

> It's the story of human tragedy. The British came, and then the Russians, then Stalin. There's this Iron Curtain and you just can't cross it. You know, one guy even tried to swim over the Pacific, just to get out of the Soviet Union. Families were torn apart; brothers didn't see each other for decades. Fathers didn't see their sons. We had some slight reconnection: my uncle is a dentist and he set-up a practice in a place called Barponja, on the Afghan side of the river. One of his patients told him that we have some distant relatives still around. We have the same faces and the same names, but I never went there. I think I'm a little worried that I would turn up and they would be like 'Oh, what do you want?' I guess there is just memory now, no real connection.

For many families, this is sadly the case and the connections which existed before the ruptures of the 20th century have been lost forever. Azizkhon's own apprehensions at searching for connection, shared by Nekruz, highlight how successful the Soviet measures in creating a long-lasting severment were. After close to a century, hope appears to have been lost for many in the possibility of reconciliation or any possible return to life before the border demarcation.

3.5 Pamir Imagined through Memory and Emotion

These three family stories, shared by three young men from GBAO, are representative of the effects the rupture of the border demarcation had on Pamiri life-worlds. For Nekruz's family, this caused the forced migration of his great-grandmother and grandfather, leading to family separation of roughly 90 years, but, thanks to Nekruz's tenaciousness, also the reconciliation of the family a few years ago. For Abdulloh, the forced migration of many relatives to Afghanistan and the religious persecution which followed affected the movements of his fam-

ily, but are also representative of the larger issue of religion during the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, his family's status as *saiden* is something which has ultimately withstood the many ruptures. Finally, in the case of Azizkhon's family, the forced migration of his great-grandfather changed their trajectory from having lived actively across the river. While his great-grandmother's connection to the shrine on the Afghan side is evident of the ability of materiality to withstand ruptures, the family connections were unfortunately not as strong and were ultimately severed forever.

While these three family histories deal with separation, they also highlight the interconnection of Pamiri lifeworlds. While the border separates these and countless other families in Pamir, there is still a desire to know where one comes from. As Nekruz said, Pamiris are closely connected to the environment and this does not simply stop at the border. This would suggest that, despite the passage of time, Pamiris still long for a sense of connection, a connection which transcends the border itself. In this way, this chapter highlights the tenacity of familiar and communal interconnection, speaking to the greater argument that Pamir can be conceptualised as a region in its own right, irregardless of the political borders and imaginaries which prevail. Through this lasting interconnection, the fearful imaginaries of *weruya* have the potential to be overcome, and suggests the possibility of a future post-border Pamir.

Furthermore, this chapter also highlights how materiality can withstand rupture. Just as Azizkhon's grandmother prayed towards the shrine in Afghanistan, so too did power lines in Shighnan present points of connection which transcended the border. Even the emotion in the narratives of Nekruz, Abdulloh, and Azizkhon speaks to the residual nature of emotion, being closely connected to experience and memory. The materiality of fear was enough to hinder Nekruz's grandfather from attempting to find his relatives, which was passed down to Nekruz through communicative memory. Yet still, materiality acts as an anchor in rupture, as exemplified by the shrine in Afghanistan, being a way for Azizkhon's great-grandmother to orient herself within the chaos around her.

What hinders Pamiris from seeking reconnection is not necessarily fear of the border itself, but rather an imagination of what lies on the other side of the river. These imaginaries, finding their roots in pre-Soviet threats of invasion from neighbouring Emirates, were given traction in Soviet political imaginaries which served as ways of controlling the body. The fear propagated by these imaginaries, coupled with the threat of political repercussions, hindered many Pamiris from crossing the border and maintaining connection with loved ones. It was, in some part, the same fear that caused Ismaili Musims in the Soviet Union to adopt new practices, redirecting themselves away from Ismaili as a religious category and instead pursuing opportunities offered by the Soviet regime. This chapter therefore high-

lighted ways in which Ismaili-Pamiris dealt historically with the rupture of the foundation of the Soviet Union.

For these three young men, and other younger generations of Pamiris, these family stories shape the way they position themselves within the world. Just as *meruya* and *weruya* become historically-informed articulations of cultural identity, so too do narratives of the past shape the Pamiri perceptions of the environment and lifeworld. The tenacity of emotion gives Pamiris a sense of where *meruya* ends and *weruya* begins, bu also reminds them of a vague connection that transcends the border. This chapter therefore contributes to the greater argument that Pamiri lifeworlds represent more than just the political boundaries of GBAO, as the remnants of familiar connection and communal interconnection still exist for many, despite the many political attempts to break them. Through such family stories, therefore, Pamir becomes much larger, sweeping across the River Panj and paying little attention to the hindrance of the border, as borders may stop mobility, but they cannot stop emotion.