# 6 Conclusion: Challenging Continuity and (Re) Drawing the Past

Towards the end of my stay in Khorog, at the beginning of spring 2023, I had taken to accompanying my flatmate, Farishta, on her evening jog around the stadium in the centre of the city. Almost religiously, Farishta would come home from work in the early evening, dawn her running shoes, and go for a few laps around the stadium. We often joked among friends that her Strava account, an app which tracks running and cycling routes, looked like the frantic circles of a person close to nervous breakdown as she had developed a thick black circle along the stadium's running track and almost nowhere else. While Farishta would do her laps around the stadium, I, who had never jogged a day in my life and had no intention to start at 2000 m above sea level, would walk up and down the rows of the stands, enjoying the quiet that this empty stadium offered. While the stadium was occasionally used for sport, with a volleyball net and some gym equipment positioned sporadically around the grounds, the most visitors this stadium got on a regular basis were small groups of retired men who would sit around and eat *semechki* (sunflower seeds) in relative silence. For big events, almost exclusively related to the state, the stadium would be the meeting place for thousands of people, seated in neat rows and listening to the speech of the President or another government official. On such occasions, placards were set up carrying slogans such as "*Tājīkistān ba pīsh*" (roughly translated as "Come on, Tajikistan") and the stadium would be decorated with the national flag and other red, white, and green materials. This evening, however, it was completely empty.

As I walked among the empty rows of sunbleached seats, the *semechki* shells crackling under my feet, I was reminded of just how empty the city had become. Over the past year and a half that I had been visiting Khorog, more and more people had continued to leave for Dushanbe, Russia, or further afield. Just a few days before, a friend had left to train abroad, unsure when or if he would return. From the heights of the last few rows of the stadium I could see over into the boarded-up houses in Novayi and Gulaken, sealed because their families had left Khorog for good. Looking down the main street, mothers accompanied their children home from school as the sun began to set, but few men were to be seen, the result of sweeping arrests, increased forced conscription, and ever-growing labour migration all caused by the unspeakable events of 2021 and 2022. Directly across from the stadium, however, was a tall building under construction, somewhat squint and far too tall for an earthquake-prone region like GBAO. These apartment buildings, which had taken far longer than expected to construct, were understood by Khorog's residents as where the families of Tajik soldiers and business-


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men would soon live, drastically changing the demographic of Khorog with the relocation of many Tajik families, some of whom already lived in apartments across the river but mainly kept to themselves.

Facing towards the mountain across the River Ghund, on which UPD, Tirchid, and Shosh sat, I read the Tajik words sprawlled across the mountain face, "*Tājīkam va Tājīkistān zindaam*" (Engl.: I am Tajik and I live in Tajikistan). This was a relatively new addition as, just a few months prior, the mountain side had looked very different. As I had witnessed from a balcony in Novayi, the previous English message to *Hazar Imom* upon his diamond jubilee in 2017, "Welcome our Hazar Imam. Diamond Jubilee Mubarak", was stripped away over the period of one week in Summer 2022 and replaced with this message instilling a Tajik national identity for GBAO and its inhabitants. Looking up at the slogan, sitting alongside the tall apartment building under construction, I realised just how much Khorog had changed in the short time I had come to know the city.

The changes, which were the clear result of rupture of the unspeakable events of 2021 and 2022, could be seen in the new materiality around me. The tall building and Tajik script on the mountain side represented a changing demographic which posed the prospect of Pamiris in Khorog moving to the minority, and newly-arrived Tajiks slowly building a majority. The absence of men and the boarded-up houses were reminders of labour migration or escape caused by sweeping arrests and poor economic prospects (Amnesty International 2024). Many of the mothers, walking their children home from school, were now the sole providers for their families, with their husbands either imprisoned or in exile, and sons conscripted to the military (Eurasianet 2023). So too had this rupture, which was still ongoing, created a malaise throughout Khorog and greater GBAO, with even the most positive of friends and acquaintances beginning to lose hope of a brighter tomorrow.

To future generations of Pamiris, it will be difficult to comprehend the rupture which has taken place since 2021. With the materiality of the city changing so quickly, it is difficult to find an anchor to hang-on to. More so, it remains to be seen how these times will be remembered in family stories, as for many it is still too difficult to speak of the events happening around them. Perhaps future Pamiri song-writers will write about this time, or the Pamiri heritage objects sold in shops will disappear as entrepreneurs try to adapt to the growing pressure to fit-into Tajik national identity. In any case, my own personal response to this rupture was to photograph everything that I could, keeping these moments safe for years later when it is perhaps more possible to discuss the sensitivities of these times. Perhaps this is what Nazar meant all those months ago in London; it was never about the lack of written history, but rather the redrafting of history

to which oral and material histories are so perceptible. Perhaps it was not that there was no history, but rather it had been redrafted and lost in the process.

**Fig. 17:** An empty stadium No. 1. Smith (2023).

## 6.1 Redefining Central Asia, Redefining Rupture

This book set out to investigate how histories of rupture have been preserved in Pamir. First and foremost, this challenged existing academic preconceptions of history being a largely manuscript-based discipline, and instead stressed the importance of alternative forms of history preservation. This was presented in two forms: oral and material, drawing from family histories and popular songs, as well as architecture and clothing. In this way, this book has shifted focus away from traditional approaches in history studies, and argued in favour of an existential anthropological approach which centres on the experiences of marginalised voices from Pamir. This approach began with the narratives of interlocutors and thus created a history of Pamir ordered around their own understandings of the ruptures that they as a community have experienced. In doing so, the frames of remoteness which have otherwise encompassed communities living in Pamir were deconstruct-

**Fig. 18:** An empty stadium No. 2. Smith (2023).

ed, instead jumping from a geopolitical, global understanding of historical continuity (Mazlish 1998) to the intimate, emotional, experiential scale.

Such a re-drafting of representations of the past challenges several perceptions of history. Firstly, this book approached history from a material perspective, viewing this as a challenge to the discontinuity of rupture. As seen in the architecture of the Pamiri house, representations of heritage are interwoven into the dwelling experience due to their materiality, which not only reminds the inhabitant of key moments of their Pamiri-Ismaili heritage, but edifies a Pamiri cultural identity through a tangible connection to the past by way of the memory embedded in the house's materiality. In this way, this book challenged notions of ruptures as breaks in continuity (Holbraad et al 2019) by arguing that the ruptures in Pamir's history are embedded in the architecture of the Pamiri house. The materiality of the Pamiri house enables a connection to the past that is therefore unbroken by rupture. Therefore, ruptures do not represent a total break in continuity but rather continuity is secured by materiality.

Furthermore, this book's approach to ruptures challenged understandings of global continuity and shared, large-scale temporalities. As highlighted well in the conversation with Gulbegim, great historic ruptures do not necessarily pose a dis-

continuity for everyone. For Gulbegim, her own ruptures were defined by her personal relation to the house and her family, rather than larger events such as the Soivet times or civil war. Therefore, it does not fit to approach rupture in terms of global continuity when dealing with marginalised communities as they dwell far from the epicentres of such ruptures. Instead, marginalised perspectives are based on a subject-centred understanding of the lifeworld and all the interconnections which it encompasses.

Ruptures are therefore key to understanding how people make sense of temporalities and highlight how subjective perceptions of time can be. Just as time appeared to stand still in Gulbegim's house, so too was entering Roshtqa'la Fortress like stepping back in time. Without the context of rupture as a way of ordering histories, there is no clear chronology. This presents a challenge to how Central Asia is understood today as it is through the rupture of the foundation and collapse of the Soviet Union that the region was conceptualised spatially (Kirmse 2020). This rupture has led to border regions such as Pamir being marginalised from drafts of history, forgotten in greater studies due to their situation at the very periphery, far from centres of power and interest (Saxer 2016, van Schendel 2002). In this sense, Pamir Studies, as an exceptionalised field of study, has yet to be fully accepted within Area Studies, instead dwelling either as a subcategory of Central Asian Studies and limited by the boundaries created around it, or featured in case studies of the classical disciplines of Geography, Anthropology, Political Sciences, and History. Therefore, this book aimed to strengthen the growing trend towards treating Pamir as a region in its own right, viewing this as a challenge to global continuity, and joining the approaches of Kreutzmann (2020, 2022, 2023), Mostowlansky (2017a, 2017b), Bolander (2016, 2017, 2021) and others, to not only overcome the political borders which have divided Pamir, but to move towards a conceptual framework for studying transborder flows (Mielke and Hornidge 2014).

To achieve this, I have proposed viewing Pamir in terms of lifeworld. Pamiris live in interconnection to various landscapes, as highlighted by the many case studies in this book. Through Pari's love for natural fibres, for example, we learned that Pamiri handicrafts are the product of a dynamic making process between artisans and the materials of the natural, physical landscape of Pamir. In this landscape, the River Panj plays a central role at the heart of Shughnan, while also creates a synthetic divide between Pamiris living *meruya* and *weruya.* Through interactions with other natural phenomena such as the Spring of Nāṣiri Khusraw, Pamiris experience not only the physical landscape of Pamir but also religious landscapes which are informed by historical rupture and reform, articulated also in the use of Islamic concepts such as *rizq.* Similarly, the literary landscape of Pamir continues to inspire song-writers who draft Shughni popular songs following the long-standing tradition of secular and religious music in the region.

Pamir, I contend, can therefore be conceptualised as a series of landscapes tied together by the experiences of the people who dwell within these at times shifting interconnections.

One landscape which we looked at in detail was the important role which language plays in shifting scale to Pamiri lifeworlds. While most Pamiris are multilingual, Shughni, including the Rushani dialect, was the first language of all of the Pamiri interlocutors presented in this book, due in part to my many months spent in the Shughni-speaking city of Khorog. Through Shughni, we gained a better understanding of Pamiri cultural identity, most notably in the concepts of *meruya* and *weruya.* As articulations of positionality, *meruya* and *weruya* lose their meaning when translated into English and thus taken out of their geographical, linguistic context. These terms are just one example of the role the physical landscape plays in Shughni language and how, through the use of Shughni language, we can better understand the region and the lifeworlds of the people who dwell there. While Russian, Tajik, and English all play important roles in the everyday experiences of Pamiris living in GBAO, Shughni represents the Pamiri perspective in Shughnon because it is through Shughni that the positionality of the lifeworld is articulated. In this sense, Shughni is a mode of experiencing Pamiri lifeworlds, as "Experience, even the drama of pain and suffering, lies outside, inside, and alongside enacted language as its indexical and phenomenological resource" (Ochs 2012, 156). Language therefore enables the articulation of experience and the communication of knowledge, being one mode of the storied world Ingold (2022a) writes about. While Shughni remains largely inaccessible to foreign learners, due to the severe lack of learning materials outside of Pamir, this language is key to an existential approach to drafting a history of Pamir, moving away from the dominance of written history, and towards oral narratives such as family stories and popular Shughni songs.

This book has therefore presented Pamir as an experience, i. e. the experience of being-Pamiri-in-the-world. This approach, which focused heavily on the residual emotion of the memory of rupture and its role in shaping perceptions of the environment (Ingold 2022b), was able to re-draft carthographies of Pamir through personal experiences and reimagine the region as a flexible, productive space defined by those who dwell there. Therefore, this book has demonstrated how Pamir is an intersection of disciplines and calls for an interdisciplinary approach, not only to this region, but other regions which lie on the periphery of classical Area Studies. Just as the boundaries of Pamir cannot be clearly defined, so too is the experience of being alive one which cannot be split into containers.

## 6.2 Feeling the Lifeworld

At the heart of this book's approach is emotion, stressing its role in narratives of the past. Approaching emotion as a material experience, the tenacity and spontaneity of emotion was shown to re-draft histories of Pamir, at points deviating from the planned script. Through the three family histories shared by Nekruz, Abdulloh, and Azizkhon, the fear of crossing the River Panj and maintaining a connection with *weruya* becomes apparent in the narratives the three interlocutors share of the separation experienced by their families during the ruptures of demarcation and the creation of the Soviet Union. For Nekruz and Azizkhon especially, the affective economy of fear (Ahmed 2014) felt by their relatives continues to influence their own movements and desires to reconnect with family *weruya.* Nekruz persevered despite multiple warnings and was able to reconnect with his family after several decades. In contrast, Azizkhon's family lost the chance to reconnect as there are now no surviving relatives. The emotion in these narratives highlights how, despite the fact that they are speaking of ruptures which took place several decades before they were born, the materiality of rupture manifests in spoken family histories and can be passed down from generation to generation. Even more so, this emotion continues to affect their movements, causing a level of immobility and ultimately shaping their perception of the landscape of Pamir.

Nonetheless, this book highlighted how such feelings are unregulatable. As seen in the visit to the Spring of Nāṣiri Khusraw, nothing could stop the captivating feeling of visiting a sacred place. Even for myself as a non-Ismaili, I could feel slight tinglings of the religiosity that my companions felt through drinking the water and feeling at peace for a brief moment. This experience came in stark contrast to the dry exhibition presented inside of the museum itself. The materiality of the Spring and the feelings I felt in this moment were unregulated and existed outside of the intended touristic experience I was meant to have. In this way, feelings were the way I was connected with the Spring, allowing me to experience the religiosity of the sacred site. This interconnection in which I stood with the Spring, though only for a few moments, relied on those feelings, perhaps because I lacked the belief in the theology of Nāṣiri Khusraw and therefore the Pamiri lifeworld connection which Nekruz and Suhrob held. Feelings, therefore, are the routes through which the interconnection of the lifeworld is experienced on a bodily scale.

Furthermore, the fear I felt in Gulbegim's house of the possibility of spirits and invisible beings highlights how, as an outsider, I could only partially feel the Pamiri lifeworld. While the feelings felt in the Spring were able to transform me, for a brief moment, from a researcher into an inhabitant by allowing me to experience the religious feelings of being in a sacred place, this did not extend to Gulbegim's comfort around the *parien*, of whom I was sacred. To experience such

elements of interconnection of Pamiri lifeworlds is something I am simply not able to do, perhaps because in my culture spirits are always something to be feared and the idea of a benevolent spirit is foreign to me, with the notable exception of *Casper the Friendly Ghost*, of course. This instance therefore highlights one of the limitations of this book: while the materiality of emotion is, in itself, universal, its elements can only be fully experienced when one is in complete interconnection with the lifeworld, which I was not. This speaks to wider issues in existential anthropology and area studies such as phenomenology and the incompatibility of epistemologies (see Knibbe and Versteeg 2008, Derichs 2015). It is false to assume that knowledge is universal, but there is a universality in the bodily reactions we experience upon certain emotions. While emotion itself is culturally informed (Ahmed 2014), feelings, I contend, are consistent and indeed offer a continuity in times of rupture.

So too was my comprehension of *meruya* and *weruya* limited. Coming from a completely different context, I could only describe but not fully understand the complex feelings of interlocutors who had grown up with a fear of *weruya* which existed in conflict with a desire for family reunification. While I could appreciate the fearful imaginary of *weruya* as I had grown up post-9/11 and watched the almost daily BBC news pieces depicting Afghanistan and the Taliban for what felt like years after, I could not understand the inner conflict felt by many people who were curious about their relatives *weruya* but were apprehensive to make contact. To understand this, as argued in this book, one would need to have complete experiential knowledge of pre-imperialism and Stalin's Great Terror, something which can only be passed down in family stories. In this sense, the narratives and memory of the past did not help me to make sense of the world around me, rather it helped me to order what I saw others experiencing. My own experiences with the unspeakable events of 2021 and 2022, which I felt both first- and second-hand, nevertheless allowed me to find myself, again only briefly, in interconnection with the Pamiri lifeworld as I, like many Pamiris living in diaspora, felt the exhaustion, frustration, and fear while waiting eagerly for messages from loved ones, or the pain upon receiving a call to say goodbye. Perhaps even more so, the fear I personally experienced while on fieldwork also caused a level of immobility as I carefully self-regulated my movements in order to not draw attention to myself or contacts (Yeh 2006). In this way, my own experience with fear shaped my perception of Pamir and my spatial movements and boundaries.

The struggle and frustration stemming from unspeakable events and societal ruptures is palpable in the Shughni songs featured in Chapter Four and exemplifies how song-writers overcome silences. Whether the situation stems from a state-level repression, economic stagnation, or dichotimising civil unrest, popular songs are a way for anthropologists to trace silences and approach moments of

unspeakableness as moments of possibility (Dragojlovic and Samuels 2021, 2023). In this way, I was able to negotiate the unspeakableness of rupture which caused silences in my interlocutors and excluded the possibility of ethnographic data relating to recent violence in Pamir.

My approach, i. e. a material, experiential at times auto-ethnography, while limited, offers a way for writing ethnography during times of rupture. Rather than asking difficult questions and attempting to break the silences which unspeakable events cause, I propose tracing these silences to try and protect interlocutors from being placed in a precarious situation. By focusing on the materiality of the lifeworld, I contend, objects become representive of not only various temporalities, but can be articulations of opinions when it is not safe to say something out loud. In times of great political unrest, conflict, and genocide throughout the world, the responsibility of the ethnographer for securing the safety of interlocutors is more important than ever.

## 6.3 Reacting to Rupture

The second half of this book dealt with creative reactions to rupture. Chapters Four and Five presented two ways of dealing with rupture: song-writing and making. As highlighted, the restrictions of unspeakable histories give way to ingenuity and creativity. When faced with rupture, the individual finds a way to deal with the distress or instability they see around them, or experience themselves. Dwelling in rupture, Pamiris are often restricted in what they can openly discuss in public and thus many song-writers find creative ways to voice opinions and provide a layer of protection for themselves. While this book focused on the textual ways in which song-writers give advice to the listener while veiling their true meaning, such expressions of opinion are not limited to Shughni popular songs and can be found throughout the creative world. Essentially, rupture causes the need to deal with rupture, and for many this instils creativity.

These cultural productions are the result of creative regimes which decide what is acceptable or not. As found in the case studies, Pamiris interact with multiple regimes when approaching their creative productions. Soviet heritage and its neatly-defined national identities continue to order conceptualisations of what, and who, is Pamiri. Pamir's intellectual traditions of religious and secular poetry also follows modes of cultural production which prevail to this day, having survived centuries of religious persecution and linguistic precarity. Global fashion trends, such as upcycling, speak to a return to natural materials and an environmental sustainability. Such regimes, I argue, are the results of interconnection

with multiple temporalities and scales which are embedded in the materiality of Pamir.

Shughni popular songs not only preserve the memory of rupture but also the language itself. This codependent relationship means that one could not exist without the other. In this sense, popular songs can be a useful source when approaching historical narratives from a lifeworld perspective as, through their use of Pamir languages, popular songs are often intended for Pamiri audiences and are therefore both an example of artistic expression, and articulations of collective identity. Particularly Shughni language has become politicised and strongly connected to a sense of Pamiri cultural identity, meaning that these songs, on one level, can be read as such articulations. This is achieved through communicative memory (Assmann 2008, 2013) in that the songs share intimate perspectives on key events in the recent history of Pamir, offering the listener the chance to make sense of the ruptures around them.

Creativity, as a regime of cultural production (Meyer and Svašek 2016) is not limited to song-writing but also is demonstrated in handicraft work, which also presented a way to trace silences through materiality. For Pari and Siawash, the objects they create in their ateliers are not simply heritage commodities but rather the product of their own personal experiences with being Pamiri. Having grown up hearing family stories, surrounded by the *pindz sitan* of the Pamiri house, and listening to Shughni songs, these two makers have developed their own understandings of Pamiri cultural identity and embedded these in the objects they create and sell. For Pari, these objects articulate a need to adapt to modern times in order to stay relevant, thus preserving Pamiri cultural heritage and responding to marginalisation through heritagisation (Harris and Kamalov 2020). For Siawash, his own experiences with switching between *meruya* and *weruya* have given him a unique perspective which he incorporates in the Afghan dresses he sews by upcycling scrap pieces of fabric and updating the waistline in an act of adaptation between varying creative regimes of cultural production (Meyer and Svašek 2016). Therefore, the adaptation and renewal of style, fabrics, and colours are essential to the making process as the makers work with what is available to them, both in terms of materials and market. From these two makers we have learned that adaptation is strongly rooted in the making process, highlighting the constant interconnection with the lifeworld by way of availability and demand. In this sense, their cultural production can be understood as a product of dwelling as they move through the lifeworld and try to make sense of the experiences they gain.

Therefore, the latter chapters of this book have dealt with the need to adapt which stems from rupture. In this sense, it has been shown that rupture creates the necessity for new directions, i. e. adaptation as a form of resilience (Smith 2025). Therefore, rupture appears to be a necessary step on the journey of a trav-

elling idea (Said 1983) and represents the moments of (re)interpretation and (re) adaptation. Such moments demand confrontation with the circumstances in which the individual finds themselves, which speaks to the subjectivity of rupture, as a rupture to one person can be the collapse of the Soviet Union, and to another the death of a loved one. Rupture is therefore experiential and subjective, but can play a role in the development of collective identity through shared memories. The subjectivitiy of rupture, as demonstrated especially by the latter case studies of this book, can be seen in how individuals respond to rupture, i. e. what they make out of it.

## 6.4 Looking Forward

There are, however, many other possible responses to rupture which this book did not address. As seen by the changing demographic and erasure of the text on the side of the mountain, the redrafting or even erasure of history is another response. It is for these reasons that the preservation of regional histories is of the utmost importance for, when materiality can no longer provide an anchor to orientate oneself, it is up to the intangible oral narrations to communicate the narratives of rupture, in one way as an act of defiance against the erasure or redrafting of that history from the powers that be, but also as a subjective, personal way to make sense of one's own lifeworld.

Just as there are multiple responses to rupture which have not been discussed here, there are countless other ruptures which the scope of this study did not allow. Perhaps most noteable was the *didor* of 1995, only briefly mentioned in passing. This moment represented a further shift in Pamiri lifeworlds as the Pamiri-Ismaili community was united with *Hazar Imom* and the rest of the global Jamat. Many interlocutors recounted their memories as children of hearing the Imam speak for the first time and seeing people gather *weruya* to join the event from across the river. Stories of family members mending their ways and striving to live more religious lives are common, signalling a transformation brought by religious reform. This rupture also brought with it administrative changes to Ismaili Islam and the foundation of ITREB as the Ismaili religious authority in Tajikistan. The implications of this event have been discussed by others in more detail (e. g. Levi-Sanchez 2021), but I did not focus on this rupture due to the heightened precarity of non-normative religious practices in Tajikistan (see e. g. Thibalt 2018), and the difficulties faced by ITREB during the time of research (Eurasianet 2022).

In the same vein, this study could also be approached from an anthropology of religion perspective. This would perhaps allow us to understand the experiential aspects of Pamiri lifeworlds even better, for example through religious sensa-

tions (Meyer 2006), sound (Eisenlohr 2018), or everyday negotiations with religious doctrine (Louw 2007). This would greatly add to the representation of Ismaili Shia Islam within the anthropological study of Islam, a field which remains heavily focused on Sunni Muslim communities. For this book, however, it was sadly not the time to discuss such sensitive issues in GBAO.

Looking forward, many changes have taken place in GBAO since I left the region in spring 2023. His Highness Aga Khan IV sadly passed away on 4th February, 2025. His death was met with great sadness from the global Jamat including Pamiris who remembered how their lives were saved through the AKF during the civil war. As per protocol, Aga Khan IV named his successor in his last will and testament: his eldest son, Prince Rahim al-Hussaini Aga Khan V. It remains to be seen how Aga Khan V will lead the Jamat in his role as *Hazar Imom*, but a restructuring of the AKDN and Jamati institutions is expected. While such religious reform can disrupt existing structures and cause change, the leadership of *Hazar Imom* as a hereditary title offers a continuity for followers to hold onto, like an anchor in times of rupture.

Perhaps this continuity is what will offer Pamiris in GBAO hope for a brighter future. While it was simply not safe to discuss aspects of religion and politics during my time in GBAO, I have tried to work around these silences by focusing on the material, experiential aspects of the lifeworld and the embeddedness of a chronology of ruptures which continue to shape it. As memories start to fade and family stories lose more and more detail, it is the materiality of the lifeworld which persists and allows us to look ahead to a different future. Therefore I sincerely hope that Zafar's words will come to pass:

*Yast vid yothdta vo dawra*
*Lak rinesam fuk dawra*
*Lak rinesam mam jaun*
*Lak viriyam vo xu jun*
*Badta thiyam vo tar pund*