

Some Historical Aspects of Funeral Rites among People of Western Pamir

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Abstract: This article describes some aspects of funeral rites among indigenous people of the Badakhshan autonomous region in Tajikistan, for most of whom the religious denomination is Ismailism. The ceremonies focus on ritual purification and seeing off the soul of the deceased person into another world. A set of obligatory rituals and rites are described, including lamp lighting, mourning rules, and memorial foods and celebrations. After analysing a wide range of data, the authors conclude that Western Pamir Ismailites believe that a dead body is inhabited by a corpse demon that brings harm to people. Although the described customs and rituals are generally Muslim and reflect features of the traditional Pamir world view, they are most probably part of the region's pre-Islamic heritage.

Keywords: funeral ceremony, lamp lighting, memorial rite, ritual cleaning, sheep sacrifice, Western Pamir

Introduction

In spite of the fact that the great Silk Road of ancient times ran through its valleys, Western Pamir was on the periphery of the cultural world of the East. The small princedoms of Vakhán and Shugnan that had existed in this region for many centuries remained in vassal dependence on their neighbours. This dependence, however, was purely nominal. High, mountainous Pamir remained isolated from the plains world almost until the late nineteenth century. Its scientific development did not begin until the region became involved in a number of conflicts between the British and Russian empires.

According to the terms of an 1895 British-Russian agreement on the delimitation of spheres of influence in the Pamir, the dividing line was drawn from the Zor-Kul Lake along the Eastern Pamir and the Panj River. One part of the Pamirian princedoms' territories appeared to be attached to Afghanistan,



which was under the British sphere of influence, while the other was attached to the Bukhara khanate, which was subordinated to Russia. This delimitation had been determined without taking into account the ethnic structure of the population of the region, which for many centuries had been a single whole and now appeared to be separated into two parts. In the early twentieth century, everyone in the Russian Pamir was allocated to a special administrative district. After establishing Soviet authority in Pamir in 1925, this region became part of Tajikistan under the name Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region or Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Region.

The Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Region is inhabited by small groups of Bartangies, Goronies, Wakhies, Ishkashimies, Rushanies, Shugnannies and Yazgulemies, for most of whom the religious denomination is Ismailism, a branch of Shia Islam. Despite their isolation in different highland valleys and the various languages that are spoken, these groups share many customs, particularly regarding the funeral ceremony. This ceremony, which includes ritual purification and seeing off the soul of the deceased into another world, will be the focus of this article.

The Area of Ritual Impurity

Ismaili people of Western Pamir, like many other people of Central Asia, believe that the house of a deceased person is ritually not clean for three days after the death, as if the house were filled with the dead person's blood (Andreev 1953: 196). According to one version, this blood is invisible to people who are alive and fills the house up to the ceiling; according to another version, it fills half of the dwelling. People of Western Pamir try to prevent the dissemination of this uncleanness and thus leave a dying person in the same place in a room without moving him or her anywhere (*ibid.*: 195).¹ Up to the end of the nineteenth century, sick people were moved into a separate room only in the case of a dangerous contagious disease. People who died of contagious diseases were not washed and wrapped in a shroud. Dressed in everyday clothing, they were buried face down, not in the clan or community cemetery, but at a separate site. The bottom and the top of the grave were covered with thorny bushes so that the dead body would not touch the ground. All of these measures were undertaken to prevent an epidemic.

Fearing the uncleanness emanating from a dead body, Pomiri people remove all products from the house, which otherwise would be unusable. They believe that if they fail to do this, the soul of the deceased would eat the food together with the living people and would thus desecrate it. According to Yusufbekova (2001: 129), at the end of nineteenth century this ritual was observed in some villages in the upper Gund River. Today this ritual endures only in some villages in Bartang valley.² For instance, in Bardara village those products that had not been taken away from the house where a person died are thrown into the river or given away to domestic animals, often dogs.

In Western Pamir there is a whole range of beliefs about the danger that can be caused by a dead body. It is considered that a corpse demon or a spirit of the dead body is most dangerous for pregnant women (Kalandarov 2004: 327)³ and for babies younger than 40 days (*čila*).⁴ For this reason, when a sick person is dying, pregnant women and newly born babies are sent off to their neighbours, where they stay until the end of the funeral feast on the third day after the death (Efendieva 2001: 42).⁵ The negative influence of the spirit of a dead person can result in a children's disease usually defined as '40-day disease' (*čil*), also called *murdaōseb*, which can be translated as 'scared by the deceased' (Andreev 1953: 74).⁶ The symptoms include change of face colour, swift body tumefaction and the child's legs interlacing (Kalandarov 2004: 419).

Andreev (1953: 74) also mentions preventive measures for the 40-day disease. As soon as a death in the village becomes known, people in houses who have small babies paint the outer side of the right ear of the baby with soot so that the deceased person will not call the baby to the grave.⁷ Khufies do not limit preventive methods to paint only. A mother measures her baby's height (*wulčak*) with the help of a string. When the funeral procession is on its way to the cemetery, the mother, carrying the baby in her hands, goes to the road. As the procession passes by, she extends the baby three times towards the dead person, saying in Tajik: 'Ba niyati murda-osib' (To avoid harm from the dead). After that, she gives the string to a person in the funeral procession, asking that the string be put into the grave. Then the mother returns home with her back to the procession in an effort to cover her tracks and hide the road to her house from the dead person (ibid.: 74–75). According to Andreev, the belief about a dead body being a danger to an infant during the first 40 days of its life was widely spread in Central Asia, for instance, among the Uzbeks of the Tashkent oasis and among Bukhara Jews (ibid.).

When a pregnant woman hears about the death of a relative, she winds a white thread around her forefinger. The number of turns depends on the length of her pregnancy: six turns for six months of pregnancy, seven for seven, etc. White thread is used to measure the height of a baby; afterwards, the white string is brought to the house of the deceased person and put into a shroud. To avoid the harmful influence of the spirit of a dead person on an infant, relatives wind a red woollen thread around the head of the baby. When a dead person is buried, this red thread is put with the body. Many other peoples have similar beliefs (Efandieva 2001: 42–46; Pisarchik 1976: 174).

Ritual Cleaning and Memorial Rites

A preventive measure against harm from a dead person is ritual cleaning. Those who touched the dead body (washed it, put it in the grave, etc.) are required to perform ablutions (Khismatullin and Kryukova 1997: 52–53). Immediately after the dead person is removed from the house, two women simultaneously take

two branches from wild bushes with red leaves in their left hands and sweep the floor of the house from the corners to the centre, throwing the rubbish over the threshold far from the house (usually one woman sweeps from the threshold to the centre). This is believed to be a magical means of ensuring the cleanliness of the dwelling space. After returning from the cemetery, men and women who participated in the burial wash their hands and face before they enter the house.

An analysis of the collected material shows that cleansing the soul of the earth's sins is an integral part of the cleaning complex among people of Western Pamir. They believe that the traditionally prescribed cleaning rituals must be conducted so that the earth will accept the body of the dead person and the sky will accept his or her soul. In this way, living people will be not harmed by the dead person's spirit. Ritual cleaning and seeing off the soul into another world where it will live forever are conducted through a whole range of rituals: *fotaxūni* (praying), *dalilakded* (lighting of a splinter of wood), *wargsārded* (literally, release and sacrifice of a sheep), *cirowpidid* (lighting of a lamp), *čuvśārded* (literally, release and sacrifice of a rooster).

The ritual cleaning of people follows the ritual cleaning of all objects that are used in the funeral ceremony, including felt, pillows, mattresses on which a deceased person lay, pots used for washing the corpse, instruments used for sewing a shroud, grave-digging tools, and the clothing of the dead person and of those who washed the body. Soft things are cleaned by means of washing and magic rites. In Vakhan, some of the tools (needles, buckets, hoes, spades) are cleaned with the blood of a sacrificed sheep. The purpose of the cleaning rites is to banish a harmful spirit (*siyoyi*) of a dead body from the tools that were 'covered with the blood of the deceased' or that were used during funeral rites. 'In Shugnan everything that is possible to clean in the house is cleaned right after a dead body is carried away from the house. Cleaning a boiler is a significant part of the cleaning ritual in general. In *Shugnani* it is called "xu dēk alol čidow" [to clean your boiler]' (Andreev 1953: 198). 'Uncleanness' of the boiler results from heating water to wash the corpse.

The first ritual of cleaning and seeing off the soul is the rite known as *fotaxūni* or *fotakhoni*.⁸ Among people of Western Pamir, this rite features a two-day visit (up until March 1960, a three-day visit) to the house of a dead person in order to express condolences and take part in memorial praying. As a rule, after the burial the men return to the house of the deceased for *fotakhoni*. The rite starts with the burning of an aromatic grass, *stirakhm*,⁹ over the hearth and the praying of the *khalifa* (priest) of a surah, such as 'Al-Mulk' (Kingdom) or 'Al-Nur' (Light). Many people usually participate in this memorial prayer, often coming from faraway places and sometimes walking long distances. Local people believe that every prayer and *ayat* (verse from the Qur'an) cleanse the soul of a deceased from sins and make its ascension to God easier, contributing to the fast passage of the soul through celestial purgatory (*a'rof*).

After the first memorial prayer in the rite of *fotakhoni*, mourners are served tea and food in the same room where the dead person lay earlier. Only in

Bardara village on the Bartang River are food and feast still strongly prohibited in the house of a deceased until after the cleaning memorial rite on the third day. At the beginning of the twentieth century, this prohibition was more widely spread, but in some villages on Bartang (Hidzhez, Ravmed), the old pre-Islamic rite was abolished under the order of a spiritual leader or *pir* (in Ismaili hierarchy, *pir* being a higher rank than *khalifa*). The rite of *fotakhoni* lasts until sunset and is then followed by *dalilak*ded, a cleaning and seeing-off rite for the soul.

This rite of 'lighting of splinters' among people of Western Pamir has been briefly described by Andreev (1953: 195) and Shokhumorov (2003: 144–145, 2005: 658–659). 'During the first two days (today is day one)', writes Andreev (1953: 195), 'in the evening they take a splinter covered with cotton wool (in some areas just cotton wool), saturate it with oil and bring it to the place where the dead body lies. Then they place the splinter horizontally, putting the end between two stones, and light it.' Splinters of finger size are lit in pairs. To light the splinters relatives choose a person who knows a farewell prayer (*kalimaxûn*). While setting the splinter ablaze, he pronounces loudly in Tajik, 'Rawshanoii charogi payghambari Khudo, Salawot bar Muhammad va Ali' (The light of the God's Prophet lamp, blessing for Muhammad and Ali). Afterwards the *khalifa* reads Qur'an texts such as 'Kingdom' or 'Five Poems', followed by a prayer (*fotiha*) that starts 'Iloho bakhshidam khatmi oyot' (O Allah devoted, your final reading of *ayat*).

Today, in some areas on the Shakh dara River (village Tusyon) and Gund (village Chardem), splinters are lit on the place where the dead body was washed (Troickaya 1971: 242), usually inside the house on a platform in front of the hearth (*čalāk*). In villages of Bartang valley (Bardara, Chadud, Basid), where a dead body is usually washed in the yard, and also in Shakh dara (village Segd) and in Vakhan (village Namadguti bolo), where the corpse is washed inside the house, no matter where the corpse was washed, splinters (*dalilak*) are lit in the house, particularly on the main plank beds (*bar-nekh*) (Shokhumorov 2005: 658–659). In the village Derzud (Rushan), splinters are lit on the plank bed (*losh-nukh*) across the entrance where the dead body is placed. Although the location of the splinter lighting inside the house varies, this does not change the purpose of the rite – to cleanse the house of harmful spirits that enter the house after death and also to brighten the path for the soul's passage into another world.

According to Shokhumorov (2005: 659), splinters or 'candles' that are lit on holidays and during memorial events are made from branches of willow and juniper,¹⁰ which are considered sacred plants. Juniper, symbolising eternal life, contains anti-bacterial substances that disinfect the house and also has a pleasant smell. According to the information from the village Dehrushan in Rushan, six splinters – two for each memorial day – are prepared. The first pair, which is lit on the first day after a funeral, is devoted to the souls of inorganic objects (*jamodi*), the second pair (lit on the second day), to the

souls of plants (*naboti*), and the third pair (lit on the third day), to the souls of humans (*insoni*). It is supposed that all of these souls inhabit the human body, from which they depart, one after the other, during the three memorial days (Andreev 1953: 206–207; Shokhumorov 2005: 666–670). In the village Hidzhez (Bartang area) this rite is conducted differently: during the three days, they light three splinters.

Andreev (1953: 195) explained that underneath the splinter, the Khuftci (a small group of indigenous people in Pamir) put a bowl with water and two twigs. As soon as the splinter burned halfway down, it was put into water to extinguish it. ‘This is human life’, the Khuftci told the researcher. They have lost the ancient meaning of the rite: ‘It burns, burns, and then goes out.’ The Khuftci could not explain the purpose of putting twigs in the bowl. Andreev notes that in some places in Pamir the meaning of this rite is interpreted in the following way: twigs are put into the water so that when the soul of the deceased comes, it can swim in the water (like a bird) and sit down on the twigs. ‘A splinter rolled in cotton wool and soaked in oil is widely spread in Central Asia among both Tajiks and Uzbeks and is used as a sacrifice to *mazar* [sacred place], being lit on graves during various ritual appeals to the saints and spirits for help, etc.’ (ibid.).

In addition to lighting splinters during the first three nights after the death, relatives would put burning candles on the hearth platform. The candles were used to light the path for the soul on its way to Paradise and were also considered to ‘feed’ the soul: ‘Where a dead body lay, they put a burning lamp by his head’ (Litvinskiy and Sedov 1984: 167). Today, because aromatic grass is used instead of candles, the initial purpose of this rite (to cast light on the soul’s path) has been lost.

With respect to the treatment of fire, the use of splinters confirms the theory that the origin of these rites is pre-Islamic. Traditions that involve splinter lighting in the evening to light the path for the soul, ritual cleaning of the house and lamps that are lit during the three days that follow a person’s death all date back to pre-Islamic times. Originating from this period, these traditions that utilise splinters, candles and fire have been integrated into Islamic rites (Khismatullin and Kryukova 1997: 59–61). In addition to lighting the path to find the abode of God, the ritual of splinter lighting also serves to cleanse the soul before its departure from the house. This supposition is based on a Pomiri procedure of lighting special ritual candles, which is described in a text known as *Charognoma* (Candle Story).

The Candle Story

Charognoma is an anonymously written religious work whose reading is an integral part of traditional memorial rituals among Ismailites of Western Pamir. The text that has survived to the present day contains 288 poetic lines (144 couplets). The attempt to identify the ideological origins of *Charognoma*

has caused ongoing discussions. Most researchers believe that the author of the text was the outstanding Persian-Tajik poet and philosopher Nasir Khusraw (1004–1088). Bertels (1976: 97–122), an expert in Oriental studies, supports the idea that the author was a famous Sufi, Shakh Niematulle Vali (1330–1428). Some researchers (Mirhasan 2003: 165; Shokhumorov 2003: 150; 2005: 662) argue that the question of the authorship of *Charognoma* is problematic because this religious-poetic text contains not only the poems of Nasir Khusraw but also the works of other poets. (It should be noted as well that whenever an Ismaili spiritual leader changes, revisions can be made to *Charognoma*, although the essence of the masterpiece is left intact.) The assumption of a pre-Islamic origin of fire rites suggests that the people of Western Pamir in ancient times already had certain texts that formed a hymn to the lighting of candles. These texts most likely existed in Pamir up until the time of Nasir Khusraw, who probably analysed their Islamised versions and edited them. This hypothesis explains why the authorship of *Charognoma*, which is a kind of compilation, is connected with Nasir Khusraw. Up to the present, there has been no satisfactory answer to many of the questions about the philosophic, historic and historiographic meanings of *Charognoma* and its source.

Based on the text of *Charognoma*, the lamp-lighting rite (*cirowpidid*) is conducted in two situations: (1) after a person's death, in the ritual *dawati fanō* (call to non-existence), and (2) during life memorial feasts (*zinda dawati*), which earlier in Shugnan and Rushan were known as *dawati baqō* (call to eternity). In both cases, the rite is followed by the ritual reading of *Charognoma*. Although all text readings are stylistically similar, there are nonetheless content differences; for instance, *Charognoma* readings on *dawati baqō* emphasise moral teachings (Hojibekov 2005: 605).

The rite of lamp lighting has still not been fully studied. The question of the origin of this ritual is as weighty as that of the origin of *Charognoma*, and there are polar opinions on the matter (Mirhasan 2003: 163–167; Shohzodamhammad 2005: 585–591; Shokhumorov 2005: 141–163, 656–670). As a result, there are many disputed assumptions and unresolved problems with regard to various aspects of this rite. One of the factors is the lack of full, detailed descriptions of the rite and its local forms, both in the mountainous Badakhshan area and in neighbouring countries – in northern Afghanistan, northern Pakistan and north-west China (Xinzian province) – where it is also spread among Ismaili people. People in these areas belong to the Nosiriya branch of Ismailism connected with Nasir Khusraw, who is acknowledged as a *pir* (Yettmar 1986: 469).¹¹ That is why the rite is known as *dawati pir Šoh Nasir* (appeal to the *pir* of Shakh Nasir) or *dawati pir* (appeal *pir*).

The lamp-lighting ritual is one of the brightest in the funeral ceremony of Ismaili people of Western Pamir. Encompassing a range of interconnected acts, it starts with the ceremony *jūndor sarded* (release or sacrifice of sheep), which traditionally was conducted on the third (today, the second) evening after sunset. An integral part of this ritual is serving guests a hot meal followed by

ritual ablutions and prayer. In some areas of Shugnan, before the prayer they put a bowl of food close to the *khalifa*, who prays over it: ‘Nazri mumin qabul baloi mumin dur’ (So that the pledge of a faithful will be accepted and troubles will stay far away). Afterwards, relatives take away the bowl and give it to somebody in the village. This part of the rite is called *puxtaziwest* (distribution of ritual meal).

During the sheep sacrifice rite, the man who slaughters the animal performs a number of ritual acts, which have not yet been described. This man is called *bojpaz* (the one who cooks wheat with meat) or *bojxambenij* (the one who brings wheat with meat), that is, a person who cooks the ritual meal *boj* during the lamp-lighting rite (Andreev 1953: 196–197, 199; 1958: 87, 320–321, 383–384; Davlatnazar 1998: 88–89; Steblin-Kamenskiy 1975: 206–207) and butchers the sheep (Yusufbekova 2001: 154). In addition to knowing how to kill the animal and cook the ritual meal, this person must also know the prayers that should follow these actions.

The sheep sacrifice rite starts with the ritual ablution of the animal, which then is taken into the house. After the participants pray, they feed the sheep with wheat and salt (Takoev 1957: 147; Yusufbekova 2001: 156)¹² and slaughter it. The sheep’s meat is then prepared in food cooked for the ritual. According to Andreev (1953: 196), one of the purposes of sheep sacrifice during the lamp-lighting ritual is to transfer the sins of a deceased person onto a sheep. This is probably one of the variants of a rite known as *davra* (redemption of sins). According to contemporary beliefs of the Western Pamir population, another purpose of the sacrifice is that a dead animal, such as a horse, will help the deceased to cross the Sirat bridge.¹³

Tracing the goals that define the sacrifice of sheep in the rite of *cirowpiδid*, we need to mention its cleansing purpose. Andreev (1953: 196) states that a sacrifice has a purifying nature and can protect one from the ‘blood of a dead person’ that fills the house for three days after the death. That is why in Vakhan and Goron tools that were used during the shroud sewing and grave digging are first ‘cleaned’ with the blood of a sacrificed sheep and then with the light of a burning lamp. For instance, in the village Yamg the bucket that is used to pour water on the grave hill is put under the head of the sacrificed animal to collect its blood. Sewing needles and grave-digging tools are plunged into the bucket of blood. Later, the needle is put into the house pole, and other tools are left in the corner close to the door, so that during the rite of lamp lighting they will be additionally cleaned by the fire.

The rite of *cirowpiδid* is performed according to Muslim rules supported by *ayat* reading, but as we have seen, this rite traces its origins to pre-Islamic times. The *khalifa* appoints the time for the lamp lighting. The *bojpaz* (the person who cooks the ritual meal) and the *khalifa* perform the same actions as at the beginning of the sheep-sacrificing rite. But this time the *bojpaz* brings the *khalifa* an icon lamp (*čaroydū*), a lump of cotton wool and a container of oil on a copper tray. The *khalifa* kisses the icon lamp three times, takes the cotton

wool, gives its end to the *bojpaz* and starts twisting the thread, pulling it out from the lump. When the thread is twisted enough, he puts two ends together and starts twisting again until he makes a string of a proper length and size. In addition to the string, the men prepare two splinters with which they burn the lamp. The thread twisting and preparation of candles and splinters is accompanied by readings from *Charognoma*, which is referred to as ‘Qandilnoma’ (stone lamp story). These readings are followed by the eleventh *ayat* of the surah ‘Al-Isra’ and by praises of prayer (*durud*). *Charognoma* starts with the following lines:

Qandil-charoghi Mustaforo
On nuri Khudoi vaz-zuhoro
Payvasta bikhon tu in duoro
Khushgu salavot Mustaforo

The lamp of Mustafa¹⁴
This is the light of the God and ‘Zuhruf’¹⁵
Constantly read this prayer
In good sounding voice you pray: bless Mustafa.

Every quatrain ends with the line ‘In good sounding voice you pray: bless Mustafa’. Pisarchik relates that the ‘*khalifa* takes a stone lamp with oil and puts a cotton wool wick in it, pouring oil with a special spoon and saying “Qandil-charoghi Mustaforo” (Andreev 1953: 199), that is, the lamp is lit while reciting the first lines of *Charognoma*. According to our observations, this is not actually so: the lamp is lit in the middle of the text. The twisting of the cotton wool happens simultaneously with the reading of 26 couplets of *Charognoma* and should continue up to the words:

Sayid, ki ghulomi khonadon ast
Said [Nasir Khusraw] is the slave of the Prophet’s family

The reading of *Charognoma* ends with the 56th *ayat* of the surah ‘Al-Ahzab’ (Accomplices 33:56), the 152–158th *ayats* of surah ‘Al-Baqara’ (Cow 2: 152–158), the 35th *ayat* of surah ‘An-Nour’ (Light 24:35), the 78–83th *ayats* of surah ‘Yasin’ (36: 78–83), the 21st *ayat* of surah ‘Az-Zaiyat’ (Dispersive 51:21) and a reading of the full text of surah ‘Al-Foteha’ (1:1–7).

When the reading of *Charognoma* is completed, the *khalifa* passes the lamp to a person, who takes the lamp to the hearth, where family members of the deceased person are waiting. Each relative then touches the lamp or holds it for a while, as this is considered pleasing to God. Thus, for some time the lamp goes from hand to hand. Each time a person receives it, he or she kisses it three times and pours three spoons of oil into it. The lamp is then left in a room in the house where it goes out by itself (blowing out the flame is not allowed). At the end of the rite, the *khalifa* reads a prayer that symbolises the completion of the memorial ceremony. While he is doing so, all people present in the room

keep their hands open towards their faces. After the rite is completed, they pronounce loudly all together 'Omin, Allohu Akbar!' (Amen, Allah is great!). Relatives of the deceased person, men as a rule, approach the *khalifa* with words of gratitude and kiss his hand. The rite of lamp lighting is followed by the memorial meal that is shared by everyone present. After the meal, everybody performs ablutions and reads a mourning prayer. As a sign of gratitude for the services provided, relatives of the deceased person give the *khalifa* presents (*počaroy*), including new clothing and boots.

In Western Pamir there are some differences in treating deceased babies. For instance, the rite of lamp lighting in Bartang valley is performed for a baby who had opened its mouth at least once or for an infant who was 40 days old. In Vakhan and Shugnan, this time limit is extended to four months. In some villages, including Dasht (Shakhdara valley), Dehrushon (Rushan) and Namadguti bolo (Vakhan), this period is nine months. The residents explain that up to this time, a baby's soul retains 'animal soul qualities'. For infants, the rite of lamp lighting is performed on the day of death or on the following day.

The rite of lamp lighting performed for children is simplified. In Vakhan, the rite (known as *dalilak*) is limited to gauze being oiled, rolled around the twig and fired. In most places in Western Pamir, in the case of the death of a child younger than seven years, *šuramoč* (milk with dumplings) was used for ritual cleaning of the house and was sprinkled on the walls.

As has already been mentioned, one of the significant aspects of the rite of lamp lighting is the ritual cleaning of the house. But people of Western Pamir also practise 'official' cleaning of the house. In Shugnan and Rushan, this rite is performed on the third day after the funeral ceremony, and in Vakhan and Bartang on the second day.¹⁶ On this day, neighbourhood women come to sweep the floor and wash the hair of female relatives of the deceased. They wash the clothing and underwear of the deceased and hang it to dry in the yard, turning it inside out. They also wash the clothing of family members that was worn during the funeral and memorial ceremonies. 'Before they put on clean clothing,' Andreev wrote (1953: 195), 'relatives of the deceased are considered unclean and are forbidden to enter other houses, in order not to desecrate them.'

In Nisur village (on Bartang River), to clean the house and the boiler, they add some *rutha* or *sipandūna* (two kinds of grass) to water boiled for *kutya* (a ritual food made of wheat) and then sprinkle it on the walls. In Savnov village in the same valley, *rutha* is prepared in a boiler and is then taken away and left in a clean place. The *rutha* broth that remains is sprinkled on the walls with a besom. Sometimes two elders kill a rooster in the central part of the house (*poyga*). After they clean the fowl, they cook it in the boiler and then take the carcass away, far from the house. The water that remains in the boiler is used to cleanse the house by sprinkling it around with a besom. Today, according to our informants in Porshinev village (Shugnan), a boiled rooster is not left in a hidden place but it is given to the women who did the laundry. Some families

slaughter a sheep as a sacrifice for the cleaning ritual and cook a sacrificial meal for neighbours and relatives. 'In Shugnan for cleaning they boil a rooster. If it is difficult to find a rooster, they cook meal called *shirfatir* – flat cake moistened with milk' (Andreev 1953: 198).

There is a belief that despite the date of death, mourning should last until the New Year – the Nawruz spring equinox holiday. On the eve of the holiday, as a sign of respect and to mark the completion of mourning, a family member or a neighbour comes to the house of the deceased person to perform the rite *vidirmvist*, which involves making three besoms from wild bushes. Then he makes similar besoms at his own home. Such besoms are used to clean the house from the year's rubbish and, symbolically, from misfortune and sorrows, thus signifying the completion of the mourning period.

Andreev (1953: 198) writes that when relatives of the deceased decide to stop mourning, 'they go to the house of the deceased, taking an appropriate gift (cloth, oil, etc.). This visit is called *terzext*, that is, "taking away black, stop mourning". After that, family members stop mourning and start attending weddings and holidays' (see also Snesev 1981: 203). Even up until the 1950s, the rite of taking off mourning for a family was performed on the seventh or twentieth day. But this did not mean that family members stopped mourning. Today, local people believe that mourning should last no longer than seven days. The date for the *terzext* (taking off mourning) rite is defined by the *khalifa* after the end of the *cirowpidid* rite, and he indicates the most favourable day for it to take place (Mukhiddinov 1989: 13–17).

On the day of the completion of mourning, male members of the family perform a rite of *kaltex*t (hair shaving) and shave their hair and beard. This rite, which has a cleansing nature and symbolises the completion of mourning, is also known as *siyabardori* (taking off the dark). Today elders prefer a shaved head because long hair signifies mourning.

People of Western Pamir believe that the soul finally leaves the house on the third day after the lamp-lighting ritual. That is why there is no tradition in this region for performing memorial rites on the seventh, twentieth or fortieth day – and sometimes today even yearly (Yusufbekova 2001: 148–149) – as is observed among other peoples of Central Asia.

It is believed that the soul of the dead visits its earthly home on Thursday evening to see how its relatives are living without it. If the soul 'sees' that family members live in peace and quiet, it is satisfied and blesses the relatives. Otherwise, it is sad and, if it becomes angry, can bring harm to the house dwellers (Bayaliev 1972: 81; Efendieva 2001: 20; Tolstov 1931: 255, 268, 297). That is why before the first-year anniversary, and sometimes even beyond it, every Thursday (and in some Western Pamir areas, on the day when the person died as well) relatives would bring a flat cake (*puxta*) from the house as the dead person's share and would give it to somebody or leave it in a *mazar*. 'Probably before Islam, the day of "feeding" of the ancestors was not Thursday but another day, most likely Wednesday' (Kalandarov 2004: 372). On Thursday

evening, to please the *arvoh* (ancestral spirit), the housewife lit the sacred aromatic grass in the hearth and called on the spirits: 'O! Spirits of the ancestors! Help!' (Davlatbekov 1995: 19).

People of Western Pamir also perform memorial ceremonies on religious holidays. Residents of Vakhan celebrate two holidays in the month of Ramadan. The first, which is celebrated five days before the end of the religious observance Ramadan, is called *idi murdaho* (holiday of the dead, memorial day) or *piri murdaho* (elders' memorial). The second is called *idi zindaho* (holiday of the living), which is celebrated in the evening before the last day of Ramadan. A 'day of the dead' is observed when a family member died during the previous Ramadan. Members of *kauvm* (family and clan) help the family of the deceased to celebrate the 'day of the dead'. During this holiday they slaughter a sheep and give away a bowl of bouillon with meat, which represents the share of the deceased person. The rest of the meat is used for a sacrificial meal (*khudoi*) for the comfort of the soul of the deceased. After the meal some men, together with the *khalifa*, go to the cemetery and read memorial prayers on the grave. Contemporary priests do not approve of slaughtering a sheep on the memorial day, stating that it should be done at the end of Ramadan. Instead, they suggest to cook simple meals, *bat* (flour kissel) or *alwošir* (milk with halvah and *shirfatir*). During the Ramadan (Id al-Fitr) and Kurban (Id al-Adha) holidays, Pomiri people visit the cemetery after sunset in the twilight hours.

Researchers consider memorial celebrations as remnants of sacrificial rituals that were made on behalf of the dead. The sacrifices were meant to show that relatives would take care of the dead by arranging for the deceased's passage into the comfort of another world. Memorial feasts were also intended to please the soul of the deceased, because if it is not pleased, the soul can bring harm to those who are alive (Sokolova 1972: 185). Memorials celebrated during the first year (on the day of death, within 7, 20, 40 or 100 days of death, and in a year's anniversary of death) also serve to feed the deceased. People of Western Pamir believe that during a whole year the corpse is cruelly swelling, its spirit is still present in the house and it suffers if relatives feed it badly by not arranging memorial feasts in the right way. The soul cannot become independent until the body is totally destroyed. Until that time, the soul soars among living people and needs care and food.

Conclusions

In general, we can draw the following conclusions from this examination of rituals and funeral ceremonies. First, Western Pamir Ismailites believe that a dead body is inhabited by a corpse demon that can bring harm to living people. Factors involving house desecration and beliefs that exist in other Central Asian areas are very similar to those in Western Pamir. Second, the peculiarities of beliefs in Pamir are revealed mainly in memorial ceremonies and rituals. Third,

despite the fact that all described customs and rites are generally Muslim and reflect particular features of the traditional Pamir world view, they undoubtedly originated in the region's pre-Islamic heritage. Fourth, the complex of traditional Ismaili funeral and memorial ceremonies in Western Pamir vividly reflects the ethnic-confessional 'selfhood' of the local population of the studied area. Fifth, the whole cycle of the funeral and memorial ceremonial systems of this ethnic-confessional group reflects the core patterns of its traditional world view, especially with regard to death beliefs – particularly the belief in the soul's life after death. Lastly, the system of funeral and memorial ceremonies of Ismailites in Western Pamir reflects features characteristic of their habitat, which is far away from the centres of Central Asian civilisation. These factors have defined the patterns of extreme conservatism of Ismaili funeral and memorial ceremonies in Western Pamir.

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Notes

1. In some groups of mountainous Tajik (on the upper Shing River), a dying person was taken to a special *murdahona* (public place for the dead) in order to avoid house desecration. Many peoples of the world have a similar ritual. For instance, in India when a Brahman is close to death, he is removed from the bed and put on the floor. But if there is a fear that the day is inauspicious, a dying person is taken out of the house and put in the yard or *piala* (upper verandah) (Snesarev 1981: 201).
2. In the 1930s, this ritual existed in all villages in Bartang valley, but in some areas, due to the order of Ismaili spiritual tutors, or *pirs*, it was prohibited. For instance, in Ravmed village, according to our informants, a *pir* was present at the funeral of an Elchibek family member,

- and he ate butter to demonstrate that it is not harmful to eat food that is left in a house after a death. Since then, people no longer take products out of their houses.
3. The participation of a pregnant woman in funeral ceremonies is believed to be very harmful, not only to her baby but also to people around her. Sometimes they believe that a woman will not be able to conceive because of the harmful influence of a person who died in the village on the day of her wedding (Kalandarov 2004: 327).
 4. In this article, we present terms in Shughani, a lingua franca for all Pomiri groups.
 5. Azerbaijan people believe that spirits gather in the house where a person has died. That is why pregnant women and children leave the house and visit relatives (Efendieva 2001: 42).
 6. For a more detailed explanation of *murdaõseb*, see Andreev (1953: 74).
 7. Chitral people also have a tradition of marking children's ears with soot during the mourning period. This is done to calm the children and to prevent the harmful influence of demons (Yettmar 1986: 471).
 8. The name of this rite derives from the first surah or chapter of the Qur'an, 'Al-Foteha'. But today, in the Persian-Tajik language, *foteha* refers to text that is read every time after any Qur'an surah.
 9. This aromatic grass, a type of *Anaphalis virgata*, has a pleasant smell and is burnt to cleanse the house and call celestial angels, who will bring the soul of the deceased to God's abode.
 10. Today in some areas they make such candles from branches or thistle (*Cirsium*).
 11. In Lukuh valley in northern Pakistan there is a story that Nasir Khusraw brought 40 sacrificial lamps with him. Some of them are still used during the spring equinox holiday, Nawruz, or during funeral ceremonies (Yettmar 1986: 469).
 12. According to Yusufbekova (2001), these products are considered the last meal (*tushai okhirat*). According to other beliefs, this is a means to transfer sins from a dead person to a sheep (ibid.: 156). The Ossetians give barley to a sacrificial horse (Takoiev 1957: 147).
 13. It is known that beliefs related to the Sirat bridge in Islam are borrowed from pre-Islamic beliefs, in particular from Zoroastrian ideas concerning the Chinvat bridge.
 14. 'Mustafa' is an epithet of the Prophet Muhammad.
 15. 'Zuhruf' is the name of a surah from the Qur'an.
 16. In Bartang, participants in the funeral ceremony are expected to attend all events involved in the ritual cleaning of the house in order to cleanse themselves as well. In some villages of Vakhani, male family members cut their beards, while in other areas of Western Pamir this is done during the *terzeht* (taking off black, taking off mourning) rite.

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