

LANDSCAPES OF SPIRITUALITY:
THE TOPOGRAPHY OF ISMAILI SACRED SITES IN XINJIANG, CHINA

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Introduction

When speaking of the attributes of places, it might be worth noting that they are not only geophysical, biological, cultural and historical, but also religious, spiritual or mystical. Natural phenomena, such as mountains, rocks, fossils, individual trees, groves, springs, lakes and rivers, are also considered sacred by some cultures. The Abrahamic religions and many other faith systems all attach spiritual importance to certain places, and millions of people worldwide recognize and value the special significance that is attributed to them.

In the pluralistic cultural landscape of Islam, apart from the annual *hajj* pilgrimage, one of the Five Pillars of Islam, *mazar* visits, a pilgrimage-like practice, are symbolic of the regional cultural expression of Islam in many Muslim societies, though some such societies may proscribe it. This study is a brief ethnography of sacred sites venerated (*mazar tawuf chaig* in the local vernacular) by the small Shi'i Ismaili community of Tashkurgan, in Xinjiang in the People's Republic of China (PRC; see map below).

This article documents some of the important sacred sites and their relevance today, in an age of economic and social change. Since in Islam the term 'pilgrimage' is often associated with the annual *hajj* to Mecca, the term 'visit' is used for the local pilgrimage-like tradition being discussed here to avoid confusion. The study is based on data collected in the Tashkurgan Tajik Autonomous County in Xinjiang in the summer of 2011.

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The Ismailis

The Ismailis are a Shia Muslim community, also known as the Seveners, who, after the death of Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, followed Isma'il ibn Ja'far as their Imam (from whom their name derives). The Nizari Ismailis are the largest sub-branch of the Ismaili community and are scattered over 25 countries across five continents, with large concentrations in Central and South Asia, Africa and the Middle East. They number in the millions and consist of diverse cultural, ethnic and linguistic communities united around a single spiritual leader or imam. The current Imam, His Highness Prince Shah Karim Al Hussaini, Aga Khan IV, is their 49th Imam.

One small Ismaili community lives among the mostly Sunni Muslims in Xinjiang in western China. In the People's Republic of China religion is not recognised as a valid marker of identity, and religious communities are often referred to by their ethnicity. Accordingly the Ismailis are often



Young Tajik women in traditional costume

known by their ethnic label as Tajiks because only the Tajiks are Ismailis.² Therefore these two terms are used as synonyms here in referring to the same community. The latest national census statistics suggest that the Tajiks number over fifty thousand and are mostly concentrated in the Tashkurgan Tajik Autonomous County (hereafter Tashkurgan), where they still account for the demographic majority.

As far as we know, Tajiks (Ismailis), who are numerically negligible within the population of the PRC, are actually the largest Shia group in the country. Located at the westernmost end of the PRC, ethno-linguistically and in physical type they are closer to their co-religionists in adjacent areas of Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan. In recognition of their historical ties to the land, the state accredited the community as one of the thirteen 'historical residence nationalities' (*shiju minzu*) of the Xinjiang region, and they are classified as the only Caucasian Mediterranean population that is indigenous to China.

Tashkurgan is a semi-urban locality at the south-western corner of Kashgar District, where the

² In Xinjiang only the Tajiks are Ismailis, but not all of them Tajiks are. For instance, the people from the Tajik ethnic village in Aktu County are Sunni Muslims, but are ethnically classified as Tajiks.

PRC shares borders with Pakistan, Kashmir, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Strictly speaking the Tajiks of China differ slightly from the Persian-speaking Tajiks of the wider Central Asian region and Afghanistan. The Tajiks in Tashkurgan speak the Sariquli and Wakhi languages (also known as Pamiri languages), which belong to the eastern Iranian branch of the Indo-European family of languages, with Wakhi also being spoken in the Badakhshan region of Tajikistan, the Wakhan corridor of Afghanistan and Gilgit Baltistan



Two views of Tashkurgan town, 2015

(formerly the Northern Areas) in Pakistan. The Pamiri languages are not intelligible to Persian-speakers in Tajikistan. In Tashkurgan the use of Persian is mostly limited to supplications during religious rituals and at the end of communal prayers; very few people speak Persian otherwise.

Local traditions suggest that the spread of the Ismaili *da'wa* (mission) into the region was associated with the missionary activities of the tenth-century Persian poet, philosopher, traveller and Ismaili preacher Nasir Khusraw (1004-1088; see Saidula 2010). It was believed that the mission was brought over by Nasir and a few of his close disciples. Today some of the local religious leaders, known as *pirs*, still claim descent from those early missionaries.

As in the broader Central Asia region, visiting local sacred sites for religious purposes is a part of indigenous Islam in Xinjiang. People from many different cultural, religious and

ethnic backgrounds may venerate a sacred site in a locality according to their own tradition and interpretation (Valdinoci 2008; Bhardwaj 1998). In Xinjiang, paying homage to a shrine transcends the regional, linguistic and denominational divides by which people often build their sense of community. This phenomenon in the region has been explored by scholars from both within and without the province such as Alexander Papas, Thierry Zarcone, Yasushi Shinmen, Minoru Sawada, Edmund Waite, Lisa Ross, Rian Thum (e.g. 2014) and Rahile Dawut (e.g. 2001), to name just a few who have published extensively on the subject.

However, most existing studies on the subject are limited to an exploration of the sacred places located in the Sunni-dominated areas in southern Xinjiang. Very little has been written about similar practices among the Ismailis in the region, where, in addition to shrines visited by all communities, a few sacred landmarks have special significance for Ismailis.

The Ismaili sacred sites constitute an important component of the religious heritage of the region, and their absence from the academic literature may hinder our understanding of the region's rich religious traditions. By documenting visits to sacred sites in Tashkurgan, this article may also shed some light on the rich and heterogeneous frontier cultures of the PRC, which is often described as a mono-cultural nation state.

Sacred landmarks in Tashkurgan

In Tashkurgan County there are over four hundred places, known as *mazurs* or *mizors* in the local vernaculars, which are venerated for their sacred attributes. The term comes from the Persian word *mazār*, used for the mausoleum or burial place of a saint or holy man, but here the expression denotes various sacred sites, including built structures or natural objects. These are places where people pray, make wishes or offer *narzulla*, a special offering that is shared by people who live in the vicinity of such sites.

Often a sacred or holy site comes with an oral narrative associated with the life of a saintly person, a folk hero, or a significant religious event. It is through such associations that these locations or objects acquire their mystical and spiritual power. The built structure category



Partaking in a special offering (*narzulla*)

consists of the tomb of a saint (*awliyu*) or martyr (*shayid*), or a group of graves believed to have been an ancient battlefield where Muslims fought against the infidels. Specific sites known as *qadamgoh* (footprint) are landmarks associated with the activity of an Ismaili Imam, and in a broader sense they also qualify as built structures, as most of them are bounded by a surrounding wall. Natural objects with sacred attributes include mountains, rocks, trees, and springs with healing power, as well as objects found in the vicinity of a sacred tomb, or household objects used by a holy person.

Except for some anecdotal stories, oral traditions reveal very little about the history of most of the *mazurs* in the region, and we can only guess how a term for a mausoleum in Persian has acquired its current expanded meaning. Paying homage to a grave may have evolved from the ancient grave-worshipping custom of the roaming nomads of the distant past. According to some Chinese scholars, the people of the Tarim Basin worshipped at the graves of their ancestors, friends, family, spiritual masters or religious teachers in antiquity (Zong Zheng and Guorong 1997). Similarly, the worship of natural objects was also practised widely in pre-Islamic Central Asia, where old and new faith traditions often merged over time. Adapting to the constantly changing religious environment offered a new lease of life to fading faith systems in a new guise, rendering the origin story irrelevant while preserving the

spiritual importance attached to a *mazur* (Starr 2013: 63 ff.; Frye 1996: 29-50; Sa'dullahzade and Ghapar 2002: 1-23).

Keeping pace with the changing social dynamics, visits to sacred sites among the Xinjiang Tajiks seems, once again, to have acquired modern significance as an ethnic identity marker, reflecting shifting social relations and a concomitant swing in the way social communities are being (re)-imagined. Social groups, whose sense of belonging was once forged in accordance with regional connections or religious associations, are now looking for evidence from the past in order to add some flesh to a modern collective identity that was born out of necessity. The resilient *mazur* tradition, which has endured the vicissitudes of time, has now been recommissioned to serve alongside ethnic and linguistic markers as an important ethnic denominator. The temporary disruption to organised religious activities in the early decades of the PRC helped to magnify the significance of informal spiritual traditions such as shrine visits as indicators of ethnic tradition (*minsu*), through which a cultural community is identified along with other common 'indigenous' features.

The Ismaili sacred sites

As remarked above, there are many *mazurs* in the countryside that have a special spiritual significance for the Ismailis in Tashkurgan. The resting place of a saint, preacher or holy man is normally known as *langar mazur*. The Persian word *langar* for ‘anchor’ denotes a shrine and the built environment around it in the local vernaculars. Except for a few mausoleum-type shrines that are named after a person, most of the *langars* are associated with the deeds or life of an obscure holy person or wandering Sufi master. The shrines known as *qadamgoh mazur* are landmarks where an Ismaili imam, a prophet or a saint (*awliyu*) is reported to have met and blessed his followers. The trees with sacred attributes are known as *tol mazurs*, which means ‘tree *mazur*’ in Sariquli.

However, not all *mazurs* are created as equal; some are places of local importance, while others have a wider following. The mystical power of a sacred place and the blessings (*barakat*) received from it are commensurate to its ranking and local fame. Popularity, prestige and influence depend on the alleged miracles associated with a *mazur*, and its eminence is perpetuated by the retelling of anecdotal stories of unverifiable veracity. With a wider following, mausoleums and *qadamgohs* are ranked at the top of the hierarchy. Trees, rocks, mountains, springs and other natural objects are lesser *mazurs* and have only local significance. *Mazurs* from the second tier are seldom used for ceremonial assemblies, which are usually performed around a mausoleum or ancestral grave. Below are some of the better known sacred sites in Tashkurgan.

Langgar mazurs

There are a few villages or small hamlets in the Tashkurgan region that are dotted with local shrines called *langgar mazurs* or *mizors*. As we have seen, such places are named either after a legendary person or an obscure Muslim saint. The few eminent ones among them are the *Tizneff langgar* in Tizneff township, roughly 5 km to the northeast of the county town;

Wacha langgar in Wacha Township, 80 km to the south east; and two *langgars* in Tung Township, 180 km to the east of Tashkurgan. These shrines are well known and attract visitors from various localities in Tashkurgan County.

Langgars are uniformly marked burial sites decorated with rocks, the horns of ibexes and Marco Polo sheep, and a wooden pole draped with colourful banners. Up until the mid-twentieth century, these were the foci of spiritual life, where religious ceremonial events were organised and attended by visitors with spiritual or worldly needs. People came here to celebrate religious festivals, to make personal supplications, or to make the special offerings known as *narzulla*. On such occasions, they gathered around the shrine, prayed for health and prosperity, and received blessings from the caretakers of such places, known as *shaykhs*.

Tizneff langgar is a ruined tomb encircled by a 1.3-metre high, 46-metre long mud wall to keep animals from straying on to the site, and is visible from the main road that connects China and Pakistan. The shrine is at the edge of a local cemetery surrounded by many square double-layered tombs and a few mud-brick mausoleums with ornate lattice windows, interior wall paintings and domes. The top of the surrounding wall is lined with the horns of Marco Polo sheep and antelope. The shrine has a narrow entrance with a simple wooden door providing access to the almost undistinguishable tomb that was marked by a wooden stick and colourful banners, known as *togh*.

According to a local *khalifa*, a religious scholar, the tomb belonged to an Ismaili preacher by the name of Shah Talib who came to the region a long time ago, hence the site is also known as Shah Talib *mazur* locally.



Apart from some anecdotal ^{Tizneff langgar}

stories, very little is known about this person, with some suggesting that he was a Persian *sayyid* (descendant of the Prophet Muhammad), and others believing him to have been a preacher from Badakhshan (now in Afghanistan and Tajikistan), who settled and preached here and chose this location for his burial.

The fetish objects kept in the shrine once included a square turquoise rock at the western corner of the wall, and a 50 x 20 cm bronze rod, both of which were treated as part of the shrine and venerated. The village *khalifa* said the missing blue stone had been venerated because it radiated divine light (*nur*) at night, and the rod was an object used by the saint. Both the stone and the rod were looted during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).



Wacha langgar is a small mud and stone structure dedicated to an unknown *awliyu* (saint). Located at the side of the village thoroughfare at the eastern end of the township, it is a tomb built at the top of an isolated thirty-metre high steep hill in the middle of a narrow valley. The shrine has a circular low wall and a 2 x 3 metre mud and stone grave at the centre, which is barely discernible now. Both the encircling wall and the grave are decorated with the horns of Marco Polo sheep and ibex. The hole in the middle, where the multi-coloured bannered wooden pole once stood, is now filled with dirt. The only access is via a steep goat track from the east side of the hill; it is covered with grass and clearly had not been used in years.

Visitors may have stopped climbing to the top of the hill, but there was some food and a small amount of money left in the nearby ruins of a simple shack at the bottom of the hill, suggesting the shrine still had visitors. The place where these offerings were left was an adobe created by sealing off the front of a deep dent at the face of a colossal boulder, which was once the residence and centre of religious activity of the saint now buried on the hilltop. The simple adobe structure was later passed down to his disciple and his successors, and continued to function as the centre of spirituality, religious learning and night healing vigils, celebrating religious festivals and *narzulla* offerings until it was demolished during the Cultural Revolution. A local resident confirmed that, during the annual religious festivals of *Ramadan* and *Edil Fitr* (*Qorban Eid*), the villagers from the locality attend communal prayers at this site and partake in the special feast prepared by each household for the occasion. Occasionally, those with spiritual or worldly problems invite friends, families and local villagers to the site and offer *narzulla*.

Tungg langgars. The two *langgars* in Tungg (also known as Datong) Township at the easternmost end of the Tashkurgan region are well-known shrines. Squeezed in by high mountains, Tungg is a narrow valley that stretches from east to west, over 25 km long and

almost 1 km wide at the widest part. Apart from its reserves of high-quality white jade, the area is also known for the multitude of *mazurs*, ranging from various strange rocks, trees and springs, and most importantly, the two famous shrines known as *Bamafili Mujarrad* and *Bamafili Wali*, mausoleums located at either end of the valley.

The local population believes they belong to two missionary brothers who preached Ismailism in the region centuries ago. The elder brother, Bamafili Mujarrad, was buried in upper *langgar*, the first village from the westernmost end of the valley, and the younger brother, Bamafili Wali, was buried at the other end of the township in the lower *langgar*, which was also known as the *aqtuga* (white camel) *langgar*, after the camel-shaped white-stone fossil in the vicinity that was believed to have been the mount of the saint. The anecdotal story about the exploits of those missionary brothers and the shrines has been recorded in a recent book about the Tajiks of China (Qorban et al. 1994: 450).³

Bamafili Mujarrad is a square mud-brick mausoleum with a circular dome. It comes with all the trappings of a shrine, like ibex and goat horns and colourful flags, and stands out from the other ordinary graves around it. According to the caretaker, in the past there was a stone candle-holder, a rusted cast-iron candle-holder and a mud cooking stove placed outside the entrance, all were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Inside the dome there is a 2 x 0.6 metre mud grave in the centre; near it there are stones placed against the wall, one boot-shaped, a second camel-shaped and a third saddle-shaped. These were fetish objects and are venerated for their mythical association with the saint.

³ The chronology suggested in this publication was anachronistic, as the authors tend to suggest that the preachers arrived there during the time of the Prophet Muhammad, whereas Islam came to the region during the tenth century, long after the death of the Prophet.

Covered in a layer of thick dust, the walls are crumbling, the door frame is barely standing, and the mausoleum looks derelict, with no sign of any recent activity around the shrine. The current heir of the shrine's traditional caretaker *shaykhs*, an elderly gentleman from the village, blamed his co-



Bamafili Mujarrad *mazur* with its caretaker

villagers for the ruinous status of the site due to their lack of piety. He said, 'Nowadays people only mumble a few mandatory words of prayer when their path crosses a sacred landmark. People have lost their direction, they have forgotten their maker, and they don't care about *mazurs* anymore. Because hardly anyone donates for such shrines, we don't have the resources to maintain the place'.

Bamafili Wali *mazur* at the lower *langgar* was perched on the ridge of a steep hill, making it almost impossible to access in the summer (when my fieldwork took place). Hence, the details below were summarised from the oral description of the place by its current caretaker, an elderly villager. The cliff is sandwiched between two seasonal rivers, which cut it off when the water rises in the warm season. Even during the winter, due to an almost vertical slope and no safe path, the site is very difficult to reach. The shrine is a lonely mud-brick tomb inside a crumbling encircling wall. It is believed that the location was selected by the saint so that he could rest in eternal peace without disturbance from his followers. It was said that, except for the caretakers, only a handful of others ever reached the shrine as far as could be remembered. The caretaker, who has not been to the shrine since 1965, said the grave was almost indistinguishable when he last clambered up there five decades ago. He also said only

the ruins of the outer walls had survived of the original shrine, and indeed the remnants of the wall were still distinguishable from across the river.

At the bottom of the hill, on the left bank of the river that flows past from the southern side, there was a mud hut known as *marqad*, which was the residence and activity centre of the saint and his disciples. As the village did not have a mosque or other communal place of worship, the hut was where people organised various religious activities until it was razed during the 1960s. Later a flood washed away all traces of it. The site was covered in weeds and wild grass, in the middle of which there lay a five-metre piece of blackened wood, allegedly the main beam of the



Bamafili Wali *mazur* and its caretaker

marqad, the only tangible remainder of the structure, which has acquired some sort of fetish status. Owing to its sacred attributes, this patch of land was left untouched in a narrow valley where open space is sparse, with the hope that one day they will rebuild the *marqad* or build a new *Jama'at Khana* (Ismaili place of worship) at the same site.

Sacred graves

In Tashkurgan, there are a few other mausoleums that are venerated as *mazurs* but are not called *langgars*. These are graves consecrated to a saint (*awliyu*) or a martyr (*shayid*), and are known for their healing properties. These shrines are named after the person buried there, and are similar in their style of construction and identically decorated with ibex and goat horns and colourful banners like other shrines in the region. Some stand alone in a desert environment, while others are surrounded by graves. Any item collected from the mausoleum or its vicinity, such as a piece of clay, a pebble or a handful of dry hay, is



Sayyid Hasan *mazur* in Daftor village



Shah Awliyu *mazur* near Tashkurgan

treasured as a sacred object and kept as a prophylactic in a high spot within the house of the person who collected it. The presence of such an auspicious object is believed to bring blessings (*barakat*) and to ward off the evil eye and bad fortune.

The Shah Awliyu *mazur* near Tashkurgan town, the Sayyid Hasan *mazur* in Daftor village and the Jahangir Qala *mazur* in Wacha are a few well-known shrines in this category. It has been suggested that these shrines were built on the sites of ancient battlefields where the faithful fell as martyrs in battle against the infidels. Not much has been remembered about these martyred saints, the battles they fought or the foes they fought against. Given the multiplicity of religions that existed in the region before Islam, these men might have fought

against the Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Nestorian or pagan inhabitants of the land, or even the Mongol hordes, who ruled the land for centuries and gradually blended into the local culture.

***Qadamgohs* or footprints**

Qadamgoh is a Persian word meaning ‘footprint’ or ‘place where one has set foot’.

They are often associated with a saint or holy person. The *qadamgohs* in Tashkurgan are known as *Agha qadamgohs*, which literally means ‘the footprints of the Aga



Aga *Qadamgoh* near Tashkurgan

Khan’, an honorific title given to the Ismaili

imam. Unlike the *langgars* or mausoleums of the martyrs, which also appeal to non-Ismaili visitors, *Agha qadamgohs* are important landmarks revered exclusively by the Ismailis. They are seen as sanctified locations where an Ismaili imam once received and blessed his followers (Q 1994, pp. 428).⁴ There are at least six places with that name, and all are located at the side of some old tracks or goat trails, away from residential areas. These sites are also marked by a pile of stones and ibex and goat horns, a flag pole and colourful banners, and one near a new settlement south of Tashkurgan town has a circular wall.

The veracity of *Agha qadamgoh* stories may be questionable, but the *qadamgohs* and the associated stories signify the importance of the imam in the Ismaili tradition. This association with an imam sets the *qadamgohs* above the various other minor *mazurs*. Traditions like this are instrumental for transmitting and reproducing the basic tenants of faith in a context where formal religious learning is restricted.

⁴ It was believed that the 47th Ismaili imam, Aqa Ali Shah, Aga Khan II (r. 1881-1885), once visited the region and met with his followers, but in reality, there is no historical record of an Ismaili imam ever having visited the region until 1981.

Other *mazars*

Lesser *mazurs* of the second tier include a variety of natural objects such as rocks, trees, springs, mountains or hills. For instance, the *Shinggun duldul* ('horse of Shinggun'), a horse-like rock formation, *Rustam bloq* (a spring named after the main protagonist in Firdawsi's Persian epic *Shahname*),⁵ *Mustagh ata* (the Ice Mountain) *Qara Tash* (the black rock valley), and *Farhad balda* (the axe of Farhad) are a few significant landmarks in this category.⁶ Moreover, there are sacred trees (*tol mazurs*) and strangely shaped stones in some places in the region that were also venerated for their mystical powers and are known as *khosiyatin juy*, or 'sacred sites' in the local vernaculars.



Rock *mazur* near Tungg



Fossil *mazur* in Baldir

Most of these sacred objects have a story attached to them. The *duldul* in the Shingun valley to the west of Tashkurgan town, for instance, was the favourite mount of Ali b. Abi Talib, the first Shi'i imam, according to local legend. When the horse was seduced and misled by the devil (*shaytan*) and failed to respond to an urgent call, it was condemned and turned into

⁵ Rustam is the folk hero from the *Shahname* of Firdawsi, the Persian epic poet (940-1020). The Ice Mountain is a snow-capped mountain in the south of Tashkurgan that legend claims to have been the shrine of a hermit saint.

⁶ Farhad is the main protagonist in the Persian epic tragedy of *Farhad* and *Shrin*.

stone by the imam. Barely visible from the foot of the mountain on a clear day, it was said that the mystical *duldul* reveals itself to the eyes of the pure and the pious only.

Tol mazurs, Juniper trees, are distinguished from the other trees by the colourful ribbons and small pieces of cloth hung on their branches, suggesting their sacred attributes. It is one of the most common *mazurs* and are found near residential areas, in the desert or on a sheer mountain slope where vegetation is sparse, and all share a common theme.



Tol mazurs near Tashkurgan

The sacred power of these trees is ascribed to their association with miraculous and beneficial works of a wandering mystic or holy man. Most of them tend to share similar origin stories, suggesting a limited scope of imagination about their genesis. The

commonly told story about a *tal mazur* involves a walking stick that was used by a holy person to produce running water in a barren land, to remove an obstacle like a mountain or boulder from the path of an irrigation canal, or simply to provide shade at the side of a desert track so travellers might take refuge from the burning sun. The sacred trees are the manifestation of the miraculous stick left behind by the saintly person.

Unlike the aforementioned mausoleums and footprints, most of which are either protected by an encircling wall, or enclosed inside a larger built-up public area used for religious rituals or prayer, most of the sacred trees and other natural objects have no protection around them. Sacred trees, stones, rock formations, springs, and mountains are open to all and people pay

homage to those lesser *mazurs* if their paths cross such places, but they are rarely a destination for pilgrimages or visitations.

According to the local people, shrines and footprints were holy places that radiated with divine light at night when the people's faith was strong. The notion has been passed down orally and none of the research subjects had seen the light personally. "We can't see them these days, because our faith (*emon*) has become lax and our belief weakened, therefore, God has stopped showing as such miracles," a prominent religious leader said as an explanation for the discontinuity of the phenomenon. His statement resonated with the view of most of the local people who blamed the declining morality and lack of piety for the area's fall from divine favour. One villager said, 'actually, the light is still there, but we can't see it anymore, because our hearts are blinded by greed and our souls are corrupted by avariciousness. An unclean body (*jism*) is unworthy of seeing the divine light.'

Attending a shrine

Unlike the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, a visitation to a native shrine is not guided by canonical scriptures, and is free from strict procedural rules; mixing up, omitting or altering some of the ritual orders may not take away from the purpose of shrine visit. The essentials of paying homage to a sacred landscape among the Ismailis in Xinjiang are often learned through personal experience of them, and the absence of written rules allows ample space for individual expression and understanding. However, notwithstanding the seeming laxity of the practice, the ritualistic performance also follows an observable pattern.

When attending a shrine, being mentally and physically prepared is a prerequisite with the emphasis on the purity of intention. Ideally, if conditions allow, the making of ablutions prior to ritual is encouraged but are not mandatory. At a sacred place an appropriate and serious attitude must be expressed in one's facial expression and body language, and unseemly

behaviour like talking or laughing during the ritual is discouraged. Most importantly, in order to receive the full benefit of praying at a shrine, a clear conscience is crucial and the mind has to be free of evil intention and clear of harmful and impure thoughts.

It is believed that if the ritual of shrine visiting is presided over by a member of the clergy the odds of one's wish being granted may increase. Therefore, villagers often invite a local religious leader (a *pir*) to lead the supplication on such occasions. Such rituals are often initiated by a household and everyone in the vicinity is invited. In order that everyone may attend, shrine visitation rituals are often organised after the autumn harvest and during the quiet winter season.

The ritual includes communal prayer, then walking towards the shrine in single file with one's hands humbly crossed in front of the lower belly and the visitant mumbling some personal prayer. Then the participant touches the sacred object (the grave, tree, stone, etc.) with the right hand, kisses the fingers that have just



Incense burning during *narzulla*

touched the *mazur* and touches the forehead and eyes with the same hand. This is called *daryub zoht* (being blessed). At a *mazur*, apart from being blessed one may leave some food or a small amount of money near the shrine upon leaving. *Mazur* visitation may also involve lighting a torch during a local religious festival known as Barut Eid,⁷ or burning incense during a funeral.

⁷ *Barut Eid* is performed on the fifteenth day of the month of Barat according to the Islamic calendar.

From the occasional recollection of village elders, we have learned that a sacred landmark was the focal point of religious life in a locality where people gathered on special occasions, prayed, chanted (*zikr*), held overnight meditations or vigils, and recited verses from the religious texts. When formal religious practice was suspended under the PRC, visiting such sacred places offered a sense of continuity to the spiritual life of religious communities. However, after over half a century of secular education and the association of religion with backwardness in culture, practices like this have been reduced to sporadic individual initiatives. Details such as the sort of religious texts and the language used during such occasions are gradually being forgotten. Today, when a sacred site is visited, unless clergyman religious specialist is present, supplications are mostly spoken in the local vernaculars, as very few people in the region can recite Persian or Arabic prayers.

Conclusion

The Chinese proverb ‘the same water and the same soil nurtures the same people’ (*yi fang shui tu, yang yi fang ren*) aptly capture the Central Asian identity of the practice of sacred site veneration among the Ismailis in Tashkurgan. Xinjiang is known for its plethora of sacred landscapes, as ‘many of the most important sanctuaries are located in Central Asia and East Turkistan (Xinjiang) ... [and this] reflects the spiritually numinous topography of a region with a strong Sufi tradition’ (Papas et al. 2012: 251). However, it is the contextual nuances that give the regional variations their peculiar identity. Shrine visits in Xinjiang also transcend modern ethno-linguistic boundaries, as many such places are venerated by different ethnic communities in a locality.

The seemingly unorthodox rituals, like venerating a tree, a rock, a mountain or a spring, may also attest to the rich and varied religious heritage of the region and the subtle continuity of older belief systems adapted to the surrounding cultural environment. For instance, the juniper (*tughruq*) trees venerated today may have some link with the Aryan and Zoroastrian

religions, for both of which the juniper symbolizes purity; fire-related rituals were salient features of Zoroastrianism; burning incense may have been inherited from Buddhism; and shamanism may shed some light on the treatment of mountains, rocks and springs as sacred. These were influential faith systems that flourished in the region long before the arrival of Islam (Sa'dullahzade and Ghapar 2002, Frye 1994, Starr 2013). Accordingly, there is a sense in which visiting a local shrine echoes the rich repository of the region's religious history through an ancient tradition, as well as acting like a summary of the spiritual journey of the region and its people.

Apart from the seasonal rituals organised around a shrine, people also visit a sacred site when faced with existential dilemmas or uncertainties in life. Constantly being haunted by a bad dream, being stricken by unexpected sorrow or a piece of bad luck, being tormented by lingering emotional or physical pain, having difficulty conceiving, or believing oneself cursed or afflicted by the evil eye are all valid reasons that warrant a visit to a sacred shrine. One may also pray at a *mazur* in search of divine protection or for psychological reassurance before embarking on a long journey, starting a new business, building a new house or making a serious decision.

Lastly, this ancient tradition seems to have acquired contemporary significance as a collective identity marker among the Tajiks of China. Despite the secularisation of the public space in the PRC, spiritual practices without a rigid form of performance or liturgy are treated as ethnic cultural traditions and are tolerated by the state. Accordingly the Tajiks of Tashkurgan see the sacred landmarks described in this article as a part of their local cultural heritage that defines them as an ethnic group, along with a common language, common residence, the Ismaili faith, ethnic music, and culinary and sartorial traditions. Even though the ruinous state of many sacred landmarks indicates that the spiritual appeal of shrine visits is waning, the

idea of venerating a common sacred location in Tashkurgan is seen as an indication of a common Tajik ethnic identity.

The Ismailis in Xinjiang are undergoing a subtle but important social and economic transformation. The dynamism resulting from the PRC's economic success is reshaping the cultural context which has supported the traditional values and local ways of life to date. Consequently, the new generation's apparent scepticism regarding spirituality and ethnic culture lacks the older generation's sense of connectedness and certainty. Young people may look at the shrine as an identity marker rather than a spiritual necessity, but spirituality still has some relevance for a negligibly small and marginal group's sense of community. The perseverance of such older traditions, even if the accompanying rituals are hollow and mainly devoid of spiritual significance, may soften the effects of cultural assimilation and ease a sense of disorientation. The persistence of the *mazur* tradition against all odds may also mean, even if all the tangible conceptual and cultural barriers to integration have been removed, that cultures do not surrender totally but are in a constant process of self-reinvention.

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