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Stéphane A. Dudoignon
'Gnosis as Dissent? In Soviet and Present-Day Tajikistan'¹
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To Reinhard Eisener, in memoriam

Summary

Islam in the USSR was long described as resistant to Sovietization, but also as reluctant to dissidence which is much better documented in the European regions of the Soviet Union. Since the turn of the 21st century, however, the publication in Central Asia of previously unknown manuscripts has brought to light the production, through the short 20th century, of a Muslim gnostic poetry of classical form and content, by authors from a small number of mutually linked sacred lineages, transmitters of the Sufi tradition (ritualised Islamic gnosticism). Among the issues that this production raises is the existence of a Muslim 'underground' steeped in ascetic tradition, and this underground's relationship to Soviet culture, which it opposed in a radical way, playing the roles of a focus of resistance to the 'idolatries' of the era and of the harbinger of an apocalypse in the present. The present study of two Persian-language Sufi poets, a master and his disciple, active in the Tajik SSR between the 1920s and the 1980s, questions the supposed absence of dissidence in predominantly rural Central Asian societies, which were latecomers to *samizdat*. It leads us, too, to question the notion of historical change, through a phenomenon of apparent continuity of literary forms and practices, against the peculiar backdrops of Soviet modernisation and post-Soviet nation-building.

Keywords: Islam, gnosis, Sufism, poetry, Naqshbandiyya, dissent, USSR, Tajikistan



The history of dissidence in the USSR had long ceased to be a matter of interest for international observers of the region when the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation banned the Memorial Association for the Remembrance of Gulag Victims on December 28, 2021.² Since the turn of the 21st century, the historiography of dissidence seemed oriented towards its literary aspects, without much curiosity about its political or confessional dimensions, in Russia as elsewhere in the former Soviet Union. Dissidence itself often denied the 'Muslim' south

¹ The episodic research that informs the present article began in 2004 and is currently being carried out in the framework of the ANR RedGold Research Programme (2021-24), directed by the present author. Drafts of the article have been presented at the Annual Workshop of the RedGold Programme as well as at the Atelier Eurasie Centrale of the École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris, during the study year 2021-22. I would like to thank all the participants of both — especially Marie-Paule Hille, Rachida Chih, Flora J. Roberts and Thierry Zarccone — for their encouraging comments, as well as the three Reviewers of the journal for all their suggestions of improvements, the remaining defects being my exclusive property. I would like to express also my deepest gratitude to my many informants, including the direct descendants of great figures of 20th-century Tajik Muslim gnosticism, who have generously opened their doors and, in some cases, the archives of their lineage to me. I hope that this study does justice to these people's remarkable testimonies.

² Ex. <https://www.rfi.fr> (2021/12/28).

of the USSR the possibility of any similar phenomenon, except for the movements for the return of the Crimean Tatars and of the Meskhs, in the 1950s to 1980s, sometimes compared with Jewish *refuzniks*.³ Conversely, in the eyes of the Western sovietology of the Cold War period, Islam in the USSR, acting as a conservative force, was a vector of resistance, freezing beliefs, practices and identities in the forms in which they had existed prior to the triumph of Stalinism. In the 1980s only, in a period of rise of ‘political Islam’, Sufism was reinterpreted as a quietist, peaceful version of the Muslim religion.⁴

A recurrent difficulty in the historiography of this period is the problematic nature of much of the primary documentation hitherto identified by the historians of Islam in the USSR. These documents come largely from state organs of atheist propaganda which served to control, if not directly shape, Muslim religious practice. Notable among these organs was the Muslim Spiritual Assembly of Russia, created in 1788 after the first Russian conquest of the Crimea, followed by the Muslim Spiritual Directorates, also called *muftiyyats*, established from 1943 onwards. The Directorates succeeded the Assembly during WWII, with the aim of mobilising Soviet Muslims against Nazi Germany. The confessional bureaucracy of the *muftiyyats* and its limited networks of ‘accredited’ (Rus. *zaregistrirovannye*) mosques played a similar mobilising function on several other occasions, as in 1979-89 during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.⁵ Three characteristics of this bureaucracy, as far as Central Asia is concerned, are its defence of the Hanafi Sunni *madhhab* (denominational tradition); its self-conception as a civil administration; and an ideological line often characterised by an entrenched hostility towards, if not Sufism in itself, at least the cult of saints that is particular to it.⁶

Hence the relative silence that state sources in the former USSR maintain on a number of religious, notably gnostic practices and movements, while descendants of elite groups targeted by Stalinist Terror themselves frequently kept silence on their origins.⁷ Other reasons for this silence are the interests that the state officials of the *muftiyyats* shared with many ‘non-accredited’ clerics absent from their registers, and the uneven zeal, from place to place, of the ‘plenipotentiary’ (*upolnomochennye*) agents of the Council for Religious Affairs, in charge of supervising religious practice.⁸ Throughout the Soviet period, ethnography itself showed little interest in the bookish culture and textual practices of the Sufi world, even while it was well aware of the importance for the population of the great tombs linked to the regional Islamic past. The sole notable exception here was a limited quantity of late Soviet

³ Like the Caucasus, Central Asia is conspicuous by its absence from Liudmila Alekseeva’s classic work (1992), except in relation to the Crimean Tatars and Meskhs (pp. 93-114). The same can be said of all the reference works on dissidence mentioned in the bibliography.

⁴ Critical overview by DeWeese 2018, esp. pp. 24 sq.

⁵ Cf. Eden 2016 and the synthesis by Tasar 2012, pp. 164-9.

⁶ On the staff of the *muftiyyat* of Central Asia in the Tajik SSR, cf. Dudoignon 2011.

⁷ Cf. Roberts 2016, esp. p. 166-8 (on the strategies adopted from the 1930s onwards by the remnants of the pre-Soviet socioeconomic elites of the city of Khujand, located since 1929 in the north of Tajikistan).

⁸ On local variations in the role of the *upolnomochennye*, see Ro’i 2000, especially pp. 4-7, 566-75, 619-34; Tasar 2017, pp. 312, 317-21 (on the 1980s); Bustanov 2017, pp. 216-7 (on the Muslims of Soviet Russia). My observations also rely on an interview with Qāzī Akbar Tūrajānzāda (1954-), in Turkābād, Waḥdat District, 30 November 2011. (The son of an influential Jahri *shaykh* from the Rāmit upper valley, north of the capital Dushanbe, Qāzī Akbar had been *qāzī* — the senior Hanafi Sunni Muslim cleric — of the Tajik SSR, then of independent Tajikistan, from 1989 to 1992, before becoming a key figure of the United Tajik Opposition during the civil war and, finally, leading with his brothers Īshān Maḥmūd and Īshān Nūr al-Dīn a major madrasa in Turkābād.)

and early post-Soviet studies on literate sociability.⁹ The Soviet ethnographic vision of expressions of religiosity as a residual phenomenon can be observed, as far as Central Asia is concerned, in various works about high valleys such as Qarategin in the Tajik SSR, a land of plenty for modern Sufism.¹⁰ Hence, too, the general neglect, by both local and international research, of much of the scholarly literature transmitted and produced in the Muslim south of the USSR — starting with gnostic poetry of classical form and content, which for a long time circulated only orally and in manuscript, and is preserved predominantly in private archives.¹¹ In present-day Tajikistan, this poetry of the Soviet era came to the light thanks to hagiographic writing developed after the civil war that the country faced between 1992 and 1997, before a renewal of anti-religious repression, since 2009, put a stop to these experiments. The resultant patchiness of scholarship means that Sufi poetry has not yet had the attention it deserves as a source for the study of the Soviet period, even though as we shall see here it formed an inescapable part of the worldviews of religious elites whose literary compositions have only just begun to be studied; as a consequence, scholarship on Soviet Islam continues to miss a key part of the picture.

For a little over a decade, then, between the late 1990s and the early 2010s, there was a flourishing of textual hagiographies. Unlike those that appeared just after the end of the Soviet period, which often focus on figures from classical Islam, these texts are often centred on men (more rarely women) of God active during the ‘short’ 20th century.¹² One aspect of these textual experiments was the collection, copying, editing and study of the poetic works of Sufi guides and shrine keepers, in a political environment that remained tense. Against the background of a clash of memories of the civil war of 1992–97, this 20th-century gnostic poetry and the role played by small numbers of sacred lineages in its (re-)production in the Soviet era have been subject to contradictory interpretations. On the one hand, they have been seen as a hotbed of continuous dissent, right up to the present day, by many followers and admirers of 20th-century gnostics — in whose eyes the regions where these lineages were active, such as Qarategin to which we shall return, were centres of the contest of the ungodly Soviet regime. On the other hand, for local authorities this poetry and its authors embody historical continuities safeguarded by the regime victorious of the civil war — a regime born of the political apparatus of a Soviet period that may look like, in retrospect, a golden age of Hanafi

⁹ E.g., Mills & Rahmoni 2015, pp. 319 sq. — an illustration of the role of oral narratives conveyed in the traditional male assemblies of Tajik intellectuals, in the mid-2000s, as a link between local identity, the oral history of the pre-Soviet elite (including sacred lineages of *sayyid* and/or *khwāja* status, related to Prophet Muḥammad and the first converters to Islam) and Soviet-era values expressed in literary tradition.

¹⁰ Considered a region of ‘traditional’ economy, Qarategin is characterised by Soviet ethnography as a land of religious practice reduced to ‘survivals’ (Rus. *pereshitki*): e.g., Karmysheva 2009, pp. 246-59 (posthumous edition of notebooks from 1952). This representation had a lasting influence on Islamic sovietology during the Cold War period — of which a representative, the Arabist Vincent Monteil (1913-2005), could speak in 1954 of the concessions made by the Soviet authorities to this or that Muslim cleric as ‘an inoffensive vestige of a vanished past’ (p. 17). On these representations, see the critical overview by DeWeese 2011.

¹¹ On the general significance of the latter for the history of the Muslim religious literature, notably poetry, of the Soviet period, see Bustanov 2017, pp. 199-200.

¹² On early post-Soviet Muslim hagiography in Central Asia, see notably Schubel 1999, pp. 76–81. As is often the case in the worlds of Islam, the invocation of female sainthood is present in everyday life, while at the same time focusing on figures from the distant or legendary past, in these figures’ remit as connections between a local tradition and the heart of the world of Islam. On the presence, for example, of ‘Bībī’ Khadīja, the first wife of Prophet Muḥammad, and their daughter ‘Bībī’ Fāṭima, in the song repertoire of the Qarategin milkmaids of the 1950s-60s, see Kisliakov & Pisarchik 1966, pp. 168-9.



The present article focuses on two mutually related figures: a master and his disciple in the Sufi tradition known as Naqshbandiyya Mujaddidiyya: Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Dawlat ‘Īlākī’, known as “the great” (Ḥaẓrat-i Buzurgwār, c. 1881-1947), and one of his aspirants (*murīds*), Dāmullā Iskandar ‘Bīdakī’ (c. 1895-1989), whose posthumous reputation as a classical poet exceeded that of his spiritual guide. Born in two villages close to each other in the upper Qarategin valley (both poets actually signed some of their works with the epithet ‘Qarātīgīnī’¹³), ‘Abd al-Raḥīm and Iskandar embody two phenomena in the eyes of their present-day Tajik readership. The first is the tragic 20th-century fate of Qarategin and of the Wakhsh Valley (a tributary of the Amu Darya, the headwaters¹⁴ of which flow through Qarategin). Celebrated sometimes as a hotbed of resistance against the Red Army in the early 1920s, the upper valley underwent, before and immediately after WWII, ruthless population resettlements towards the cotton-growing lowlands of the Wakhsh, in the south of the Tajik SSR.¹⁵ Comprising as they did Tajik Persian-speaking cultivators, the resettled populations were considered by the authorities politically more reliable than the Uzbek-speaking Laqay nomadic tribes who, until then, had dominated the area. Locally, however, their fates varied greatly, depending notably on when and how they were integrated into the collective farm system developed in the region.

Called ‘Migrants’ (Pers. *muhājir*) by the *vox populi* followed by local historiography, the people of Qarategin who came down to the southern Wakhsh plain developed localised strategies, either within or on the margins of the cotton collective farm system, where those resettled in the mid-1940s were often latecomers. These strategies were often informed by the experience of the development of fruit growing, imported from the highlands¹⁶ on individual plots in the collective farms of the plain, and later re-developed in the wintering villages of Qarategin, gradually recolonised from the 1970s onwards. After 1990, many of these Migrants were to be found in the ranks of the Islamic Revival Party, which was organised from the mid-1980s onwards and became the backbone of the United Tajik Opposition during and after the 1992-97 civil war, until its ban and repression in 2014.¹⁷ At the heart of this specific *muhājir* identity were a set of cultural values linked to the practice of market gardening and including Persian-language spiritual traditions. Ironically, Persophony, which was identified in the 1930s–40s

¹³ Qarategin and its capital, the rural town of Gharm, have been renamed ‘Rasht’ by the current government (from the name of the valley in some Persian sources prior to the Mongol conquest of the 6th/13th century), as part of the policy of Persianisation of the toponymy of Tajikistan carried out since the end of the country’s civil war of 1992-97.

¹⁴ Called Surkhāb, ‘the Red’, because of the colour of its waters according to the modern inhabitants.

¹⁵ See the historical syntheses by Kurbanova 1993, pp. 51-79; Abdunazarov 2003, pp. 114-27; Loy 2006; Abdulhaev 2009, pp. 179-206; Kassymbekova 2011; and Nabotī & Olimov 2008, pp. 413-28 (the latter in relation to the once flourishing market town of Hāyit, in the centre of the valley, until then a provider of Sufi guides for the Qarategin uplands endowed with a Qyrghyz population: cf. Karmysheva 2009, p. 247).

¹⁶ On the horticultural specialisation of Qarategin, as well as the practice of hunting, and their sacralisation in popular memory in connection with Sufi symbolism, see the study by the Soviet ethnographers Kisliakov & Pisarchik, 1966, pp. 147-51, 292-3.

¹⁷ On the origins and sociology of the Tajikistani IRP, see in particular the overview by Dudoignon & Qalandar 2014, in part. pp. 88-95.

as a possible vector of loyalty to Soviet power,¹⁸ ultimately became a source of this power's contest — of the Central Asian *muftiyyat* especially, made of Uzbek-speaking or bilingual Tajik-Uzbek staff. Against such a complex backdrop, it is not surprising that the figure of the Persian-speaking saintly founder of a community, discoverer of a water source, breaker and irrigator of a new land frequently appears in the present-day Muslim hagiography developed along the Wakhsh River.¹⁹

Attesting to a literary technical mastery which is not common in contemporary Sufism, the verses of Shaykh 'Abd al-Raḥīm and his pupil Iskandar, written mainly in the classical genre of the ghazal, raise several issues, as does their popularity in present-day Tajikistan. The first of these issues is the continuity of a teaching of Arabic metrics, a highly demanding discipline that can hardly be improvised,²⁰ in the Sufi circles of the Soviet period. (This permanence is all the more noteworthy as many components of the art of Persian composition, *inshā'*, were then experiencing a rapid decline in Central Asia, starting with calligraphy, another discipline taught by example.) The second issue regards the place that this Soviet-era Muslim gnostic poetry should perhaps have occupied in the historiography of 'dissidence' (Rus. *inakomyslie*) — even if this concept, which appeared only in the latter decades of the USSR, is in fact never mentioned even in the work of Dāmullā Iskandar, written from the 1970s, the golden age of *inakomyslie*. The third issue, meanwhile, is the current legacy of this literary production and the place that it has occupied in national memory since its rediscovery after the fall of the Iron Curtain (the first transcription of Shaykh 'Abd al-Raḥīm's works seems to have occurred in 1990)²¹ — in particular in a Wakhsh River valley ravaged by five years of civil war from 1992 to 1997.

It may come as a surprise that I have taken so long to make an inventory of these sources and to propose a study of them, more than eighteen years after I first started conducting interviews and collecting written materials. One reason for my delaying thus was in order to protect then-living interviewees and other informants, whose identities would become apparent through their familial and/or intellectual kinship with one or other of our two masters. Out of a similar caution, I have refrained from mentioning a number of other interviewees; those who do appear in the present text, meanwhile, are generally very old, if indeed still alive at all. The role of many of these witnesses in the hagiographic experiments of the past quarter century also required me to wait for the appearance and spread of the oral and written traditions that now constitute the growing personal legend of our two characters. Now, these nascent traditions allow us to study the readings of their work beyond a cénacle limited to just a handful of fellow-members. They help us to identify what Sufism has represented, and still represents, for the societies of Soviet and present-day Central Asia, thus offering a useful counter-perspective to the conventional historiography of Soviet Islam, which tends either to exaggerate Sufism's role as a vector of resilience and of re-traditionalisation, or on the

¹⁸ On this aspect, see esp. Kassymbekova 2011, pp. 354–7.

¹⁹ Examples in Dudoignon 2021a, pp. 396–9.

²⁰ As Shaykh 'Abd al-Raḥīm seems to remind his few listeners of the early Soviet period: 'On the Path of the Most High, schoolboy, don't go alone, / without companions at this goblet don't drink alone. // The song of our Path is not one to be improvised, / its drums are not to be beaten on the road alone' (*maraw ay ṭālibā dar rāh-i 'ishq-i dhāt-i Haqq tanhā / manūshī bādarā az jām-i 'ishq bī payrawān tanhā // magū tarāna-i 'ishq-i ṭarīqatrā zi pīsh-i khūd / makūbī ṭabl-i kūs-i 'īn ṭarīqat dar safar tanhā*) — cf. Dudoignon 2021b, p. 202.

²¹ This is a collection of ghazals copied by a certain Sayyid Muḥyī al-Dīn, from the village of Langar in the district of Ḥiṣār, south of the capital Dushanbe, in 1410/1990: see the reproduction in Dāmullā Iskandar 2000, esp. the colophon on p. 93; and Raḥīmzāda 2000, pp. 5–6.

contrary to minimise it, on the assumption of a global secularisation of Central Asian societies along the 20th century.

1. Geo-Historical Background

The history of Islam in the Tajik SSR, as elsewhere in Central Asia, can be characterised, albeit with localised exceptions and particularities, by a general rhythm alternating between periods of repression and periods of liberalisation — a rhythm that can be traced back to the confiscatory policy of the People's Republic of Bukhara (1920-24), of which most of the Wakhsh River Valley was part.²² Spatially, the demographic engineering and highly localised economic specialisations of the Soviet period resulted in the development of a range of solidarity systems, especially within the large collective farms of the late 1950s to late 1980s. These variations in time and space can be observed also in the post-Soviet period, in predominantly rural Tajikistan: a period of openness, after the end of the civil war in 1997, gave way to another, of gradual restriction of religious freedoms in the 2000s, on the pretext of the 'struggle against terrorism', then to a more repressive turn in 2009, followed by the banning of the Islamic Revival Party five years later. Since the turn of the 21st century, these sometimes brutal swings in public policy have triggered competition in the religious sphere. In this competition the state, through its power of regulation and selective repression, has itself become a key player.

For their part, the Central Asian *muftiyyat* and its local agents remained a centre of modernist trends of Islam. Favourable to state control of religious institutions (a legacy of certain 'jadid' trends of the 1910s–1920s), they were often hostile to Sufi practices such as the cult of saints, as well as to the public role of the pious foundations (*waqf*, pl. *awqāf*) which, until the 1920s, granted a degree of autonomy to the lineages of tomb keepers in their dealings with political power.²³ The Sufi world, deprived of *waqf* revenues by the confiscations of the People's Republic of Bukhara and by collectivisation from 1929 onwards, became simultaneously impoverished and ruralised, in sharp contrast to what it had experienced during the urban construction boom of the Russian protectorate period (1868-1920).²⁴ It fell back on the confidential teaching of spiritual guides (*murshids*) or Venerables (*pīrs*) from a small number of sacred lineages of putative descendants of Prophet Muḥammad (referred to, in South Central Asia, by the Persian title of *īshān* or the Arabic one of *sayyid*, pl. *sādāt*). From the turn of the 1930s onwards, these lineages became the exclusive holders of libraries of manuscripts and lithographs from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. (After WWII, library-owners frequently purchased lithographic editions from clandestine booksellers to replace manuscripts that were seized or destroyed in the repressions of 1929 to 1937.) It is within the framework of this lineage-based Islam that a multiform literary production continued to develop, dominated by the classical range of genres of gnostic poetry. Absent from public collections of manuscripts, this production long remained beyond the reach of philologists and historians.

A blind spot in the contemporary literary history of Central Asia, this production is also conspicuous by its absence in the recent historiography of modern Sufism. Historians of Tajik Persian literature in the short 20th century have shown little interest in the 'informal' sphere

²² Cf. Khalid 2015, pp. 231–40; see also Pianciola & Sartori 2007, esp. pp. 489–92.

²³ On the discourse of the Central Asian *muftiyyat* and local reactions to Sufism and the cult of saints in the last decades of the Soviet period, see for instance Frank 2007, pp. xvi ff, 71-77.

²⁴ On it, see in part. Pickett 2020, pp. 48-54.

(i.e., situated outside of the public institutions of the Tajik SSR), with the exception of an oral tradition that has long been reduced to ‘folklore’.²⁵ Folklore studies of the Soviet period themselves only very gradually integrated confessional elements of local and regional oral tradition — such as those related to Muslim piety or religious celebrations, as well as to great figures of the Islamic past. (Such figures include Khwāja Bahā’ al-Dīn Naqshband [d. 791/1389], in a role of intercessor with the divine, or the figure of Ḥusayn in the tragedy of Karbalā, who appears in a range of Sufi literature and whom we will find again in the Muslim gnostic poetry of the Soviet and present eras).²⁶ More decisive was the contribution of folkloric studies to the celebration of collectors of traditions on the ‘people’s revolts’ of the period of the Russian protectorate.²⁷ New avenues of research were gradually opened up by Tajik philology in the 1970s. They included, in the national catalogue of places of memory, local and regional literary schools dominated by Sufi guides. Notable here were the manuscript studies and literary surveys produced by Amīrbek Ḥabībzāda (Abibov, Habibov, 1916-98), a researcher at the Rudaki Institute of Tajik Language and Literature in Dushanbe, originally from Upper Badakhshan. Drawing on a somewhat patchy range of sources, Ḥabībzāda revisited the history of 18th- and 19th-century ‘literary circles’ (*dāyirahā-yi adabī*) in the upper valleys of present-day Tajikistan, especially in Qarategin, focusing particularly on the gnostic traditions that developed up to the first decades of the Soviet era.²⁸

However, it was not until Tajikistan became independent in 1991 that this rediscovery extended to the work of 20th-century religious and gnostic writers. Among these studies, one

²⁵ E.g. the influential Braginskii 1956, pp. 421-53 and Bečka 1968, in part. pp. 577-88 and 595-8 (attempts to conceptually link the history of Tajik Persian literature and orature of the short 20th century to that of Soviet and Eastern bloc literature, from a Marxist-Leninist perspective); Asozoda 1999 (historical account focusing on the reconstruction of a genealogical link between Muslim reformist trends of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in Central Asia, on the one hand, and the Tajik Persian literature of the Soviet period, on the other); Anūsha 2001 (covers the Soviet period through the output of the Union of Writers of the Tajik SSR, with the exception of poets still active in the 1920s-30s, documented by anthologies from the late colonial period); Rzehak 2001 (reconstructing the nationalisation cum modernisation of Persian in Central Asia, with interest in the impact of the de-Arabisation of the 1920s, the Russification of the following decades and the changes of alphabet, against the background of the liquidation of the reformist and modernist movements of the 1910s-20s); Gulnazar 2003 (a directory of Tajikistan’s literati, focusing on the registers of the Writers’ Union and so ignoring the ‘informal’ sphere); Ma’mur 2006 (a pioneering attempt to integrate the Muslim gnostic poets of the modern period into the pantheon of Tajik Persian literature, though with no interest in Soviet-era Sufi production); Rahmoni 2010 (two brief, curiously separate sections are devoted to ‘edifying religious histories’ [*qiṣṣas*] and *riwāyāt*, the former treated as the residual practice of just a handful of religious scholars, the latter connected to historical figures and events); Shi’rdūst 2011 (transposing entries from Tajik encyclopaedias of the Soviet and current periods); Hitchins 2018 (study focused, for poetry, on figures of poet laureates, tracing their activities through the progress of Russification and Realism). . . .

²⁶ For references to Bahā’ al-Dīn, the eponymous saint of the Naqshbandiyya, and appeals for his intercession (*shafā’at*) by 20th-century Sufis, see e.g. Asrorī 1990, pp. 242-3. On the memory of Ḥusayn and his martyrdom at Karbalā in Tajik folk orature, see e.g. Rabiev 1998, pp. 133-4; Rajabī 2001, pp. 34-43; Fathulloev & Murodov 2007, p. 269 (in an elegy, *marthiya*, collected from the Kulab plain in the south of the country and bearing traces of Ismailism, which prevails in the upper valleys of neighbouring Badakhshan).

²⁷ As for the locally famous Bābā-Yūnus Khudāyādāzāda (c. 1870–1945): see the testimonies published since the 1950s, collected by Khudoidodzoda, Iunusov & Ahmadov 2008, esp. pp. 22–23.

²⁸ Cf. Habibov 1984, pp. 157-218, especially 207-18 on the work of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Ḥayy Mujakharfī. A brief biographical sketch of Ḥabībzāda can be found in Gulnazar 2003, p. 84 (who celebrates him for his contribution to the ‘research and resurrection of forgotten works of Tajik Persian literary circles’ of the pre-Soviet period). On his work generally speaking, see Gatling 2015, pp. 216-8.

can mention, for Qarategin, those conducted on the work of the gnostic poet Shaykh ‘Abd al-Ḥayy Mujakharfī (c. 1867-1931), in connection with the editing of earlier regional authors such as the Sufi poet Mawlawī Shāhidī ‘Rashtī’ (active in the first half of the 10th/16th c.) and the Hanafi Sunni religious poets Mawlānā Jāmī-i Thānī (active at the end of the 10th/16th c.) and Mawlawī Junūnī (c. 1216/1801-2 – 1295/1878) — all read in the Sufi underground of the Soviet period. A Persian-speaking Hanafi Sunni religious poet active in the second half of the 10th/16th century between Bukhara and Namangan in the Ferghana Valley, the ‘Second Jāmī’, in particular, had his work copied extensively until the middle of the 20th century in the Tajik SSR.²⁹ This copying work is all the more important for our purpose as it allows us to reconstitute, even if only in part, the discursive background of the work of our gnostic poets of the Soviet period.

Such reconstruction is crucial, for the fact is that very little is known about Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Dawlat, as well as about his disciple and continuator Dāmullā Iskandar. To the former I have devoted an exploratory study, accompanied by the translation of some pieces of his work.³⁰ The latter has left us five manuscript collections of short poetry.³¹ Only one of these was still in the possession of his son Sharāf al-Dīn, when I was able to visit him in September 2005. Reputedly copied out by the author himself, it is called ‘Draft of a *dīwān* of Dāmullā Iskandar Bīdakī’ (*Matn-i musawwada-i dīwān-i ash‘ār-i Dāmullā Iskandar Bīdakī*). It was used, along with others which I have not been able to consult in full and which will not be mentioned here, in three successive editions of Iskandar’s works. The first is a collection of ghazals published in 2000 on the basis of a manuscript compiled ten years earlier by a certain Sayyid Muḥyī al-Dīn.³² The second consists of an anthology printed the same year in Iran, partly on the basis of the previous one, by the philologist Shādī Raḥīmzāda, a researcher at the Institute of Oriental Studies and Manuscript Heritage of the Tajik Academy of Sciences. The third is an anthology in Cyrillic characters published in 2005 by the independent philologist Sayyid Aḥmad Qalandar.³³

2. Hermeticism and orality: a Soviet specificity?

The Mujaddidi Naqshbandi guide Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Dawlat Īlākī, alias Ḥaẓrat-i Buzurgwār (c. 1881-1947), occupies a special place in the collective memory of Tajikistan, due to his identification with Qarategin, a modern regional centre of the Naqshbandiyya as we shall see in the next paragraphs. Born in the wintering village of Īlāk, at the entrance to the upper valley, shortly after its annexation to the Russian-subjugated Emirate of Bukhara, ‘Abd al-Raḥīm, if his personal legend is anything to go by, studied in that city at the prestigious Mīr-i ‘Arab madrasa, spending a year at the shrine of Khwāja Bahā’ al-Dīn Naqshband, the great ancestor of the Sufi tradition that bears his name. In Bukhara, ‘Abd al-Raḥīm became associated with masters from the ‘Mountain’ (*kūhistān*), as the urban faction (*firqa*)

²⁹ E.g. Habibov 1984, pp. 207-16; Hotam 2005. On the Soviet posterity of Mawlawī Junūnī, see the testimony of Īshān Maḥmūd-Khān Tūrajānzāda (in Mavlavī Jununī 2009, pp. 3-14; on the Tūrajānzādas: supra note 8); Gatling 2018, pp. 80-85, 89-93; on the general popularity of Mujaddidi literature in Transoxiana in the 20th century, see Babadjanov, Krämer & Paul 2000, pp. IX-X.

³⁰ Cf. Dudoignon 2021b, esp. the introduction pp. 198-202.

³¹ According to the Tajikistani philologist Shādī Raḥīmzāda (2005, p. 6), who was in contact with the family.

³² Supra note 21.

³³ Dāmullā Iskandar Bīdakī 1992; *ibid.* 2000; *ibid.* 2005.

comprising scholars from the eastern regions of the emirate was then called.

Upon his return to Qarategin in around 1910, he specialised in Islamic gnosis, to which he devoted a dozen works in Persian verse of classical form, among them an anthology of 63 ghazals entitled *Kashf al-asrār* ('The Unveiling of Secrets'), published in 2000 in Cyrillic.³⁴ Inspired by masters of Persian didactic poetry from the 4th/11th to the 8th/15th century, such as Sanāyī, Aṭṭār, Mawlānā, Ḥāfiẓ and Jāmī, this work also takes inspiration from the poetic tradition of Qarategin, represented at the turn of the 20th century by the abovementioned Shaykh 'Abd al-Ḥayy Mujakharfī. The latter's works seem to have been read and commented upon in Persian-speaking Sufi circles of the Tajik SSR.³⁵ Coming from the powerful *Dahbīdī* lineage of the Naqshbandiyya (relinked to Khwāja Aḥmad Kāsānī, known as Makhdūm-i A'zam, d. 949/1542), Shaykh 'Abd al-Ḥayy embodies the lineage-based Islam that was to characterise Sufism in the Soviet era.

His work, marked by the cultivation of the 'Hindustani style' (*sabk-i hindī*) of Persian verse, deliberately hermetic, rich in imagery and saturated with references to the gnostic Islamic past, also influenced that of 'Abd al-Raḥīm through its oral dimension: it was sung, during the 20th century, in mystical assemblies (*maḥāfil*, sing. *maḥfil*; *majālis*, sing. *majlis*).³⁶ Discovered by the uninitiated public in the 2000s, it is celebrated nowadays by the Writers' Union of Tajikistan — in whose eyes the *sabk-i hindī* particularises Tajik literary heritage and its privileged link, since the 10th/16th century, with the Indian subcontinent. The commemoration of Shaykh 'Abd al-Raḥīm also enriches present hagiographic experiments that place 20th-century Muslim gnostic poetry at the heart of the current culture of an Islamic past specific to Soviet Central Asia. In particular, this culture insists on the regional dimension of the *vita* of Shaykh 'Abd al-Ḥayy Mujakharfī: the latter's current biographers can claim that he never left Qarategin.³⁷ (This claim marks a break with older accounts, as well as with Central Asian Muslim hagiography, which is often centred on the initiatory journeys of men of God and on their privileged encounters, often supernatural, far from their place of origin.)³⁸

These texts from the pre-Soviet period together with Shaykh 'Abd al-Raḥīm's own ghazals form the basis of the spiritual teaching that he gave in Īlāk until his death in 1947. The listeners of these lessons belonged to a small circle of acquaintances. Among these were another gnostic poet, Dāmullā Iskandar Bīdakī, already mentioned, and one of the future masters of the Soviet Tajik Mujaddidiyya, Īshān 'Abd al-Raḥmān-Jān b. Īshān Pārsā Khwāja, aka Ḥazrat-i Pīr ('the venerable', 1920-91). These would carry on the Mujaddidi spiritual and literary tradition in Qarategin until the eve of the dissolution of the USSR. Dāmullā Iskandar and Īshān 'Abd al-Raḥmān-Jān would themselves become the subject of a hagiographic process from the 1990s onwards, in connection with the glorification of Qarategin as a whole, via the sanctification of a single spiritual lineage.

The posthumous memorialization of Shaykh 'Abd al-Raḥīm Dawlat tends to emphasise his status as the embodiment of a lineage-based Islam nourished by Sunni Persian traditions. In

³⁴ Selected French translations and commentary in Dudoignon 2021b.

³⁵ Cf. Gatling 2015, pp. 222–7.

³⁶ On these assemblies in Soviet and early post-Soviet Tajikistan, seen Dudoignon & Zevaco 2009, esp. pp. 281–90; elements of comparison with different Tatar-speaking regions of Soviet Russia in Bustanov 2017, pp. 200–1.

³⁷ Ex. Muhammadiusuf 2018, pp. 48 sq.

³⁸ Cf. Papas 2018; for the present period, e.g. Bigozhin 2022a–b (on various examples of post-Soviet Qazaq hagiography).

his first articles about him in the local press, beginning in 1999, the philologist Mīrzā-Ḥusayn Badalīpūr, professor of Language and Literature and then of Religious Studies at the Tajikistan State University, in Dushanbe, emphasised Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥīm’s regional roots.³⁹ (Professor Badalīpūr was assisted by Shaykh Qamar al-Dīn Darwāzī, a disciple of Ḥaẓrat-i Pīr, who has himself copied five of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥīm’s works.)

The central theme of this poetry of classical meter is a guide’s exhortation to his disciples to follow the Naqshbandiyya. The Naqshbandis’ hierarchical and ritualised Sufi sociability is presented as the best bulwark against the evils of a period of impiety and of aggravated repression of Islam and its clerics, with much praise of the traditional Naqshbandi practice of inner or silent *dhikr* (invocation of the divine) as a prudential response to political repression. Hence the importance, in this work, of Naqshbandi themes par excellence such as ‘seclusion in society’ (*khalwat dar anjuman*), which is facilitated by the ‘union of the Clear-Sighted’ (*ba khalwat anjuman dārīm zi bahr-i waṣl-i hūshyārḥā*).⁴⁰

What distinguishes this work from that of the later Dāmullā Iskandar is an emphasis on both rhythm and hermeticism, thus following the example of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Ḥayy Mujakharfī. The vocabulary, refined, is peppered with Arabicisms. The classical *wazn* (metre), though more irregular in its application than in Mujakharfī, remains highly rhythmic. Finally, the taste for repetition from one *bayt* to the next, accentuated by elementary rhyme, suggests that, like the Mujaddidis’ permanent inner *dhikr*, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥīm’s verses were meant to be memorised and recited *in petto* more than for declamation. This modular writing, the repetitive character and exhortatory tone of the whole are hardly a novelty in Naqshbandi gnosticism as far as Central Asia is concerned: such tendencies already characterised, for example, the work of Shāhidī Rashtī in the 9th/16th century.⁴¹ But in ‘Abd al-Raḥīm’s work they have a different significance: as an underground preacher, ‘Abd al-Raḥīm sought to communicate his message as directly and efficiently as possible, and these literary traits enabled him to outline in highly distilled form the various essential principles of the Naqshbandi tradition. One element of novelty is how Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥīm offers a counterpunch to official Soviet propaganda. Frequently in his verses he exhorts his audience to choose between ‘faith’ and ‘blasphemy’ (*az miyān-i kufr u imān ‘ishq-i ū kun ikhtyār / bas ki ‘āshiq kay bidānad ka’ba wu butkhānarā* [‘between blasphemy and faith, choose the love of Him / for confounding the idol is enough for the Fearful’]).⁴³

More classically, ‘Abd al-Raḥīm exhorts his reader to the search for a ‘Guide’ (*hādī, rahbar*) suitable for the times, in a Mujaddidi spirit very much inspired by Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1034/1624), the founder of the Mujadidiyya: *shawad dar har zamān az luṭf-i Ḥaqq rahbar paydā* [‘a Guide through Him in every era is found’].⁴⁴ Central in classical Sufism, the theme of spiritual guidance (*hidāyat*) found a particular echo among the Islamic poets of the Soviet period and in their present-day hagiography, certainly due to the precariousness of this guidance in the 20th century.⁴⁵ If we situate Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥīm’s verses within a longer literary tradition, we see that he is engaging here with the very essence of what constitutes the specificity

³⁹ Cf. Badalipūr & Darvozi 2000.

⁴⁰ *Kashf-ul-asror*, p. 28. On Sufi ‘isolationism’ under Stalin among the Tatar-language Muslim religious poets of Russia: Bustanov 2017, pp. 203 sq.

⁴¹ Ex. Mavlavī Shohidī Rashtī 2003, pp. 19 sq. (of the Persian text).

⁴³ *Kashf-ul-asror*, p. 34.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 31.

⁴⁵ About Soviet Russia, cf. Bustanov 2017, p. 217-9.

of the ghazal, a literary genre established as early as the 5th-6th/12th-13th centuries, for the Persianate world, by authors such as Sanā'ī (d. c. 524/1130) and 'Aṭṭār (d. c. 600/1221). The work of these two founders was read, copied and commented upon in Mawara al-Nahr until the height of the Soviet era, especially by masters such as Shaykh 'Abd al-Raḥīm and, after WWII, his disciple Īshān 'Abd al-Raḥmān-Jān, a copyist of 'Aṭṭār's works. (Note that Sanā'ī and 'Aṭṭār's works were studied by Tajik philology since the end of the Soviet period.)⁴⁶ The works of Sanā'ī and of 'Aṭṭār had been born in a context of preaching (they are sometimes referred to as homiletic poetry), focused on the 'necessity of the master'.⁴⁷ The popularity of such works in 20th-century Tajik Sufi cenacles reflects their status as examples of subversive gnostic poetry. Focused on the symbolic apology of wine and drunkenness, they are then combined with a rigorist identification between *adab* (a term that can be translated as 'education', 'manners', 'culture') and *akhlāq* ('ethics', 'morals') – an identification characteristic, in Islam, of the gnostic literature of the Mongol period as well as of the modern colonial and Soviet periods, all eras of subjugation under non-Muslim rule.⁴⁸

A preacher for troubled times, 'Abd al-Raḥīm has become the courier of an endangered heritage, to a cenacle of initiates who mastered the 'codes' (*rumūz*) of gnosis. This explains the central place, in his verses, of this notion of *adab*, the code of values of the honest man in the Islamic tradition, re-read in the 19th and 20th centuries as a crucible of spiritual refinement.⁵⁰ It was this role as transmitter of Sufi *adab* that earned Shaykh 'Abd al-Raḥīm the homage of his disciple Dāmullā Iskandar Bīdakī, the continuator of his literary work in Qarategin, in a genre of ghazal that continued to evolve until the end of the Soviet period. Although this poetry remained unpublished until Tajikistan's independence, its existence explains the relative popularity then acquired by the region's Sufi heritage: the madrasa of Gharm, the capital of Qarategin, built in the 1990s, bears the name of Dāmullā Iskandar. And when I took a taxi from the town, on a fine day in September 2005, for an impromptu visit to Bīdak, the driver, a Gharm pensioner, knowing where to take me, dropped me off without a moment's hesitation in front of the master's family home.



Dāmullā Iskandar b. 'Abd al-Salām b. Ṣūfī Ṣafar 'Bīdakī' (c. 1895-1989) was, according to his kinsmen, the son of a cleric who briefly took up arms against the incipient Soviet regime. Educated by his mother Gawhar, his older brother Mullā Ḥaydar and a local scholar, one Dāmullā 'Abd al-Ḥakīm Qaznāqī,⁵¹ Iskandar went to continue his studies of Hanafi Sunni *fiqh* in Bukhara under the Russian protectorate, until the city was taken by the Red Army in August 1920. According to family tradition, he returned to the country after the change of regime and continued to study with a paternal uncle, Dāmullā Islām, who had similarly once

⁴⁶ For example by Karomatullo Olimov (1944-), who was to become Tajikistan's Minister of Culture from 2001 to 2004, before heading successively the Institutes of Philosophy and Oriental Studies of the country's Academy of Sciences. His main works from the 1970s to the 1990s on the history of Mediaeval Persian gnosis were republished a decade ago: Olimov 2014. Among these texts: *Mirovozzrenie Sanoī* [Sanā'ī's Worldview], Dushanbe: Donish, 1973.

⁴⁷ Cf. Feuillebois-Pierunek 2020, esp. pp. 204 sq.

⁴⁸ Cf. Mayeur-Jaouen & Patrizi 2017; Mayeur-Jaouen 2021.

⁵⁰ On 20th-century Central Asia, cf. Dudoignon 2020, esp. pp. 542-3.

⁵¹ Qaznāq is a village located a few kilometres downstream from Gharm, on the northern bank of the Surkhāb, the upper reaches of the Wakhsh. It is glorified today for having been host to several Muslim religious scholars in the first half of the 20th century.

studied at Bukharan madrasas (as suggested by his title of *dāmullā*,⁵² which his nephew took over). Iskandar appears to have studied also with two North India-trained theologians, including a certain Mawlawī Ṣadr al-Dīn Nawshārī Tājīkābādī. (The latter’s Hindustani pedigree is suggested by his title *mawlawī*, ‘master’, which in Central Asia has been attached, since the beginning of the 20th century, to the names of former boarders of the madrasas of the so-called Deoband School and, more generally, of the Islamic religious schools of North India.)

In the 1920s-30s, as the coexistence of *dāmullās* and *mawlawīs* suggests, Qarategin became a refuge for Hanafi Sunni clerics, after having sheltered numbers of resistance fighters to the Red Army in 1919-21.⁵³ Their influence and legacy would extend over a wider territory thanks to the population resettlements that the Soviet authorities organised, from 1946-47 onwards, towards the cotton-growing lowlands of the southern Tajik SSR. According to various post-humous hagiographic accounts, Iskandar then became a specialist in *tafsīr*, Hadith and *uṣūl al-fiqh*. He would teach these disciplines in the suburban village of Qizil-Qal’a, in the former Kuibyshev district (in Tajik, Kūybēsh, east of Qurghan-Teppa), home to a large displaced population from Qarategin, where he resided from the mid-1940s until the 1970s. Kūybēsh was reputed during the same period as the abode of several Mujaddidi lineages of Qarategini origin. Qizil-Qal’a itself hosted the underground preaching of a Mujaddidi master, Īshān ‘Azīz Khwāja (c. 1888-1976), who had come from the village of Lālazar, some fifteen kilometres upstream from Gharm.⁵⁴ Īshān ‘Azīz Khwāja had also been received into the Mujaddidiyya by Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Dawlat, whose village of Īlāk is only a few kilometres away from those of ‘Azīz Khwāja and Dāmullā Iskandar, in the heart of Qarategin.⁵⁵ According to the testimony of his son, Iskandar in turn became a master in the *ṭarīqa*, leading a *dhikr* for the students of his classes, in the *khāfi* (silent) tradition that had been ‘that of all his masters’.

Various allusions in his work suggest, however, that Dāmullā Iskandar composed most of it in his last decade, at the end of a life of hard work and solitary learning.⁵⁶ In his ghazals he notes that he was not initiated into the Sufi tradition until an advanced age.⁵⁷ And he laments

⁵² Common in Central Asia, where it seems to have spread from east of the Tian Shan, the title *dāmullā* appears to be composed of the Chinese 大 (*da*, ‘great’) and the Persian term of Arabic origin *mullā*, ‘master’: an etymology proposed by the Swedish diplomat and Turkologist Gunnar Jarring (1907-2002) in his *Return to Kashgar: Central Asian memoirs in the present*, trans. E. Claesson, Durham: Duke University Press, 1986 (original ed. 1979), p. 107.

⁵³ On this period, see notably Ismailov 1977, pp. 30–31.

⁵⁴ On the life and the local posterity of Īshān ‘Azīz Khwāja, cf. Dudoignon 2011, pp. 62–63.

⁵⁵ Cf. Raḥīmzāda 2000, pp. 4–5; interviews of the present author with Īshān Ayyūb Khwāja b. Īshān ‘Azīz Khwāja, Qizil-Qal’a, 4 August and 20 December 2004; with Īshān Sharāf al-Dīn b. Dāmullā Iskandar, Bīdak, 28 September 2005.

⁵⁶ See the poem entitled ‘At Seventy Years of Age’ (*Haftād sālagī*), opened by the distich ‘At seventy years of age I joined Your palace, / old orant, having celebrated Thee alone all this time’ (*āmadam darbār-i dhātāt ‘arīf-i [sic] haftād sāl / yakka wu yagāna khāndam [sic] turā haftād sāl*), in *Matn-i musawwada*, f. 28b, untitled in *Duoi subhgoh*, p. 25; see also the hemistich ‘All alone I studied for eighty years’ (*yakka wa yagāna khwāndam muddat-i hashtād sāl*), in *Rahgudhar*, p. 16; *Duoi subhgoh*, p. 38 — a poem absent from the *daftar*, and suggesting that Iskandar’s writing of his work may have spread, in fact, over at least a decade.

⁵⁷ ‘Late did I join, alas, His lovers / and so remained His most humble servant’ (*pīsh-i jānān dīr kardam wādarīghā āmadam / zīn sabab az kamtarīn chākirān hastam hanūz*), *Rahgudhar*, p. 33; ‘At Your door, O Clement, late I knocked alas, / old, confused, embarrassed’ (*dargah-i dhātāt, Karīmā, wā darīgh, dīr āmadam, / mūsafīd u rūsīyah, sharmsārān āmadam*), *ibid.* p. 38.

the fact that he is living in an age when ‘the best ones’ are no longer alive:⁵⁸ a recurrent theme, if ever there was one, in Sufi literature, made more topical by impressions of disinheritance of Islam under Soviet rule. Borrowing a trope from Badr al-Dīn Hilālī, a Persian poet from 9th/15th-century Herat, Iskandar states that the master’s absence makes him envy not only the dog in the Cave of the Seven Sleepers (symbols of the resurrection of a long-suppressed confessional tradition), standing guard at the entrance to the cave, but even — and here he is really laying on the humility — the bone in said dog’s mouth.⁵⁹

The lament of an unfinished mystical experience is ubiquitous among the classics; it appears for instance in Ḥāfiz, whom Dāmullā Iskandar indeed quotes. The subject of nightly weeping, it takes on a particular resonance in Iskandar’s verses.⁶⁰ Despite the number of disciples that Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Dawlat may have had at the end of his life, their dispersion and the rarity of their encounters reinforce in Iskandar a feeling of loneliness as well as of disaffection, accentuated by the successive mourning for six sons.⁶¹ This feeling may also express the implicit questioning of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Dawlat’s other successors — of Īshān ‘Abd al-Raḥmān-Jān among others, who was endowed with a genealogy more prestigious than Iskandar’s, who contrasts to this noble ascent the memory of his own father’s resistance to Soviet power.⁶² This is about all that is known about the context of the composition of these poems, other than the fact that Iskandar’s family (one son in particular, Dāmullā Sharāf al-Dīn, and a daughter, Bībī Salīma) played a key role in the preservation and posthumous copying and printing of his work.

3. Dāmullā Iskandar and the Issue of Sainthood

Celebrated in a period of upheaval as a reassuring embodiment of cultural continuity, Dāmullā Iskandar’s work nevertheless expresses a subtle shift, if we compare it with the verses of his master Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥīm. Certainly, obvious formal and thematic continuities between the two can be identified, beginning with the centrality in their respective works of the subject of the necessity of spiritual guidance. An axial theme in the Persian ghazal since

⁵⁸ ‘The best of them are in the ground: / no answer from them, no news at all. // No trace either of their lovers’ attractions, / for these young beauties have become dust’ (*jumla-i nīkān ba khāk-i dahr yaksān gashta and / nī z īshānān jawāb, nī khabar bāshad darīgh // har yakī zulf-i ‘arūsān shud judā az farq-i sar / har yakī zībā jawānān khāk gashtand wā darīgh*), *Rahgudhar*, p. 35.

⁵⁹ ‘And how, hatchling, can I get away from your sight? / What can I do but make myself a dog of your street, / even though to your dog I would like to be a bone?’ (*man-i ‘ājiz na bardāram sar-i khūd az sar-i kūyat / nadānam banda-i rū-yi tū bāsham yā sag-i kūyat / walī khwāham ki az bahr-i sagānat ustukhwān bāsham*), *mukhammas* ‘*Man-i ‘ājiz yakī az kamtarīn. . .*’ on a ghazal by Hilālī, in *Rahgudhar*, p. 61, *Duoī subhgoh* 105. On the legend of the Cave or Cavern of the Seven Sleepers and its Central Asian fortune, see in particular Zarccone 2011, pp. 253, 256; on Hilālī: Bernardini 2003.

⁶⁰ Ex. ‘I have not yet drunk the wine from His lips, / nor smelled the scent of the flowers of His garden. // [. . .] I saw myself as a scholar, driven by my ardour, / without distinguishing the Paths to the true or the vain’ (*az may-i la’l-i lab-i dilbar nanūshīdam hanūz / yak gulī az bāgh-i waṣl-i ū nabū’īdam hanūz // [. . .] khwīshrā ‘ālim shumurdam az hawā-yi nafs-i bad / farq nākarda rah-i ḥaqq az rah-i bātil hanūz*), *Rahgudhar*, p. 32.

⁶¹ Mourned in several elegies (*marthiyas*): *Rahgudhar*, pp. 67–70; *Duoī subhgoh*, pp. 68–69.

⁶² As in a rare *mukhammas* to the glory of his forefathers: ‘To oppression you preferred danger: / who am I, when you drew the sword? // Of that father, alas, far away I remained, / of Ḥamza the model I should have embraced: // whose nobility remains in this world today?’ (*bā chunīn khabar u jafā raftīd shumā rāh-i khaṭar / man chi kardam bā shumā ki zadīd tīgh u tabar // dūr māndīm wādarīgh az nazd-i ān shāh-i padar / Ḥamza sarkhīl-i shahīdān bāshadam ‘amm-i padar / īnchunīn aṣl u nasab dar jumla-i ‘ālam kīrāst ?*), *Rahgudhar*, pp. 56–57.

the 5th/12th- and 6th/13th-century gnostics Sanā'ī and 'Aṭṭār, two explicit literary models of 'Abd al-Raḥīm and Iskandar, the quest for the master remained so in the Naqshbandiyya through its successive mutations between the late 8th/14th century and the present.

In a ghazal composed as an ode to his master 'Abd al-Raḥīm, the poet of Bīdak borrows from him the classical figure, in Persian spiritual eroticism, of the night butterfly (*parwāna*) dancing, 'in circular procession' (*ṭawāf*) around the figure of the departed guide.⁶³ This theme is found in a *mukhammas* of the *Matn-i musawwada* that was not included either in the texts collected in 2000 by the philologist Shādī Raḥīmzāda or in the anthology 'The Prayer of the Dawn' edited five years later, in Cyrillic, by Sayyid Aḥmad Qalandar:

روز و شب در انتظارت از کجا یابم ترا	ای پیر کامل جان فدایت از کجا یابم ترا
ای یوسف گمگشته من از کجا یابم ترا	همچون مجنون در فراق از کجا یابم ترا
ای هادی لطف حقیقت از کجا یابم ترا	
هم کرامات [هم] لطافت همه احسان تو	[...] رفته به چرخ فلک هم فیض هم احسان تو
شد زیارت گاه خلق آستان پاک تو	رفته تا عرش عالی روح شریف پاک تو
جان فدای تربت من از کجا یابم ترا	
در طواف روضه ات من دست پاکم میکنم	[...] ای ره نمای عاصیان من آه افغان میکنم
از من مسکین رضا شو التجایت میکنم	هر زمانی با روح پاکت ختم قرآن میکنم
عوف کن جرم دریغا از کجا یابم ترا	

O perfect master, where to find thee, poor me,
Night and day I wait for you, how can I meet thee?
Far from thee as Majnūn, longing for thy roof,
O Yūsuf the Wanderer, where then to find thee?
Where to seek thee, O guide to the Truth?

[. . .] Flee thy grace, thy favour, to other skies,
Miracle, privilege, consideration: all thy benefits!
Gone to the worsening, your virtuous spirit,
And thy threshold now a hospice for wanderers.
Tell me, dust of your grave, where to look for thee!

[. . .] O guide of sinners, I long for you,
Seeking ablution in the water of thy court.
The Qur'an in my mind I never cease to read,
Be pleased with me: I seek thy asylum,
And forgive my faults. Where shall I seek thee?⁶⁴

Written over a short period of time, in little more than a decade in the latter years of a life of labour, Iskandar's verses are distinguished by their formal and thematic coherence, sometimes verging on a certain uniformity. His poetry, less strewn with Arabicisms than that of his predecessor, is accessible to a readership endowed with elements of classical Persian culture but lacking the technical mastery of madrasa students. Even in its classicism, it thus bears witness to a transformation. Its relative simplicity doubtless partly explains the popularity it seems to have enjoyed in the years following its author's death in March 1989 and

⁶³ *Rahgudhar*, p. 42; transcriptions and French translation on the 'Hypotheses' blog of the RedGold ANR Research Programme: <https://redgold.hypotheses.org/705>, posted on 2022/02/03.

⁶⁴ *Mukhammas* entitled 'Dar marthiyya-i al-Shaykh 'Abd al-Raḥīm Quṭb al-Aqṭāb', in *Matn-i musawwada*, ff. 26a-27a (not included in the collections edited to date).

the fall of the Iron Curtain in November of the same year.

Exceptional, moreover, from this point of view is the aforementioned tribute ghazal to Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥīm, through which Dāmullā Iskandar defines Soviet Muslim sainthood. Sprinkled with Arabicisms as were the poems of his guide, this ghazal of Iskandar claims a Central Asian Sunni Persian confessional and spiritual ancestry, through allusions to the madrasas of Bukhara where, as noted above, both master and disciple were trained and educated, as well as to the Naqshbandi shrine of Shāyakhsī, in the district of Fayzābād, which both allegedly attended. At the same time, Iskandar refers to a specifically Persian line of transmission of Islam, through a brief allusion to Salmān al-Fārsī (‘the Persian’), whom the tradition of Prophet Muḥammad makes the latter’s first non-Arab Companion.

One of the two *qaṣīdas* in the ‘Small Guide’ completes the retrospective portrait of Islamic sainthood, attached to the memory of the golden age of the family of the Prophet of Islam, dispersed after the disaster of Karbalā. (‘Mothers separated, siblings disunited, / daughters left without fathers, mothers without sons, / brothers made pilgrims, spinning, weakened, / saints set out in memory of ‘Ali, / prophets gone with the help of their Seal.’)⁶⁵ The praise of Muḥammad, a paragon of science and humility, is a recurrent theme, linked also to the figure of the master as intercessor allowing the appearance of the Prophet in dreams.⁶⁶ Such praise is associated with the contemplation of ‘saints and scholars’ (*awliyā wa ‘ulamā*), pillars of the sharia and public morality⁶⁷ — pillars also of gnostic sociability, the oblivion of which nourishes Iskandar’s feeling of solitude.⁶⁸ Three other golden ages can be discerned in his verses, via the latter’s system of quotations: first, the end of the 6th/12th century, that of Sanā’ī and ‘Aṭṭār, seen as an apogee of Sufism and the era of fixation of the literary canons, before the destructions of the Mongol period; then the 9th/15th century, the era of the apogee in Herat of a court culture deeply impacted by Sufi tradition; finally, the 12th-13th/18th-19th centuries, a period of revival of Sufi sociability before the reductions in scale imposed by the short 20th century.

The nostalgia for Sufi sociability explains the recurrence of the theme of the mystical banquet.⁶⁹ In Iskandar’s verses, the solidarity of the society of the Lovers (*‘āshiqān, jānān, ‘azīzān*),

⁶⁵ *Mādarān andar firāq wa kūdakān zārī kunān / dukhtarān-i bī padar bā mādarān zārī kunān / ham barādar bā barādar tashnalab zārī kunān / awliyā az bahr-i khāṭir-i ‘Alī zārī kunān / anbiyā bar iltifāt-i Muṣṭafā bigurīsta* (Rahgudhar, p. 70).

⁶⁶ Ex. ‘Many times, thanks be to God, I have dreamed of the Prophet, / always through the perfect master. // [. . .] Better than a father, a mother and a kin: / his breath always the Path of love reveals’ (*shukr-Allah bārḥā dīdam rasūl Allah ba khwāb / ānhama az fayz-i pīr-i kāmīl paydā shawad // [. . .] pīr-i kāmīl bihtar ast az wālidayn u aqrabā / az nufūs-i ū tarīq-i ‘ishq-i ū paydā shawad*), Rahgudhar, p. 28; *Duoi subhgoh*, p. 50.

⁶⁷ Ex. ‘Saints and scholars enlighten our religion, / guiding us day and night to redemption’ (*awliyā wu ‘ulamā bāshand charāgh-i dīn-i mā / rahbarī dārānd mardum dar hidāyat rūz u shab*), *Duoi subhgoh*, p. 22.

⁶⁸ Ex. ‘Where, alas, have these wise men gone, / all disappeared at the hands of the ignorant? // [. . .] Here are the people, alas, in error: / boasting today is worth the discourse of a scholar // [. . .] I flee, driven away by the blame of the fool: / to say the truth has made me their rival. // No respect henceforth for the saint, the scholar: / blockheads, will you find the way of Judgement?’ (*kujā raftand darīgh ān ‘ālimān-i bā ‘amal imrūz / tamām-i ‘ālimān raftand zi dast-i jāhilān imrūz // [. . .] darīghā dar zālālat rafta and khalqān zi gumrahī / ki yak lāf-i durūgh bihtar zi qawl-i ‘ālimān imrūz // [. . .] gurīzānam zi mulk-i khūd zi ṭā‘n-i mardum-i jāhil / zi guftār-i ḥaqqam dushman shudam bar jāhilān imrūz / namānda ast, wādarīgh, dar awliyā wa ‘ulamā ḥurmat / kujā yābad širāt al-mustaqīm īn jāhilān imrūz*), ghazal entitled ‘Of the Glory of Scholars’ (*Dar sha‘n-i ‘ālimān*) in *Matn-i musawwada*, ff. 11a–b; reproduced without title in *Rahgudhar* (p. 30) and in *Duoi subhgoh* (pp. 58–9).

⁶⁹ Ex. ‘As soon as you enter the Pavilion of the Thirsty, / you light it up with your perfect beauty (*gar qadam mānī ba har kāshāna-i tashnalabān / az jamāl-i khwīsh rawshan mīkunī kāshānarā*), *Rahgudhar*, p. 17.

which is to say gnostic adepts, most notably members of the Naqshbandiyya, is a bulwark against antireligious repression.⁷⁰ Gnostic work within the Mujaddidi tradition is thus presented as the best possible protection against an era of corruption (*fasād*) of morals. The saint and the man of knowledge are above all renunciants: in both Iskandar's ghazals and those of his master there are repeated calls for the audience to embrace the rigours of deprivation, for the abandonment of an earthly world defined as 'a theatre of dissension' (*fitnasarā*).⁷¹ This reminder of the vanity of all things, these exhortations to repentance and a return to religion are classic themes. However, Iskandar does not simply praise temperance (*ṣabr*) over rebellion (*jurm*, *ʿiṣyān*), but goes so far as to advocate the nobility of the permanent *dhikr*.⁷²

More than ever, in a context of endangered spiritual tradition, the aspirant (*murīd*) becomes an attester to his master's sainthood. In the 1970s–80s, Dāmullā Iskandar's homage to Shaykh 'Abd al-Raḥīm allowed him, too, to recall the role played by Qarategin and its migrant populations in the preservation and transmission of what is now a heritage, through the 20th century. It is in this capacity, indeed, that master and disciple are today officially celebrated as embodiments of the polysemous figure of the 'sage' (Pers. *farzāna*, *dānishmand*), in local historiography — this genre now serving as a tacit outlet for Islamic hagiography, at a time of re-establishment in Tajikistan of censorship of 'religious' literature.⁷³ In the regional biographical dictionaries that are now in vogue, modelled on both Islamic and Soviet examples of the genre, a selection of 'famous sages of Islam' (*dānishmandān-i ma'rūf-i islāmī*) sits alongside lists of 'state and party officials'.⁷⁴

Against this background, the heritage value currently ascribed by this encyclopaedic literature to the gnostic verses of Dāmullā Iskandar has become an issue for cultural and political power, central and regional, as well as for the poet's own people — among whom the Arabic script of his manuscripts is called 'historic script' (*khatt-i tārikh*).⁷⁵ The family of Iskandar has been torn, since the turn of the 21st century, between a desire to maintain the secrecy of the gnostic teachings of its spiritual lineage, reserved among the Naqshbandis for cenacles of initiates, and a desire to preserve this heritage by disseminating it as widely as possible.

⁷⁰ 'Defeated are scholars and saints, here: / the fear of all their enemies takes to the viscera. / [. . .] Shall you turn against them, too, / you will join Bū-Jahl tomorrow in the underworld. / Become, poor Iskandar, of the Fearful servants / for with them you will glimpse the Houries (*hama ahl-i 'ulūm wa awliyā gashtand zabūn injā / zi khūf-i dushmanān-i dīn darūn-i sīna bīmār ast / [. . .] agar dushman shawī bā awliyā wa 'ulamā'-i dīn / ba fardā hamrah-i Bū-Jahl tūrā yak qiṭ'a-i nār ast / biyā Iskandar-i 'āṣī tū khādīm bāsh jānānrā / ki hamrah-i jānān bihisht-i hūr dīdār ast*), *Rahgudhar*, p. 17. Abū-Jahl (d. 624) was a prominent Meccan hostile to Muḥammad at the beginning of his preaching.

⁷¹ *Rahgudhar*, p. 21.

⁷² On the pre-eminence of constant inner *dhikr*: 'Rise Iskandar, moved by love, on the mall, / praise God steadfastly : here below is not your place' (*khīz Iskandar zi ḥubb-i māsawā andar gudhar / dhikr Allah kun mudām chūn īn jahān jā-yi tū nīst*), *Matn-i musawwada*, ff. 18b–19a, *Duoi subhgoh*, pp. 44–45; and, on the *dhikr* of dawn: 'Better thy death than sleep at this hour of dawn' (*marg-i tū bihtar ki khwāb-i ān zamān dar waqt-i ṣubḥ*), *ibid.* p. 26.

⁷³ On the various effects of this censorship on Sufi literary practice in Tajikistan, see Gatling 2018, pp. 167 sq.

⁷⁴ See e.g. the article 'Domullo Iskandari Gharmī', in Amirbekov 2015, pp. 129–30; for comparison with the present-day sanctification process in the southern Khatlan plain, see Asozoda & Asozoda 2015, esp. pp. 114–253 (on men of God active, too, in the region during the short 20th century). A study is in preparation by the present author on this type of literature.

⁷⁵ Interview of the present author with Īshān Sharāf al-Dīn, Bīdak, 28 September 2005.

4. Khalwat or ‘inner exile’: on the issue of dissidence

These reappropriations of the figure of the gnostic poets of the Soviet century and of their work, and the discourses of sainthood to which they are subjected — between denunciation of a new period of impiety, for many a Mujaddidi *murīd*, and embodiment of cultural continuity, for the local instances of political power —, reflect the intrinsic ambivalence of the hagiographic process in general.⁷⁶ In the current context of the return to the ‘underground’ of many religious practices, such reappropriations also raise the issue of Islamic dissidence in the 20th century and its possible echoes into the present. The nascent hagiographic experiments in recounting the lives of ‘Abd al-Raḥīm and Dāmullā Iskandar allow the Mujaddidi *murīds* and, more generally, the readers of the now-printed work of ‘Abd al-Raḥīm and Iskandar to reconstruct the moral foundations of their lives in a socio-political context perceived by many as a disorder.⁷⁷ Nostalgia for ancient golden ages explains the popularity of literary assemblies seen as forums for the expression of communal identity and solidarity, in a context of increasing restriction of public freedoms.⁷⁸

The late Soviet and early post-Soviet periods, it must be admitted, were generally favourable to hagiographic experiment. Dāmullā Iskandar, it should be remembered, died in the year when the Iron Curtain opened. This was a time also of gradual re-colonisation of the Tajik highlands, which had been deserted by their ‘migrants’ since the massive population resettlements of the mid-20th century towards the cotton-growing lowlands of the south of the republic. This phenomenon of authoritarian demographic transfer followed by return movements, characteristic of the immediate post-WWII period, lies at the origin of dissidence in many other non-Russian regions of the USSR.⁷⁹ But there has been a curious tendency to overlook this phenomenon in Tajikistan and other republics in the Muslim south of the USSR. Much of the historiography of Soviet dissidence focuses on the mobilisation of entire national entities, such as the Jews of the USSR, or the Crimean Tatars and the Meskhs of the Southern Caucasus following these latter two peoples’ deportations after WWII. Such movements are generally approached from an ethnic or national perspective, even when in all three aforementioned instances there was a clear religious dimension.⁸⁰ Even the importance of cemeteries as a place of gathering is barely mentioned.⁸¹ This being so, it is perhaps unsurprising that the distinctly religious phenomenon of Tajik Muslim dissidence should have escaped most scholars’ attention.

As suggested above, this tendency is compounded by the fact that most historians have long studied Soviet Islam on the basis of materials held in public archives, which generally articulate the governing authorities’ vision of religion. Within this scholarly tradition there is some variance between studies focusing on the Cold War period and those focusing on more recent decades, with the latter placing greater emphasis on accommodation and negotiation between Muslim confessional bodies and political power; scholarship focusing on the 1980s, in

⁷⁶ Ex. Boucheron 2019, pp. 344–8.

⁷⁷ Cf. Thibault 2018, pp. 155 sq.; Gatling 2018, pp. 31–43 (on the springs of the current posterity of a Īshān ‘Abd al-Raḥmān-Jān b. Īshān Pārsā Khwāja, based on fieldwork conducted in the mid-2010s).

⁷⁸ Thibault 2018, pp. 163–9.

⁷⁹ See e.g. the general reflections of Chiama & Soulet 1982, pp. 139–44.

⁸⁰ See Wolfe Jancar 1976, especially pp. 218–9; Grigorenko 1978, pp. 77–78, 92; Alekseeva 1992, pp. 93–114.

⁸¹ E.g. Wolfe Jancar 1976, pp. 192–3 (on Jews and Muslims in general); Alekseeva 1992, p. 102 (on Crimean Tatars).

particular, emphasises how the *muftiyyats*, sometimes in conjunction with the leadership of the main Sufi traditions, obtained a number of concessions from the authorities, while repression fell on all forms of protesting Islam against the backdrop of the Soviet military occupation of Afghanistan.⁸⁴ But regardless of whether scholars tell a story of repression or one of accommodation, they have very little to say about the concept of dissidence.

In view of this historiographical lacuna, we are minded to ask: can the concept of dissidence, so frequently associated with Soviet Russia, help enlighten the contemporary history of Central Asian Islam? As we ponder this question, we should of course remember that dissidence in Soviet Russia had a number of characteristics that will not necessarily be found in the South. Highly connected to public debate, it was exposed to repression,⁸⁵ prompting many of the protagonists to mobilise an entourage of acquaintances, even if one sometimes speaks of an 'organisation' or 'chain' focused on an distinct external outlet. Dominated by a small number of international figureheads and a host of writers, scholars and artists with a high 'general intellectual level' (the intelligentsia, seen by some as *the* hotbed of opposition), it had a large number of determined and courageous young activists, organised in networks.⁸⁶ From the mid-1960s onwards, the dissident writer sometimes had an audience, whose feedback was a spur to action. Her/his habitus was marked by the circulation of samizdat and of offshore publications (*tamizdat*), as well as listening to foreign radio stations in Russian, and the more or less temporary occupation of low-status and low-commitment jobs such as doorman and security guard, which allowed them to disengage from their surroundings.⁸⁷ From the 1960s onwards, as hopes of reforming the regime proved vain, Russia's dissidents instead opted to escape it. The dominant behavioural mode became that of exile in the inner world, seen as a form of Acmeism.⁸⁸ Culture is also seen as a brake on possible shifts towards the adoption by dissidents of radical stances, a 'proven counter-poison against fanaticism and unbridled behaviour'.⁸⁹

What about Soviet Islam, what differences does it present with what has been observed further north? On reading the two gnostic poets studied here, and the hagiographic literature about them, a number of key differences can be observed. The first is that, unlike Russian dissidence or the human rights struggles of the 1960s to 1980s across the USSR, the Muslim underground, while a subject of counterpropaganda, was little connected to the dominant all-Union public debates, such as that on civil rights in the 1970s. It is true that Central Asian societies were far from being inert, as suggested by the uprisings in Tashkent in 1957 and 1969, and in Almaty in 1986, but they suffered from international isolation (even the hajj, traditionally a key opportunity for communing with Muslims from all round the world, was reserved for a numerically small, highly supervised elite), and their long lacked of connections beyond the Iron Curtain. As a result, substantial part of Central Asia's post-World War II Islamic underground escaped repression, with many of the non-official Muslim scholars of this period remaining protected (as the early Russian dissidents had been themselves) by

⁸⁴ See for example, for the first period, Wolfe Jancar 1976, pp. 191-2; Chiama & Soulet 1982, pp. 191-2, 275-9 and p. 246 on university unrest in Tashkent in 1957; on the evolution of the Central Asian *muftiyyat* during this period, cf. Tasar pp. 312 sq.

⁸⁵ Woll 1983, p. xviii.

⁸⁶ Grigorenko 1978, pp. 89-94; on the intelligentsia as a focus of opposition, cf. Martin 2019, pp. 62-63.

⁸⁷ Gorbavevskaya 1978, p. 245; Grigorenko 1978, p. 97.

⁸⁸ Woll 1983, p. xxxi.

⁸⁹ Goritcheva 1978, p. 186.

their very obscurity. The gnostic poetry of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥīm and Dāmullā Iskandar circulated orally and in manuscript form within the framework of an ultra-confidential sociability, limited to the small number of each master’s personal associates. Iskandar wrote in a period of academic discovery of modern Sufi poetry, in Qarategin especially⁹³, but also of repression of what the KGB called ‘Wahhabism’, and of confiscation of literature in the Arabic script. This repressive climate and the orality of Sufi sociability explain the fortune, among Central Asian Sufis of the late Soviet time, of short-form classical poetry, which is difficult to produce since it requires a long apprenticeship, but easy to memorise.

If the samizdat made possible in Russia and elsewhere what the dissidents themselves described as national literary ‘resurrections’, its absence in Central Asia until the end of the 1980s explains the historians’ neglect of this literature, which was written for a small audience and did not really circulate until the early years of the 21st century.⁹⁶ There was, furthermore, another consequence of this culture of secrecy: as we will see in the conclusion, the work of the Mujaddidi Naqshbandi gnostics of the Soviet period has had little impact on current Tajik literature, despite the place of authors such as Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥīm and Dāmullā Iskandar in the hagiographic experiments of the 1990s-2000s, and in quickly developing regional historiography.

Part of the explanation of this lack of impact lies perhaps in the very regional dimension of present-day Tajik Muslim hagiography. The texts dedicated since the 1990s to ‘Abd al-Raḥīm and Iskandar celebrate Qarategin as a breeding ground for a Naqshbandi tradition presently identified with the ‘silent’ *dhikr* — as opposed, for instance, to the Jahri (‘loud’) rituals more commonly practiced in the upper valleys of Rāmit and Zerafshan, to the north of the capital Dushanbe. Iskandar’s allusion to his father’s death, arms in hand, in face of the Red Army, recalls the past of Qarategin as a focus of resistance against the Soviet state and the Central Asian *muftiyyat* (who, even in the Wakhsh River flatlands, were often Uzbek-speaking until the late 1980s).⁹⁷ Locality, indigeneness have become here attributes of sainthood: the formal practice of the hajj itself, which was reserved in the USSR for happy-few *muftiyyat* staff and hand-picked notables, is denounced by Iskandar as a diversion from Islam.⁹⁹

Here we touch on an essential feature of Tajik society at the end of the 20th century: its rurality, counterbalanced for younger generations since the late 1990s by economic migration to Russia’s metropolises. In the Russian case, even if samizdat and religious dissidence originated in small country towns,¹⁰¹ it soon became an urban phenomenon linked to the intelligentsia. In South Central Asia, the population resettlements of the 1940s-50s, combined with the maintenance of the *propiska* regime (of personal registration in a single, unchangeable locality), simply strengthened their rural dimension. As we have seen, Iskandar’s career took place entirely between a mid-mountain wintering village of Qarategin and a kolkhoz, then

⁹³ The work of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Ḥayy Mujakharfī (d. 1931) was rediscovered by the local Qarategin press from the mid-1970s: Muhammadiusuf 2018, p. 7.

⁹⁶ Ex. Wolfe Jancar 1976, pp. 195–6.

⁹⁷ The Imam of the erstwhile Karl-Marx Street Mosque in Qurghan-Teppa in the late Soviet and early independence periods, Ḥājjī Murād-Jān Thābitzāda, has left a collection of sapiential poetry in Uzbek: *Me’iorul-akhloq*, Dushanbe: Nafosat, 2009.

⁹⁹ See the short *mathnawī* dedicated by Iskandar to the commentary of a hadith of Prophet Muḥammad on the vanity of hajj performed for its own sake, to the detriment of the pilgrim’s relatives: *Rahgudhar*, p. 77. Another brief *mathnawī* on the same theme is found in *Duoi subhgoh*, pp. 119-20, in which the practice of hajj appears squarely as a possible diversion from Islamic religious practice.

¹⁰¹ Wolfe Jancar 1976, p. 227.

sovkhos brigade in the Qurghan-Teppa region, in the lower valley of the Wakhsh River. His career was thus synonymous with the territory, along the Wakhsh, where the population movements of the mid-20th century favoured the spread of one particular branch of the Mujaddidi Naqshbandi tradition over a vast and well-defined area. Against this particular demographic background, Islamic hagiography could recover, in the 1990s to 2010s, one of its key roles: the valorisation of a particular group within a particular territory — a role strengthened by the increasing censorship of ‘religious’ literature and the refuge of now banned hagiographic texts in the pages of local historiography.

Conclusion: What Posterity for Soviet Muslim Gnosis?

How does posterity today, in a political context very different from the one they experienced, regard such gnostic poets as Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥīm and Dāmullā Iskandar? The literate youth, in conversations struck up on social networks,¹⁰² sometimes evoke the work of prize-winning poets of the last decades such as the famous Gulrukhsār (Safieva or Ṣafī, born in 1947 in a village in Qarategin). After a long period dominated by a culture of free verse and secularist inspiration, Gulrukhsār has tried to popularise, since the turn of the 21st century, a return to the ghazal genre, sometimes inspired by the North Indian Muslim gnostic tradition.¹⁰³ This development is also reflected in the work of younger poets now popular for their formal traditionalism. Among such figures is Āzarakhs̄h (pen name of Tolib Karimov, born in 1963 in Urmetan, a rural town in the upper Zerafshan valley). This idol of Tajik student youth was often associated in recent years with the arch-popular rubab and tar master Jurabek Murodov (alias Farzāna, born in 1941, also in the upper Zerafshan). Āzarakhs̄h stands out for his adaptation of the *wazn* to the musical setting of his works, decisive in establishing a popularity in the age of online social networks, in a country where since the end of the Soviet period folk song (*tarāna*), adapted to the modern stage, has become a key vector for the dissemination of culture.¹⁰⁴

This concern for the continuity of a collective memory is understandable in today’s Tajik youth. However, it remains difficult to see in these poets’ eclectic repertoire, marked by the Soviet habitus and a tendency to adhere to the fashions of the time, a reflection of the uncompromising literary and moral discipline of the Muslim gnostics of the ‘Mountain’ during the short 20th century — starting with their rejection of their era in general and their criticism of worldly Sufism. Although a native of Darband (present-day Nūrābād) in Qarategin, Gulrukhsār, in her free verse of the late Soviet period, secularised the theme of the mountain as a refuge by giving it a psychological twist.¹⁰⁵ Even in her ‘ghazals’ of the 2000s, the *wazn* has disappeared, and no link with the regional literary tradition emerges — so that if the local historiographers of the upper Qarategin Valley celebrate her in their souvenir albums, it is

¹⁰² In online conversations with the author in the winter of 2021-22.

¹⁰³ See in particular her poetic *dīwān* in Cyrillic: *Devon (devoni ishqu ashku khanda)* [*Dīwān* of love, tears and laughter], Dushanbe: Pazhuhishgohi farhangi forsī-tojikī, 2006, pp. 562 ff.

¹⁰⁴ See his Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/ozarakhs̄h>) and that of the ‘Ozarakhs̄h va Farzona’ group, with over 3,000 members at the time of writing (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/515100491997521>).

¹⁰⁵ Compare for example ‘Qasidai kuhiston’ [*Qasīda* of the highlands], a piece dated by the author to 1977, in *Devon*, pp. 471-3 (where a generic mountain acts as a moral refuge from psychological fatigue) and ‘Shajara’ [Lineage], a ghazal of 2003, *ibid.* p. 568 (where the author claims a pan-Iranian, pre-Islamic cultural ancestry).

as the national poetess of an undivided Tajik homeland (*waṭan*).¹⁰⁶

It seems that it is within the lineages of Mujaddidi Naqshbandi masters of the Wakhsh River valley, among others, that we should look for the real legacy of the work of such gnostic poets as Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Dawlat and Dāmullā Iskandar. Given that the death of his six sons meant that, as Iskandar lamented, there was no possibility of genealogical transmission, we should perhaps look for his continuator instead among those individuals who are associated with the home and tomb (now *mazār*, shrine) of his kolkhoz neighbour Īshān ‘Azīz Khwāja, on the outskirts of Qurghan-Teppa. There, Īshān Żarāb al-Dīn (1958-), the memorialist of the lineage, has been working since the 2000s to perpetuate the Persian gnostic poetry of classical form and metres of his predecessors who had been resettled from Qarategin to the lower Wakhsh River valley. Written in Cyrillic, his ghazals and other *munājāt* (odes) bear the trace of new mutations, even in their mixture of formal fixity and reinvention of *wazn*.

The homage to Sanā’ī, ‘Aṭṭār and Hilālī is accompanied in Īshān Żarāb al-Dīn’s verses, as it was in Iskandar’s, by the posthumous celebration of contemporary Sufi masters from his dual lineage, spiritual and genealogical, and of encouragement to resort to the intercession of those he calls the ‘Inspired’ (*ṣāhibdilān*, another metonymy for the Mujaddidis).¹⁰⁸ Indeed, Īshān Żarāb al-Dīn’s work, published in several hundred copies at a time of increasing censorship of ‘religious’ literature, is more allusive than Iskandar’s, which circulated solely in manuscript during his lifetime, in denouncing the evils of the age. His proclaimed mourning for ‘Imam Ḥusayn’ (sic), however, clearly expresses his critical distance towards the contemporary political order, in a register already present in Iskandar’s poetry.¹⁰⁹ Like his predecessors, Żarāb al-Dīn questions the mores of his contemporaries and sets out to denounce, in classical terms, a mode of ‘corruption’ that many a Mujaddidi *murīd* associates with the current state of affairs in the country.

Since the end-of-civil-war agreements were called into question and antireligious policies resumed in 2009, the process of modernisation in Tajikistan is less than ever synonymous with accommodation — even if the opposition/compromise aporia, present in Sufism since its origins, remains intact.¹¹⁰ Certainly, the maintenance of a regime of belief was made possible, in the Soviet and current eras, via a link with the past facilitated, in the Wakhsh River valley, by the marking out of the mental landscape of the population by innumerable landmarks.¹¹¹ However, if the past itself ‘conceals real possibilities and gives the opportunity to act and reconfigure the Sufi experiences of the present’,¹¹² perhaps part of this role falls, rather, on a learned literary tradition kept alive, among the Qarateginis, by Shaykh ‘Abd al-

¹⁰⁶ Ex. Malikzod, Anzurat, ‘Gulrukhsori Safī’, in Amirbekov 2015, pp. 257-63; and the portrait of her, written in the midst of Tajikistan’s civil war (1992-97) by the protest poet Bāzār Šābir (1938-2018), as an arch-typical communist poetess of the late Soviet period: Sobir, Bozor, ‘Gulrukhsor’, *World literature today*, 70/3 (1996), pp. 574.

¹⁰⁸ See his *mukhammas* in tribute to Īshān Ḥāmid Khwāja (1925-2003), eldest son and continuator of Īshān ‘Azīz Khwāja in Qizil-Qal’a: Karimī 2013, pp. 120-1; transcription, translation and commentary: <https://redg-old.hypotheses.org/1744> (posted 2022/05/03). See also the ghazal ‘A Remedy for Pain’, *ibid.* pp. 100. The polysymous term *ṣāhibdil* refers to the virtues of piety, wisdom and charity.

¹⁰⁹ Ghazal ‘In Mourning for Imam Ḥusayn’ (*Dar motami Imom Husain*), *ibid.* p. 96. On the figure of Ḥusayn and the tragedy of Karbalā in Dāmullā Iskandar, see *supra* note 65.

¹¹⁰ On the 2010s in Tajikistan, see the observations of Thibault 2018, pp. 181-2; on Sufism in general, the recent synthesis by Papas 2021, esp. pp. 273 ff.

¹¹¹ Ex. Schubel 1999; Mills & Rahmoni 2015; Gatling 2018; Sartori 2019.

¹¹² Gatling 2018, p. 172.

Raḥīm Īlākī until the 1940s, by Dāmullā Iskandar Bīdakī in the 1970s-80s and, since the 2000s, by Īshān Żarāb al-Dīn Karīmī. Revisiting the task of the Mujaddidi master, of restoring the memory of self-forgetful Aspirants, while exhorting them to help each other, the three masters suggest to us that if a regime of faith could be preserved in this part of Soviet Central Asia through an abundance of Islamic memorial markers, it is also thanks to a living Mujaddidi spiritual heritage, spread more than ever today beyond circles of initiates.

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