Imagining alternative futures through the lens of food in the Afghan and Tajik Pamir mountains

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Imaginer des futurs alternatifs par le biais de la nourriture dans les monts du Pamir en Afghanistan et au Tadjikistan

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Introduction

1 It is a troubled relationship that connects international development agencies and local and indigenous communities seeking to chart independent trajectories of development (Robbins 2012). The tension between them can be observed, albeit rarely explicated, in the mountainous region of the Western Pamirs of Afghanistan and Tajikistan, where international development agencies seek to improve the livelihoods of the rural population. Here, like elsewhere, questions outnumber solutions, and imagining alternatives that combine local and foreign aspirations in a helpful manner is deeply challenging.

2 What partly prompted the writing of this paper was a sentence in a book by Middleton and Thomas (2008: 516) about the Tajik Pamirs, declaring that it offers visitors “one of the most successful development programmes ever implemented.” This is a remarkable statement, not only in its boldness, but also because it belies a very complex development reality, with many different voices, including voices of dissent. The intention of this paper, however, is not to debate the truth of that assertion: depending on one’s perspective, ‘objective’ indicators about health, infrastructure, education, income, and agricultural production (see, e.g., Bliss 2006 and Pain 2010) may be interpreted to denote both development success and failure.
Rather, this paper attempts to give voice to Pamiri people who may have an alternative view of development. By casting light on elements of Pamiri society that are important to its identity and wellbeing (and may not be captured in prevalent indicators of progress) we suggest a different angle from which to consider Pamiri development and its accomplishments. The elements we refer to emerged from conversations we had over a period of four years (2008-2011) of intermittent but intensive fieldwork: with farmers, while they showed their fields, crops and orchards; at the dinner table when food was shared; during village workshops; with school teachers, children, and others. While a sense of pride about Pamiri culture and its humanity often manifested in these talks, so did strong doubts and discontent regarding the changes taking place in the Pamirs, and the effects of these changes on health and wellbeing. Apart from some instances (see Bliss 2006 on general socio-economic changes; Kassam 2009 and Kassam et al 2010 on traditional knowledge and medicine; Kanji 2002, Giuliani et al 2011 and Kreutzmann 2003 on markets and the shift from barter trade to monetary markets; Koen 2008 on music, spirituality, and health; Nabhan 2008 and Van Oudenhoven 2011 on agricultural biodiversity) they are sparsely documented in written studies and not yet part of a well-defined debate about development practice.1

Pamiri communities are not homogenous, and visions for the future and the path towards it often vary depending on people’s age, gender, profession, and on which side of the Afghan-Tajik border they live. Many people dare not have hopes about the future – a result of the many conflicts of the past decades – and say so specifically: they are (or would be) happy simply to have a livelihood that provides reasonably for themselves and for their children. Partly as a result, people’s attitude towards change, whether desirable or unwanted, often seems to be marked by a sense of inertia. In this context, it was striking to see how food, as an event or a topic of conversation, often inspired reflections and ideas about current developments and possible futures. Particularly women and older people, who are rarely heard in discussions about development in the Pamirs, spoke to us in this way. Their ideas provided the main material for this paper.2

There are a number of reasons to choose food as a lens through which to approach these themes. In a sense, talking through food helps to stay close to the original meaning of conversations: its vocabulary is different from the impersonal and technocratic jargon that often dominates development discourse. It is an intimate and honest, even instinctive way to understand a people, a place, and their combined history. Food is also strongly evocative. Speaking and thinking about food brings up memories and ideas, especially in a place where traditional agriculture has been the mainstay of daily survival for millennia. Lastly, not unlike a good recipe in which different ingredients blend together, but keep their own qualities, food brings together very different elements of life, at different scales, without effacing their individual characteristics. It connects the minutiae of daily life to things that are as large as international trade patterns, and so helps people understand the developments that are increasingly affecting them.

The geographic area of this study includes the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) of Tajikistan and the Afghan province of Badakhshan. Findings presented are from villages along the upper reaches of the Panj river (from the Wakhan corridor through to Darvaz), which is also the border between the two countries, and more remote villages in the valleys formed by its tributaries (figure 1).3
Figure 1. Districts in Afghan Badakhshan and Tajik GBAO (red colour) where research was carried out.

MAP BY STÉPHANE HENRIOD

Historical and development context

“A long time ago, when ice covered the surface of the entire Earth and no life could exist, angels brought a handful of soil from paradise and left it here, in this place high in the mountains above our village. The ice began to melt and King Jamshed was asked to rule over this new kingdom – within the mound formed by the soil he would find a cave, and in this cave were all the beings, humans, animals, and plants that the prophet Nûh (Noah) had left there before the earth became covered with ice. It would be his duty to teach them how to live and to see to it that all living things prosper. This is how life came from the high mountains of the Pamirs and spread throughout the world, and when, much later, the Pamirs again became covered in ice and life there disappeared, it was from these surrounding other countries, from India, and Persia, that people came back and repopulated these mountains. They are the ancestors of the people that live here now.”

If it is by understanding history that we give meaning to the present, an attempt at enriching the discourse of Pamiri development must start with an investigation of how history is being told in the region itself. Most accounts of Pamiri history would not include the story given above; the Pamirs have been represented mainly through the eyes of foreigners—Chinese travellers, Marco Polo, Russian and English explorers and spies (Polo 1993; Hiuen Tsiang 1906; Steveni 1892; Younghusband 1892). When not discussing the harsh beauty of the landscape and the personal challenges involved in traversing it, they concentrated their writings on geopolitical developments (the movement of borders, kings, and empires) (Holt and Lewis 1977) and occasional descriptions of the Pamiri people and their modes of subsistence (Vavilov and Bukinich 1929; Vavilov 1997). Current
historical accounts, presented for context in the following paragraphs, similarly use a rather foreign, factual perspective.

8 Geological findings indicate that the Pamirs have been inhabited, albeit sparsely, by people for many millennia. Traces of early Zoroastrian and Aryan Avesta culture may be found in old buildings and in some customs, which are still practiced (Bliss 2006). Their relative isolation meant that the Pamirs were largely spared the destruction that befell other parts of Central Asia under the hands of Genghis Khan, Timur and others, although wars between local fiefdoms and periodic slave raids by Afghan rulers (Steveni 1892) affected the population until well into the 20th century. Outside influences were, however, always present, in the form of international trade routes with minor routes of the Silk Road connecting the Pamirs to China, India, and the Caucasus (Levi 1999) and the spread of religion (much of the Pamiri population belongs to the Shi‘a sect of Ismailism).

9 Drastic changes came during the period of the Great Game when, in 1895, the British and Russians agreed on the establishment of an international border to separate what have now become Afghan and Tajik Badakhshan. The border, drawn along the river Panj (the Pamiri name for the upper reaches of the Amu Darya), severed trade relationships and separated communities and families whose members lived on both sides of the river. As its southernmost border region, Tajik Badakhshan became a strategically important buffer zone for the Soviet Union and received ‘preferential treatment’ in the form of education, infrastructure, health care, agricultural assistance, and enormous amounts of food aid to support the deliberate influx of immigrants. It achieved high standards of living not seen before or after; unemployment was virtually non-existent and literacy was (and remains) at 99 per cent (Breu and Hurni 2003). The Afghan side of the river did not benefit from these developments. While ethnicity (Ismailism) and the Hindu Kush mountain range isolated the population to some extent from the wars in the rest of the country, these factors also meant that virtually no government support or aid were received. In more recent years, specifically after the Mujahideen left the region in 1994, the situation stabilized somewhat. International aid agencies have a strong presence in Badakhshan, which remains one of the only regions of Afghanistan without significant insurgent activity. Still, it is commonly considered one of the more destitute places on earth and has the highest maternal mortality indicators ever recorded, at 6,507 per 100,000 live births (Walraven et al. 2009).

10 Meanwhile, in Tajikistan a civil war (1992-97) followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, destroying much of what was left of the country’s political, economic, and social infrastructure and leaving it the poorest country in the region (Mercy Corps 2012). GBAO’s previous dependence of up to 80-85 per cent on Soviet subsidies and food imports, combined with a population growth of well over 300 per cent between 1926 and 2000 (Breu and Hurni 2003) resulted in extreme poverty and hunger when these supply mechanisms ceased. Local and regional institutions continued to persist throughout the civil war, but their failure to adapt to their new positions has led to a political economy of rent seeking and extensive corruption (Bates 1995; Hiro 2009).³

11 This historical context, or at least this perception of historical events, was the reason for international agencies (ICRC, AKF, UNHCR, GTZ, USAID) to come to the Pamirs in the early nineties. Depending on circumstances (war or peace), the nature of their activities fluctuated between humanitarian assistance and development aid. Their role in the survival of the Pamiri population gave them the legitimacy to later take on the role of a de facto government (De Cordier 2008; Kanji 2002) for the many areas in which the local
governments have limited capacity or financial means, or where they fail altogether: infrastructure, health care, rural development, nature conservation, and culture. With such a historical narrative as its basic justification, it is perhaps not surprising to find here a relatively conservative development approach: beyond ‘fixing the damage’, providing basic infrastructure and services, programmes focus primarily on promoting the transition to a competitive market system (GIZ 2011). The ‘pains’ of centuries of barter trade and (in Tajikistan’s case) a centrally planned Soviet economy seem to warrant an almost religious fervour in the promotion of market values on behalf of development actors. Often this happens directly, through projects that establish ‘cross-border markets’, develop market value chains, provide ‘licit and sustainable income opportunities’ (AKDN 2007) and stimulate enterprise development. But also when projects have as objectives the increasing or diversification of agricultural production, fruit and vegetable processing (CIDA 2011; USAID 2010; Roots of Peace 2008), community-based tourism, or the building of community institutions (AKDN 2007b) it is generally through the lens of markets, ‘pro-poor growth’, or ‘unlocking the Pamirs’ development potential’ (FAO 2010).

Many of these projects can be justified from the historical perspective presented above (in which the present development context is seen as the outcome of a chain of wars and events springing from forces that are largely external to the people of the Pamirs) and often do genuinely benefit segments of the population. The question arises, however, whether the market is the most effective mechanism for enabling development, and, more importantly, whether it agrees with the ethics, values and qualities of the Pamiri people.

**Values of a food-based development approach**

The answer to that question hinges on a proper characterisation of those ethics, values, and qualities, which may be found in local narratives such as the legend of Khoja-i-nur, above. The remaining sections of this paper will suggest additional elements of Pamiri history and identity that are rooted in narratives about food. In presenting them we borrow from the concept of ‘the three ecologies’, developed by the French thinker Félix Guattari (1989). With this concept he distinguishes between three dimensions—environmental, social, and mental—of the current crisis of nature (both ecological and human) and illustrates how these are affected by the economic system that he considers to be the crisis’ main cause. These ‘three ecologies’ guide our analysis of development issues and the formulation of alternatives.

Implied in the following examples is the call, also emphatically stated in Guattari’s text, to abandon the professed neutrality of “pseudo-scientific paradigms” (ibid : 131) in favour of the subjectivity of aesthetic ones. In other words, to turn away, if only for the purpose of reflection, from the informational, ‘professional’, or ‘academic’ (i.e. external) narratives as a basis for conceiving development trajectories, towards the singularity and aesthetics of popular stories and memories rooted in local culture. Huyssen (2003 : 2) relates the “fundamental crisis in our imagination of alternative futures” to the differential treatment of history vs. memory. Development activities predicated on memory will be different from those based on a linear account of history and, arguably, allow for greater flexibility and creativity in responding to environmental, economic or geopolitical changes.
Environmental issues and the wealth of agricultural diversity

The first of the three ecologies, the ecology of the environment, needs little introduction. Most of the world has caught on to the severity of the ecological crisis and development agencies are well aware of its implications for their work in improving human wellbeing. Specific elements of this crisis have reached the Pamirs and are often mentioned as limits or impediments to development. Melting glaciers endanger the future of agriculture, almost all of which is irrigated from glacial runoff. Increasingly unpredictable weather and seasonal changes put harvests at risk. Overgrazing, cutting of fruit trees, and overexploitation of wild plants and trees for firewood cause erosion and desertification. Considering the poor soil quality and extreme scarcity of arable land (0.4 per cent of total land area (Hergarten 2004)), food production and food security in Tajik Badakhshan (which supports a much larger population than Afghan Badakhshan) may have already reached their limits.

Ecological and agricultural limits may, to briefly adopt development speak, be perceived either as a problem or an asset. The ‘problem’ of agroecological limits predominantly calls for external solutions (agricultural inputs, new technologies and exotic high-yielding crop varieties, or food imports through aid or market mechanisms), whereas seeing them as an ‘asset’ helps unearth local ingenuity. The distinction is a matter of perspective: had the people who first settled in the Pamirs seen limits, they would not have been able to grow food. On the plateaux, where crops might grow, there was no water. In other places, where water could be found, there was no land or soil to apply it to. The entire agricultural landscape of the Pamirs, as it exists today, was created by man (Aknazarov 2011; Vavilov 1997). Still now, enterprising farmers continue, with the same skill, labour, and patience, to channel water, move rocks and soil, and domesticate and adapt seeds (van Oudenhoven 2011). Their work, inscribed in people’s memories and the landscape itself, constitutes an important element of an endogenous account of Pamiri history. It shows that neither the landscape, nor its agroecological limits are absolute, but exist in interdependence with the activity of the people that inhabit it. In numerous villages there is, today, less land under cultivation than there was previously, because the people who cultivated it have left: in Tajik Badakhshan most young men are away in Russia or Kazakhstan to look for work. In Afghanistan many had to leave during the time of the Mujahideen and the lands they left have not been restored. Environmental degradation, in this instance, is caused by a lack of human use.

Ingold (1993) draws a useful distinction between two ways of understanding the landscape. The first, which he dismisses, is external: the view of an impartial observer that views the landscape as a functional space, an independent backdrop with a set of characteristics that circumscribe human activities. This view gives rise to the perception of agroecological limits. The second view, which he calls a ‘dwelling perspective’, invalidates the concept of limits in the first place, by seeing landscapes as the very product of human ingenuity: “an enduring record of – and testimony to – the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves” (ibid: 152).
A revealing example of how the contrast between these two perspectives impacts the way land and resources are managed is the agricultural (bio)diversity of cereals and pulses. The cultivation of these crops is the most ancient and traditional element of Pamiri agriculture (Vavilov and Bukinich 1929; Vavilov 1997) and the small irregular and beautifully coloured plots form an inseparable part of its landscape. Diversity in these crops exists at several levels: species of cereals include soft and club wheat, unique liguleless forms of wheat and rye (Vavilov and Bukinich 1929), six species of hulled and hull-less barley, and millet and foxtail millet. Important *leguminosae* include a small type of faba bean (*Vicia faba* var. minor), field pea (*Pisum sativum*), grass pea (*Lathyrus sativus*), vetches (*Vicia spp.*) chickpea (*Cicer arietinum* L.) and lentil (*Lens culinaris* Med. L.).

Infraspecific diversity in wheat is tremendous (151 botanical varieties have been identified in the Pamirs (Aknazarov 2007)), and the diversity of barley, rye and abovementioned leguminous crops (the latter represented with 124 varieties (ibid.)) is significant also.

While distinct varieties may be cultivated separately for specific purposes (e.g., *rush-kakht*, a red variety of wheat that is unique to the upper valleys of Bartang and Gunt is used specifically to prepare a type of flour porridge called *baat*, for the celebration of *Baat-Ayom*), many are grown in admixture with other varieties (in 1924, Vavilov and Bukinich (1929) regularly encountered 20 varieties in the same plot). Grain-legume mixtures, such as *lashak-makh* (rye and pea/faba bean) or *rivand-dzhindam* (chickpea-wheat) are of particular importance, in part because their capacity to fix nitrogen makes them less
demanding of local soils, but also because of their role in food and nutrition: crops grown together are generally also harvested, dried, and milled together, resulting in a richly nutritious flour that is composed of at least one cereal and one leguminous crop, and often more. In Afghan Badakhshan and isolated villages of Tajik Badakhshan, sourdough (hamirmo) flatbreads are made with the flour of practically any type of crop, while the “best” flour to make osh, a beloved noodle soup for the warm days of summer, contains rye, some wheat, grass pea, faba bean, pea, lentil, and sometimes chickpea. An important additional aspect of many local crops is their use for medicinal purposes. The small faba bean, for example, is considered a ‘wonder pill’ by many, especially when cultivated at higher elevations. It is said to contribute to the treatment of over 70 ailments.⁹

Photo 2. Afghan women baking wheat bread in a traditional oven, called kitsor.
Photo 3. Preparing *patak gartha*, or grass pea bread.

It is made with a mixture of grass pea flour and either wheat or rye flour. More to the south (India, Pakistan), grass pea is considered a crop of the poor; it causes lathyrisrn (an irreversible paralysis of the lower limbs) when not cooked properly. While lathyrisrn is known also in the Pamirs, it is quite rare. People in the Afghan Wakhan remember how some people used *makhin gartha* to mutilate themselves so that they didn’t have to fight for the Mujahideen: they made bread from grass pea that was still half-raw and ate it with butter. They would then sleep in a warm place, around the *kitsor*, and twist their legs in the morning.

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Most bread in GBAO is now made with wheat flour, but barley is important because (like rye and fingermillet) it ripens much earlier than wheat. It is used in spring, when food reserves are low, and played an important role in times of food scarcity, during the wars.

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These coupled levels of agricultural diversity—of varieties, crops, agricultural practices, and uses—attest to a long historical process in which biology (the genetic makeup of plants and, arguably, humans), the form of the landscape, and human activity have influenced each other. Despite imperfections, the system so created is uniquely suited to the Pamirs and fosters a rich source of ingenuity and resilience.

The consequences of development agencies overlooking or disregarding such local perspectives range from obvious damage to effects that are more insidious. An example of the former is the introduction of a high-yielding wheat variety during the Tajik Civil war. With the threat of acute famine, foreign aid agencies promoted the wheat and farmers readily abandoned their own varieties for the promise of higher yields. After two years it became clear that the new wheat moulded while left to dry on the field and that its taste was poor. By then, no alternatives seemed left. Finally, a few farmers crossed the river to Afghanistan, recovered their ancestral varieties there and distributed them amongst their communities. While relatively extreme, this example is by no means unique. Several years ago, the agricultural office in Afghan Shugnan handed farmers a package with an improved European wheat variety and the corresponding necessary fertilizers (diammonium phosphate, applied before sowing and urea, during growing). Local wheat is grown without chemical fertilizers, which are prohibitively expensive (animal manure is used instead) and, not surprisingly, the new fertilized wheat grew beautifully tall and provided a good harvest. Equally unsurprising, the extra demands posed on the soil...
meant that yields dropped after two years, and the taste of the flour poorly suited the
dishes traditionally prepared with it.11 No farmers repeated the experiment. A third
eexample, with fruit trees, are a number of multi-million dollar projects in Afghan and
Tajik Badakhshan that aim to improve fruit tree cultivation through the production and
distribution of ‘certified’ seedlings of apple, pear, apricot and other fruit trees. Here,
‘certified’ almost always means improved exotic varieties from France, the UK, Pakistan.
The irony of these programmes lies not just in the fact that exotic fruit varieties are ill-
adapted to the growing conditions of the Pamirs and, therefore, more susceptible to pests
and diseases and short-lived (they generally dry out and die after 10-20 years, compared
to ten times that for local varieties), but also in that they are introduced in a region that
is itself an important centre of diversity for all of these crops.12 Certification, one might
ask, for whom?

More subtle tensions arise when traditional market systems are forgotten because modern ones must be adopted. The different agricultural diversities discussed above exist precisely because they are connected in a cyclic and iterative manner through a central node—the farmer—who is both producer and consumer. Demand and supply for different tastes, uses, nutritional and medicinal properties emerge in and are met by one and the same person, family, or community, who act on diversity through the selection of diverse traits and plants, and the creation and acculturation of landscape niches. In the system of barter trade that exists in the Pamirs to some degree until today, the contact between producers and consumers remains sufficiently close for diversity to be valued. Conversely, as soon as the geographical and mental (cultural) distance between producer and consumer increases, as is the case with the system of market capitalism promoted by development agencies, the value of diversity decreases and diversity itself suffers a blow. That this is not merely a matter of landscape conservation and aesthetics is clear when people speak about their health, which they often say has deteriorated as compared to previous generations.13 Mostly, people attribute this to changing lifestyles and diets, and the fact that now, instead of cultivating food themselves, it makes more ‘market sense’ to buy refined wheat flour from Kazakhstan or India, eggs from China, and imported margarine. The term ‘cardiovascular disease’, they say, was unknown in the Pamirs even ten years ago.

In this context, it is interesting to compare comments by two farmers from Tajik and Afghan Badakhshan (where international development influence has been less):

“Now, life on the Afghan side of the river is better, because they are able to feed themselves from their own land. They have money, because they are not dependent on the global economy. Their clothes are much better, because there is a tailor in every village. There are no tailors in Tajikistan.” (farmer in Tajik Rushan)

“One important difference is that here, in Afghan Shugnan the land has always been owned by us, for many generations.14 This means that our traditions have become strong, since they had a long time to take root and develop. Our food, our economy, our clothes, are all better. We can sustain ourselves, we have autonomy over what we eat. They have become very dependent on others. But on their side, of course, they have a good road and electricity. In that sense they are more advanced.” (farmer in Afghan Shugnan)

Social relations and collaboration

In the Pamirs, more than in most places, nature is inseparable from culture. The burgeoning literature on social-ecological systems recognizes that solutions to
environmental problems must have a strong social component in order to be successful. Guattari’s second social ecology deals with the basis of this component—the nature of social relations and societal organisation—and how it is at once degraded by and must be re-envisioned to confront threatening change. Pamir people say, and visitors to the Pamirs will encounter many reasons to agree, that theirs is a mountain culture in which the values of hospitality, reciprocity, and collaboration are both indispensable to survival and honoured virtues. Yet they will also say that, over the past decades, there have been changes in these values. We briefly consider the part development programmes may have played in this change, and look at food and agriculture for examples to illustrate social values in the Pamirs.

The most apparent and probably the most profound way in which development agencies influence social interaction is by changing the codes by which property is owned and goods are exchanged. This is not to say that markets and (barter) trade did not exist in the Pamirs before development agencies began to promote a system of free market economy (people in Wakhan recall how less than 80 years ago even one ceer (7 kg) of rice from Takhar or Kunduz would be a valuable possession, paid for with large quantities of wool), but the commodification of food, labour, and other essential ‘goods’ is something very new indeed. This process happens with a tacit reluctance: only people from the valley of Vanch are traders by tradition and most other people seem to find it difficult to assign monetary value to food, lodging, etc., things they would have otherwise given or exchanged. Selling to someone you know (and people often do know each other) runs counter to long-established Islamic ethics of sharing and inclusiveness, strengthened by the scarcity of resources and isolation. “A neighbour never trades with his neighbour,” is a common saying, and “Your neighbour is as a shading hand protecting you from the heat of the sun.” Circumventing those norms is possible either by changing them (with profound social and cultural consequences) or when economic exchanges are made impersonal, for example through middlemen. At that point, the monetary values assigned by the market bear little or no relation to the values (labour, reciprocity, health, cultural) that normally accompany the exchange of goods. These values have no market value, and the great challenge of development agencies in the Pamirs, then, ought to be to envision a market system in which both value systems are of equal worth. Today, middlemen may pay less than USD 1 per 10 kg of mulberries. Compare this to an exchange which took place during the Tajik civil war, when a woman came to Khorog (the capital of GBAO) to barter a small bag of mulberries:

“A woman from upper Roshtkhala approached me and asked if she could have the mulberries for her children, who were suffering from starvation. She did not have anything to pay with, but promised that once she was able to, she would give me a goat. I didn’t think she spoke the truth, but gave her the mulberries. A few months later the woman came to see me and she gave me a goat. I was surprised and wondered: how incredibly valuable is this small bag of mulberries! I invited the woman to my house and gave her big bags of dried mulberry and other fruits. I then felt happy, as I felt I hadn’t done anything wrong.” (woman from Derzud, Tajik Rushan)

Inspiration for a system which respects real values may be found close to home. Returning to the values of hospitality, reciprocity, and collaboration, it is possible to find many examples in the way food is produced and consumed. Innovative ‘custodian’ farmers distribute cuttings of their preferred fruit trees through family and community networks (van Oudenhoven 2011) and farmers in Afghan Badakhshan obtain each year, in
addition to the seeds they save, some wheat through an informal regional seed network that comprises Ishkashim, Shugnan, and Shewa. Conditions and harvests in these places are different from year to year and by sourcing seeds from different places, farmers ensure the quality of their wheat. The first acts of working the land, the ploughing of the first furrow and cleaning of water canals, are, traditionally, done collectively and in celebration. Likewise, harvesting, building a home, and any large labour requiring the effort of many hands are done collaboratively in a custom called keryar. In the absence of much money or luxury, food is the most important expression of wealth and hospitality in the Pamirs and it is often eaten together, at home or in the field, from one plate and with one spoon.  

Photo 5. Sharing a meal of shurbo (soup with mutton), wheat and grass pea bread, yogurt, and baat in Kala-i-Panja (Wakhan, Afg).

Different from the Tajik valleys Bartang and Gunt, in this village baat is not prepared for the celebration of Baat-Ayom (see above), but rather to celebrate the return from the high pastures by the women and children after summer. They bring back one main ingredient (butter), while the other ingredient, wheat, has just been harvested in the village. The dish is prepared by the shepherd.

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Mental Ecology

Perhaps the most important point made by Guattari is that the degradation of the environmental and the social sphere cannot be seen separate from the impoverishment of the mind, or the mental ecology:

“Indeed, if we continue, as the media would have us do— to refuse squarely to confront the simultaneous degradation of these three areas, we will in effect be acquiescing in a general infantilization of opinion, a destruction and neutralization of democracy. We need to ‘kick the habit’ of sedative consumption [...] we need to apprehend the world through the interchangeable lenses of the three ecologies” (Guattari 1989 : 34).
The “media” to which Guattari refers can be seen as analogous to the role that development organizations play in the region. People aspire to achieve a model of development which they do not only poorly understand, but which, often, causes marginalization and erodes (food) sovereignty. The consequences of the ‘sedative consumption’ of a blanket market approach promulgated by development agencies are visible in the short-sighted views of many farmers on both sides of the border. When asked what their hopes for a future entail, farmers often describe a rural infrastructure which connects them to markets. Yet the same people will claim that i) they lack a “business attitude” and that, ii) the products from the market make them sick. Feeling unable to influence the course of the market, they look to the state to install safeguards for equitable distribution and quality, principles both inimical to the premise of a free market system, and wildly unrealistic in a failed state context.

The impoverished mental ecology of the Pamirs, then, as it relates to development practice, consists of two elements: the dependence on extraneous solutions (soviet legacy, development agencies), and a paucity of ideas based on local biocultural heritage. The resulting mental model, largely foreign to Pamiri culture, does not yield locally applicable solutions, but, by virtue of the dependency it creates, stifles creativity and adaptability. There is an urgent need to reinsert local and traditional knowledge into visions of future development. The point is not to supplant current development schemes, nor to simply incorporate local knowledge (many would say this is already happening), but rather to allow this knowledge to drive a fundamental restructuring of those schemes.

For the required dialogue between local and external knowledge to be fruitful, investment in a healthy Pamiri mental ecology is indispensable. Elements of local knowledge, including food, maintain relevance and agency only to the extent they occupy space in the minds of the Pamiri population. The majority of local dishes are simple and labour intensive, born out of the necessity to make best use of the few resources available. They are easily forgotten once people encounter the seduction and lower opportunity costs of ready-made canned foods. Shiroghan, for example, is a warm cream made of milk, freshly churned butter (maska), salt, and sometimes water. It is commonly eaten in Afghan Shugnan, with bread if it is available. The ‘mental space’ occupied by this food may be as small as its four ingredients, yet it may also be larger, when accompanied by an understanding of its role in the transhumant culture of the local population and the fact that maska is made from the nutritious milk of goats, sheep and cows combined. The significance of the dish becomes larger still when considering a legend about the origin of the nearby mountain-lake Shewa:

“At the bottom of what is now lake Shewa, there was once a village. One evening, an old man came to the village and asked for some food. His cloths were torn and people laughed at him, threw stones at him. One woman, however, treated him kindly. She was poor and had only shiroghan to offer him. Thanking her, he told her to take her son and belongings and to seek refuge in a place high up on the mountain. She did as he had told her, and that night a strong earthquake hit the village. Water appeared from the ground and flooded the village and its inhabitants. Later, the woman understood that the old man had been the holy Nasir Khusraw. Since that day, shiroghan has been considered a holy food.” (farmer in Afghan Shugnan)
Concluding remarks

Food is a powerful lens through which to understand the past, record the present and so envision an autonomous future. Viewed through this lens, the current Pamiri development trajectory appears to be poorly suited to its landscape and people. In the harsh geography of the Pamirs, diversity (of agriculture, social relations, and ideas) plays a very large role in sustaining life and the homogenizing forces of conventional development schemes undermine this role.

Keeping with Guattari’s concept of the three ecologies, a vibrant approach to development in the Pamirs would, firstly, view the landscape as a dwelling space, shaped and sustained by human ingenuity and labour. Secondly, it would safeguard the values of inclusiveness and cooperation that have mediated social interactions and economic exchange, and harness them to inspire collective action. Finally, ample space would be created for people’s ideas and experiences as custodians of their land and culture to be expressed and used to guide change.

We are not calling for an isolationist development policy, or one of pure self-determination. However, Pamiri people, like all others, deserve the space to forge novel connections and wean their dependence on external remittances and development aid, and to do so by invoking memories and pride in their rich way of life. This process should enable a development trajectory which is simultaneously autonomous, yet articulates itself in relation to the rest of society.

This paper then, is written to privilege the understandings that people derive from where they live and what they eat. Development practitioners and, perhaps, many Pamiri farmers with them, might find our focus on memory and tradition an overly simplified account of a romanticized past. Yet many development actors are Pamiri, with an understanding of their culture that is much deeper than what could be expressed in the few examples given in this paper. They should be the ones leading the formulation of an endogenous vision for development and they are the ones who, as part of development organisations that have the means to effect meaningful change, are able to give resources, respect, and voice to the custodians of Pamiri heritage.

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NOTES

1. While we are aware of important Russian ethnographic studies undertaken during Soviet times (see, especially, Andreev (1953, 1958)), it was not within the scope of this study to include a review of Russian, Tajik, and Dari/Persian sources on the topic. Our main concern was to include those sources currently informing development practice.

2. It is important to emphasize that marked differences in views do exist, although it is difficult to associate these with specific groups of people based on the findings of this study. While many people argue for the need to stay in the Pamirs, strengthen the local economy and guard or revive its traditions, many highly educated young men and women find it difficult to find work and decide to live elsewhere. Family and religious ties with the Pamirs generally remain strong among migrants, but appreciation for everyday culture, agriculture and food, proposed in this paper as important components of an ‘alternative development’, decreases as people become engaged in other sectors of the economy (see also notes on labour migration below).

3. Main villages in our survey included : Kala-i-Panja, Sultan Ishkashim (Wakhan, Afg); Khorog, Pordinev, Khuf (Shugnan, Tjk), Barvoz, Bathöm (Roshtkhala, Tjk); Pastew, Shewa, Gorzjin (Shugnan, Afg); Siponj, Barzud, Chidz (Rushan, Tjk); Jomariji-Bolo, Benikamar (Darvaz, Afg); Bunai, Chikhokh (Vanch, Tjk); Murghab (Tjk). Where references to villages could compromise the anonymity of informants, they have not been included in this paper.

4. A shortened version of a legend told by villagers from Bathöm in Roshtkhala district of the Tajik Pamirs. The sacred hill, called Khoja-i-nur, to which the legend refers is in the pastures above the village; it looks as if moulded and pressed to the ground by two hands folded together. (This legend resembles elements of the second chapter of the Vendidad of the Avesta, the collection of sacred texts of Zoroastrianism, in which the omniscient creator Ahura Mazda asks the good shepherd Yima to rule over the Earth.)
5. In the summer of 2012, armed conflict briefly reigned in Khorog, the capital of GBAO. The brief confrontation was seen by the local population as yet more proof of government corruption and further eroded the state’s legitimacy in the region (Tadjbakhsh 2012). A fragile peace was won by local protesters, but apprehension for future conflict remains strong.

6. By 2004, almost every family in Tajikistan had sent at least one family member abroad as a migrant worker (IMF 2005) and in many of the Tajik Pamiri villages visited for this study, up to 80 per cent of the young labour force was said to work abroad. Labour migration is not generally seen as a long-term strategy, with most migrants intending to return to the Pamirs, but it has a profound impact both on Pamiri culture and on the landscape. Remittances, which are estimated to account for over 42 per cent of Tajikistan’s GDP (World Bank 2011), enable older people who remain in the Pamirs to buy from markets the (food) products which, without the help of their children, they are not anymore able to produce by themselves. These products are generally of inferior quality. Secondly, particularly in Tajikistan, returning migrants build large houses, often on arable land, yet rarely engage in agriculture. The resulting reconfiguration of the landscape has not yet been documented, but would seem to further increase people’s dependence on external sources of income, food and labour.

7. Names of these crops in the main local language (Shugni): dzhindam (wheat), lashak (rye), chushch (barley), pindzh (millet), makh or termakh (faba bean), makhorj (pea), khiziv or putak (grass pea), rivand (chickpea), and sirdzh (lentil).

8. Baat-ayom is the second celebration leading up to Navruz, the Persian New Year (celebrated throughout Central Asia around the 21st of March). It is celebrated towards the end of February in some valleys in the Pamirs and marks, together with Navruz, the coming of spring. Its precise timing is determined with marks in the house or important rocks (khölpachor) or sundials (in the village of Yamg, in Tajik Wakhan) in the landscape. When the rays of the sun reach these points in a particular way the holiday is announced.

9. It is most commonly used to treat the flue, high blood pressure, and as a laxative. It may be prepared simply as a soup. As a laxative, it is used for horses as well, particularly in February, at the beginning of the working season. In that case, an infusion is prepared by dissolving crushed beans in cold water for 10-12 hours. (Akobirshoeva, pers. comm.).

10. Told by farmers in Tajik Rushan and confirmed with people working with the organisation in question.

11. Flour forms the basis not only of different breads (which, while sacred, are also a luxury, as they require a lot of flour), but especially also of soups. Flour-based soups are often made when people do not have enough flour to make bread. A common way of preparing such soups is to make what in Europe would be called a ‘roux’ (toasting wheat flour with or without butter and adding milk or water and salt). These may be eaten like that, or additional ingredients such as ground flax (linseed) seeds or caraway can be added.

12. After grain crops, fruits are the most important staple food in the Pamirs. They have similarly high levels of infraspecific diversity and a large number of uses in food and medicine. Particularly mulberry (Morus alba and Morus nigra) and apricot, represented with some 60 and 300 varieties, respectively, play an important role in local food tradition and as insurance against hunger. It is interesting to note that the Soviets, so widely criticized for their modernization schemes and collective industrial agricultural policies, including in Tajikistan, in some cases understood the importance of local diversity very well. Rather than introducing ‘better’ varieties, they established a research institute (the Pamir Biological Institute) and funded programmes to improve local crop varieties and cross them with varieties with valuable traits from other parts of the Soviet Union.

13. Whether this holds in a general sense is difficult to say, and depends on the indicators used and who is asked. Health statistics in Tajikistan are largely unreliable (read: fabricated), and almost non-existent for remote areas of Northern Afghanistan. From conversations with hospital
It appears that 'lifestyle diseases', such as cardiovascular diseases, high blood pressure, and diabetes have risen dramatically as a result of changes in nutrition and lifestyle. All Pamiri people spoke with for this study confirmed this and often added that their (grand)parents grew very old (a striking number of centenarians seems to have lived in the Pamirs). In comparison to Soviet times, health care in Tajikistan has deteriorated, with outdated medical equipment and training and very low wages for doctors and nurses. In many parts of Northern Afghan, isolation makes western medicine unattainable for communities, and people rely largely on traditional folk medicine.

As opposed to the period of collective land ownership in Tajik Badakhshan during Soviet times.

It is important to remember that reciprocity, different from simple “do-gooding”, implies a mutual exchange of corresponding advantages. Cicero (quoted in Gouldner 1960) said: “There is no duty more indispensable than that of returning a kindness.”

"Hamsoyata hamsoyayard savdo nakikht" and "Hamsoya dasti soya" (translated freely).

A real difficulty when writing a Pamiri cookbook (work on which this article is based) are the quantities: a single homestead may have up to 30 family members from different generations. When asked ‘how much’ of the different ingredients is used, the person preparing the food generally nods apologetically: “enough for everyone.”

An important religious poet and scholar, who is considered to have brought the Ismaili faith to the Pamirs. A very similar legend is told about lake Zorkul, on the border of Afghanistan and Tajikistan more to the west.

ABSTRACTS

Imagining alternative futures in the Pamir Mountains of Afghanistan and Tajikistan is as difficult as it is necessary. Development efforts in the Pamirs are hampered by i) real and imagined agro-ecological limits, ii) terrific geopolitical, institutional and social challenges, and related to both, iii) a strong lack of imagination. This crisis of imagination partly springs from a narrow reading of history, which obscures much of the wealth of the Pamirs and its people, including elements crucial to their ability to develop in a sovereign manner. This paper explores a different development narrative, which emerges when the history of today’s Pamirs, its landscape, agriculture, diversity, and culture are understood, not in terms of empires, humanitarian threats or markets, but through the lens of food.

The perspectives presented are drawn from fieldwork conducted over a period of four years in the Pamirs. Using Felix Guattari’s concept of the ‘three ecologies’, we apply these perspectives to an analysis of the three spheres in which development agencies in the region are active: landscape and agriculture, social (economic) relationships, and the human subjectivity of memories, identity and imagination. Viewed through the lens of food, alternatives emerge that may help formulate a more endogenous vision for development.
cache une bonne part des richesses des Pamirs et de ses populations, y compris des éléments cruciaux pour leur capacité à se développer en toute souveraineté. Cet article propose l’historique d’un développement autre qui émerge au moment où l’histoire contemporaine des Pamirs, ses paysages, son agriculture, sa biodiversité et sa culture sont compris, non en termes d’empires, de menaces humanitaires ou de marchés, mais à travers le prisme de l’alimentation.

Les perspectives que nous présentons résultent d’un travail de terrain mené pendant quatre ans dans les monts du Pamir. En utilisant le concept « trois écologies » de Félix Guattari, nous avons appliqué ces perspectives à une analyse des trois sphères dans lesquelles les agences de développement sont actives dans la région : s’attachant au paysage et à l’agriculture, aux relations sociales (économiques) et portant attention à la subjectivité humaine des mémoires, de l’identité et de l’imagination. C’est ainsi que vu à travers le prisme de l’alimentation, des alternatives émergent qui peuvent aider à formuler une vision plus endogène pour le développement.

INDEX

Keywords: Pamir Mountains, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, biocultural heritage, food sovereignty, mountain agriculture, development.

Geographical index: monts du Pamir, Tadjikistan

Mots-clés: héritage bioculturel, développement, souveraineté alimentaire, agriculture de montagne

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