



MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS AND  
EXPRESSION OF IDENTITIES:  
The *Rabbob* and *Daf* as an Expression  
of Multiple Interconnected Identities  
in Badakhshan, Tajikistan





## Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit's Research Paper #15

### Musical Instruments and Expression of Identities: The *Rabbob* and *Daf* as an expression of multiple interconnected identities in Badakhshan, Tajikistan

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#### Abstract:

This article focuses on the Pamiri *rabbob*, a plucked lute utilized by Ismaili Muslims living in the remote Pamir Mountains of southeastern Tajikistan, which helps to understand the expression of various identities. The identities are interconnected and are expressed through the music, the instruments, and the craftsmanship with which the instruments are manufactured. Added to this are the anecdotes and memories associated with the instruments, which give further meaning and context to the local musical expression. The meaning and value of music and musical instruments are defined by the interaction between the social and cultural situations in which they occur, and the inherent qualities attributed to them by the musicians and their audiences. My analysis focuses on cases in which musical instruments bring out religious, cultural, and national identities and help shore up an identitarian defense against dominant political and cultural forces. As many scholars have shown (Dawe, 2003; Baily, 1976; Doubleday, 1999; Rancier, 2014, Bates, 2012), musical instruments are significant sources for studying culture and society. Apart from being attractive for their unique sounds, shapes, and auras, musical instruments symbolize the traditions and identities of peoples, nations, sub-national regions, and ethnic groups. They have specific cultural meanings and these meanings emerge from local histories and traditions. They are not only commodities but are meaningful by virtue of the cultural values they assume at a given moment in history.

**Keywords:** *rabbob*, Ismaili, music, identity, *rubob*, musical instrument.

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This article focuses on musical instruments among the Ismaili communities in Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBO) of Tajikistan, which help to understand the expression of various identities. The identities are interconnected and are expressed through the music, the instruments, and the craftsmanship with which the instruments are manufactured. Added to this are the anecdotes and memories associated with the instruments, which give further meaning and context to the local musical expression. The meaning and value of music and musical instruments are defined by the interaction between the social and cultural situations in which they occur, and the inherent qualities attributed to them by the musicians and their audiences. My analysis focuses on cases in which musical instruments bring out religious, cultural, and national identities and help shore up an identity against dominant political and cultural forces.

The musical culture of the Pamiri Ismailis is rich and diverse. Music and musical performances play a significant role in the life of the people of the GBO. Most of the meetings and gatherings in the Pamirs are accompanied by music; it is very rare that music is not played at such events. Almost every household has at least one musical instrument. The most common instruments of the Pamirs are the *Pamiri rabbob* (in some places it is also called *rbobcha*) and the *daf*. Almost all men, starting at ten or twelve years of age, can play the *rabbob*. *Daf* is also played by almost all Pamiri men, and in some parts of the Pamirs, it is also played by women to mark special occasions (in Shughnan and Rushan districts, for example).

## Identity Matters

As is the nature of identities, social identities in the GBO are fluid and subject to change.<sup>1</sup> People in the GBO utilize various means of identifying themselves on the bases of geographic, political, cultural, or ethnic characteristics, as well as religious ones. In this line, Dagiev and Faucher present in their book various arguments related to Pamiri identity and identification processes.<sup>2</sup> The various factors discussed in their book makes the emergence of multiple identities clear, which are constructed, ascribed, and acquired through political, social, religious, and cultural forces and circumstances. These identities, in turn, are projected through various expressive art forms, such as music, which my paper is going to elaborate.

The Pamiri Ismaili communities consist of a diverse group of people who speak several different languages that are today identified with the common ethnonym “*Pamiri*” by those within and outside the communities. This is a recent political phenomenon<sup>3</sup> that has emerged from the process of assimilation into the larger so-called “title nations” and the use of terms such as “*pamirskiy tadjiki*” or “*tojikon-i pomir*” by Russian and Tajik scholars to refer to the people of the Pamirs.<sup>4</sup> These hegemonic forces compelled the once disparate communities of the GBO to unite into a new ethnic identity – to become *Pamiri*. This socio-geographic category has acquired ethnic dimensions,

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1 Jonah Steinberg, *Ismaili Modern, Globalization and Identity in a Muslim Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

2 Dagikhudo Dagiev and Carole Faucher, *Identity, History and Trans-Nationality in Central Asia: The Mountain Communities of Pamir* (London New York Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020).

3 Aleksei Vasiliev, *Central Asia: Political and Economic Challenges in the Post-Soviet Era* (London: Saqi Books, 2001), 177. Dagikhudo Dagiev, “Pamiri Ethnic Identity and Its Evolution in Post-Soviet Tajikistan,” in *Identity, History and Trans-Nationality in Central Asia: The Mountain Communities of Pamir*, ed. Dagikhudo Dagiev and Carole Faucher (London New York Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), pp. 23-44.

4 Mikhail S. Andreev, *Tadjiki Dolini Khuf: Verkhovya Amudaryi* [The Tajiks of Khuf Valley: Upper of the Oxus River Amudarya] (Stalinabad: Akademii Nauk Tadjikskoi SSR, 1953).

“whereas in the past, it denoted nothing more than the place where a person lived”.<sup>5</sup> Thus the Pamiris are now officially considered to be Tajiks regardless of the language they speak and other ethnic characteristics.<sup>6</sup> The nationality of all the people in the GBAO is seen to be Tajik,<sup>7</sup> and, “. . . all people declared themselves as belonging to one . . . and identity became univocal . . .”<sup>8</sup> Thus, the interactions of different forces, such as politics, culture, religion, and geography have played a significant role in shaping the identity of the community. Culturally, ethnically, and geographically they considered themselves “*Pamiri*,” and politically and officially they were seen as Tajiks, with their nationality being registered as Tajik on their passports.

The Soviet state policy was not particularly detrimental to local cultures, and actually contributed to the development of differentiated ethnic categories. It also led to the organization, promotion, codification, and popularity of various traditional cultures. Tishkov notes, “despite many crimes committed by the Soviet government against ethnic groups . . . no ethnic groups disappeared from the map of the Soviet Union during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, cultural traditions were documented, academically described, and staged in numerous theatres, operas, and museums, and folk music and dance groups were established. During the Soviet period, all forms of artistic expression were heavily edited and curated, so as to conform to the ideological mandate of the Soviet state policy. This, however, ended up nurturing local cultures, especially musical cultures, which later served as a basis for nation building in the nascent Tajik nation state.

Once the Central Asian states gained their independence with the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, cultural and religious expression was fostered in order to advance nation building and (religious) identity formation. The different states targeted traditional musical genres, appropriating and absorbing them into their new state-based national cultures, with modifications to accommodate nationalist goals and objectives. Thus, in post-Soviet Central Asia, artistic expression, and especially musical performances, became central to the expression and development of identities at the national and sub-national levels.

### **The Pamiri *Rabbob***

Musical instruments, apart from being recognized and attractive to individuals because of their sound, shape, and aura, have become symbols of tradition and identity for nations, sub-national regions, and ethnic groups. They have specific cultural meanings, and these meanings are related “to a web of local cultural relations which position them in local musical tradition.”<sup>10</sup> They are not only commodities but are meaningful by virtue of the cultural value they assume at a given moment in history. As Appadurai argues in another context, “we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things.”<sup>11</sup>

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5 Valentin Bushkov and Lydia Monogarova, “Ethnic Processes in Gorny Badakhshan,” *Central Asia and Caucasus*, 5 (2000); [http://www.ca-c.org/journal/2000/journal\\_eng/eng05\\_2000/24.bushk.shtml](http://www.ca-c.org/journal/2000/journal_eng/eng05_2000/24.bushk.shtml) (last accessed November 4, 2013).

6 Muriel Atkin, “Religious, National, and Other Identities in Central Asia,” in *Muslims in Central Asia: Expressions of Identity and Change*, ed. Jo-Ann Gross (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 46–72.

7 Shahram Akbarzadeh, “Why Did Nationalism Fail in Tajikistan?” *Europe-Asia Studies* 48, (7) (1996): 1105–1129; doi:10.1080/09668139608412402 (last accessed October 4, 2013).

8 Oliver Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000), x.

9 Valery Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and After the Soviet Union: The Mind Aflame* (London: SAGE, 1997), 234.

10 Kevin Dawe, “The Cultural Study of Musical Instruments” in *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*, eds. Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 277.

11 Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 5.

The Pamiri *rabbob*, or *rabbobcha*, plays a significant role in the religious and cultural lives of the Pamiri Ismaili Muslims in the GBAO. The Pamiri *rabbob* is a wooden, short-necked lute with six gut or nylon strings. It is similar to the Tibetan and Nepalese lutes and belongs to a series of high-mountain lute types from a special musical region in mountainous areas.<sup>12</sup>

The instrument comes in various sizes and shapes, and is made from the wood of an apricot, mulberry, or walnut tree. Its circular soundboard, called the “head,” is covered with thick leather fastened with iron nails. Several ornamental holes are drilled into the sound chamber to facilitate sound production. The *rabbob* is played with *zakhmak*, a wedge-shaped wooden plectrum, tied to the instrument with a string. *Kharak* (little donkey), a piece of wood located on the instrument’s head, serves as a bridge, and is used for tuning the instrument, along with six pegs (*gushak*).

The *rabbob* is played at various occasions by the Pamiri Ismaili Muslims, but mostly during the performance of *qasīda-khonī* or *mado-khonī*, a musical performance performed by individuals or groups of performers locally known as *qasīda-khon* or *mado-khon*. They accompany themselves by musical instruments, among which are the *rabbob*, *daf*, *tanbur* or *balandzikom* and *setor*. Like other musical spiritual traditions elsewhere in the Muslim world,<sup>13</sup> *qasīda-khonī* or *mado-khonī* is firstly a musical performance meant for spiritual, devotional, and ritual ceremonies. During the Soviet regime in the GBAO, the *rabbob* and its performance underwent a profound change and decline. At that time, anything that was closely associated with religion was banned and suppressed. Since the instrument was part of a religious ceremony, the *rabbob* never entered the musical schools, college, or institutes. It was a musical instrument played only secretly within the family circle. Later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the *rabbob* began to be played outside ritual contexts and was included in official cultural events as part of the orchestra of folk instruments.

After the breakdown of the Soviet system, the *rabbob* re-emerged, and modified versions of the instrument were produced. Though still fashioned in the old form and retaining aspects of the old playing techniques, the instrument makers now utilize different religious and nationalist decorative patterns on the instruments. In its basic form, each part of the instrument is ascribed a sacred meaning metaphorically assigned to the physical and spiritual worlds, thus acquiring special status in the cultural and national schemes. The instrument, through its function in the music culture, as well as its place in the social and cultural life of the Pamiri Ismailis, expresses various identities of and to the people.



Pamiri *Rabbob*.

Photo by Chorshanbe Goibnazarov.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Slobin, *Music in the Culture of Northern Afghanistan* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1976), 122.

<sup>13</sup> See Regula Qureshi, *Sufi Music of India and Pakistan: Sound, Context and Meaning in Qawwali* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).



The Ensemble of *La'li Badakhshan* from Ishkashim District participated in a musical festival in 1987 in Moscow. Photo from the archive of Langar Museum Wakhan, 2020.

## Music and Musical Instruments in Islam

The way the Pamiri *rabbob* expresses the religious identity of its makers, players, and listeners should be discussed as part of the larger discussion of music and musical instruments in the Islamic context. It should also be discussed in relation to the stories and legends connected to the production of the instrument, the decorations on the instruments, and its utilization in religious practices.

There is debate about whether listening to music and taking part in musical activities is allowed for Muslims. Many Muslim scholars condemn music and musical performances, regarding them as a deviation from God's command, in line with drinking wine and gambling. Some other Muslim thinkers provide evidence for the usefulness of music and musical instruments in religious practices.<sup>14</sup> For instance, during the Prophet Muhammad's time, women, girls, and slaves are said to have used frame drums to pay their respects upon the arrival of eminent people and frame drums were also played during battles to encourage the warriors towards victory.<sup>15</sup> The various debates on such issues indicate that Islam, as a world religion that spread to many different countries over the course of history and encountered many different cultures and civilizations, was articulated through diverse practices wherever it took root. It also created various forms of identity expression through the variations in devotional practices within Muslim societies.

In the Central Asian context, such movements resulted in creating values and identities to which traders, rulers, and preachers (especially the Sufis) contributed immensely.<sup>16</sup> The GBAO was not exempt from this process of Islamization. The missionary activities of the preachers led the Islamization process, and the result of their activities was diversifying practices within that society. Music and

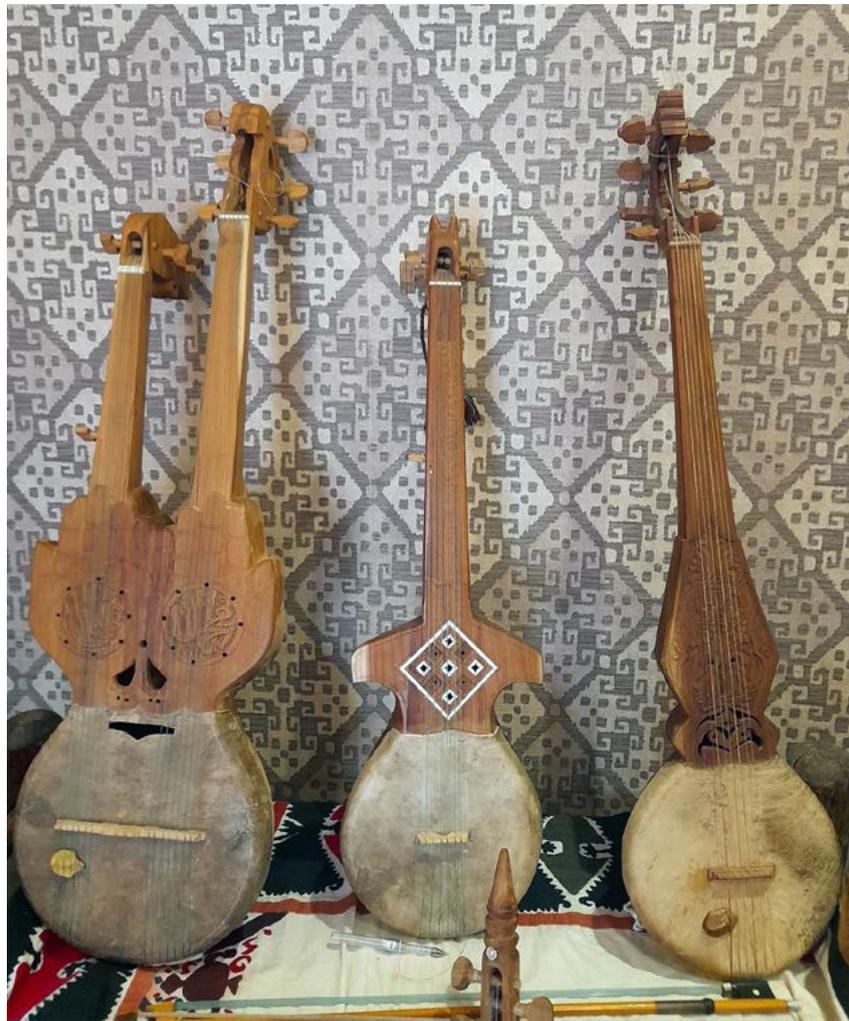
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14 A. Gribetz, "The Sama Controversy: Sufis vs legalist," *Studia Islamica* 1 XXIV (1991): 43-62; Amnon Shiloah, "Music and Religion in Islam," *Acta Musicologica* 69, Fasc.2 (1997): 43-55; and Amnon Shiloah, *Music in the World of Islam: A Socio-cultural study* (England: Scholar Press, 1995).

15 Veronica Doubleday, "The Frame Drum in the Middle East," 109. See also, George H. Farmer, *A History of Arabian Music* (London: Luzak, 1929).

16 For a case study on the Islamization of Central Asia, see Devin A. DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tükles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994). He discusses the issue of Ozbeg's (a Mongol ruler) conversion to Islam on the basis of local conversion narratives.

musical instruments became an integral part of the emergent culture. In many parts of the Muslim world, particularly in Persianate cultures, “music is considered a spiritual food.”<sup>17</sup> Many musical instruments are used during religious occasions which came to be venerated and seen as having symbolic significance. For instance, the large tambourine (*daf*), is considered to refer to the cycle of all created beings (*daira akhwah*)<sup>18</sup>; the reed-flute (*nai*)<sup>19</sup> is associated with the Mevlevi ritual,<sup>20</sup> and the *tanbur* is a musical instrument played in the sacred musical repertoire of the Kurdish Ahli-i Haqq.<sup>21</sup> The same interpretation is given to the practice of *qasīda-khonī* or *mado-khonī*, in which the *daf* is regarded as a cycle of the universe and the *rabbob* the soul entering the universe, i. e. when the soul comes into being.<sup>22</sup>



*Rabbobs* made by Shawqmamad Pulodov, a musician from Bartang Valley of Badakhshan.  
The inscription on the *rabbobs* from the left reads *Ya Ali* and *Ya Muhammad*  
written in Arabic script. Photo by Chorshanbe Goibnazarov.

17 John Baily, *Music of Afghanistan: Professional Musicians in the City of Heart* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 152-155.

18 Leonard Lewishohn, “The Sacred Music of Islam: Sama in Persian Sufi Tradition” *British Journal of Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 6 (1997): 13.

19 R.A. Nicholson, *Rumi: Poet and Mystic* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1978), 29.

20 Veronica Doubleday, “The Frame Drum in the Middle East: Women, Musical Instruments and Power,” *Ethnomusicology*, 43: 1 (1999): 104.

21 Partow Hooshmandrad, “Performing the Belief: Sacred Musical Practice of the Kurdish Ahli-i Haqq,” PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2004.

22 Zaimkhon Muborakqadamov, interview, November 2011, Shitkharv village, Wakhan.

The Pamiri *rabbob*, with its distinctive features, similarly plays an important role in the religious life of the Pamiri Ismaili Muslims. The religious associations of the instrument can be seen in its physical form, the inscriptions and decorations on the instrument, and its use in religious ceremonies. *Rabbob* makers often carve religious verses such as *Bismillah al-Rahmon al-Rahim, Ya Ali Madad* in Arabic script on the body of the instruments, which further connects the *rabbob* to their religious life and inscribes their religious identity physically. The instrument makers prop up the notion of identity through their specific choice of materials, designs, inscriptions, and decorations. On this point, Nicholas Thomas says, “objects are not what they were made to be but what they have become.”<sup>23</sup> By utilizing the *rabbob* in various religious contexts, people give meaning to it; the musical instrument transforms into an item through which the notion of identity is constructed and expressed.

Mention must also be made of the oral history prevalent among the Pamiri Ismaili Muslims relating to the origin of the *rabbob*. This has allowed for the integration of *rabbob* performances into traditional Muslim devotional practices. Today, each household in the GBAO possesses a *rabbob*, even when no members of the household play the instrument. They keep the instrument hanging on their walls, passed from one generation to other, as a marker of their religious and ethnic identities.

### Origin Stories of the Pamiri *Rabbob*

The history of the Pamiri *rabbob* is not clear; no known written historical sources provide information about the instrument’s evolution. Medieval petroglyphs in this region do, however, indicate that the *rabbob* has been conceivably present in the region before Islam.



Images of the *rabbobs* on rocks from Langar village of Wakhan. Source: Tashbayeva K., Kujanazarov M., Ranov V. and Samashev Z. (2001: 142).

Apart from these petroglyphs no other sources were available to refer to the instrument’s ancient historical presence in the region. One must therefore rely on oral history produced by the musicians and instrument makers, which include ambiguous legends and stories shared orally, with some even being available in the region in written form.

The most common legend associates the invention of the *rabbob* with Nasir-i Khusraw (1004-1088). The legend says that when he came to Jurm in Afghan Badakhshan, there lived a king called Malik on the other side of the river, in Barak, whose sister was sick for a long time. Nasir cured her, and then rumors spread of her being pregnant, which angered the king, who then ordered his people to persecute the healer. When the king’s men wanted to cross the bridge to reach him, the bridge turned upside down, and the king, his host, and his people turned to stone. Nasir-i Khusraw turned them back to human form, thus

<sup>23</sup> Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 4.

performing another miracle. Only then did the king realize that he had made a mistake and promised to serve Nasir-i Khusraw for the rest of his life. The king was ordered to make a *rabbob* from the saddle of his horse and was asked to sing.<sup>24</sup> This story exists in a slightly different version in a small book, *Bahr al-Akhbor*, a manuscript that was edited and published in 1992 in Khorog.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to the aforementioned story, there is another legend that was narrated to me by Kholmamad, a musician, a *qasīda-khon* or *maddo-khon*, and a *rabbob* maker from Shughnan. I met him in Khorog at the De Pamiri Handicraft (an organization that works with craftspeople in GBAO) office where he was selling *rabbobs*. He believes that the *rabbob* was first created at the same time as the first human being was created by God.

*The history of the rabbob goes back to the first human being, Odam-i Safiulloh [Adam]. When the first human body was created by Olloh [Allah] from clay, Jabrail [Gabriel], the angel, was sent to earth to place the soul inside the body. However, the soul did not want to enter the body, as it was scared to go inside a small narrow space. Then all the angels were asked to make a rabbob and play it. As soon as the soul heard the sound of the rabbob, it got excited and went inside the body. However, before entering the body, Olloh-yi ta'ollo [told] the soul that if it did not want to stay inside permanently, it could come out. When the soul entered the body, it liked being inside the body and decided not to leave it. Jabrail was asked to remind the soul that he had promised Olloh to stay there temporarily. The angels played the rabbob again and the soul departed from the body. Therefore, we human beings do not live forever. Our soul came to this world with the sound of the rabbob and it should be accompanied to its origin by the rabbob too.*<sup>26</sup>

Many scholars are frustrated by these legends and question their historical reliability.<sup>27</sup> However, these legends are passed on orally even today and their popularity, as Devin DeWessee emphasizes, “serve[s] not as a source for history per se, but for religious values in general,” and, “the significance of conversion and its meaning for communal identity.”<sup>28</sup> Their place within their own historical context helps us to “reveal the essentially sacred act of ‘founding’ a community and defining it in fundamentally religious terms.”<sup>29</sup>

Ethnographic accounts of Pamiri musical culture from the 20<sup>th</sup> century also provide us with some interesting stories from the region that assert the importance of the *rabbob* in the Pamiri Ismaili culture. Nurjanov offers the following description, which is similar to the narrative of Kholmamad: “Gabriel cut a stick from the tree, made a *rabbob* and then covered the head of the *rabbob* with the skin of a horse, made strings from the intestines of sheep and played the music. Then the soul gets excited from the music and comes down from the mountains and enters the body of the human being.”<sup>30</sup>

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24 Yormamadov Abdulmamad, Azizkhon Karimov, and Zaimkhon Muborakqadamov, interviewed October and November, 2011 in the Wakhan. The same story was told in: Gabriele van den Berg, *Minstrel Poetry from the Pamir Mountains* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag 2004); and Faizulla Karomatov and Nizam Nurdjanov, *Muzykalnoe Iskusstvo Pamira* [Musical Arts of the Pamirs], vol. 1 (Moscow: Nauka, 1985).

25 R. Rahmonqulov, ed., *Bahr al-Akhbor* (Khorog: Pamir Press, 1991).

26 Kholmamad Kholmamadov, interview, November 2011, Khorog.

27 Andrei Bertels, *Nasiri Khosrov i Ismailism* (Moscow: Vostonchnoi Literatry, 1959); and Wladimir Ivanow, *Problems in Nasir-i Khusraw's Biography* (Bombay: Ismaili Society, 1956).

28 Devin A. DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde*, 12.

29 *Ibid.*, 6.

30 Faizulla Karomatov and Nizam Nurdjanov, *Muzykalnoe Iskusstvo Pamira* [Musical Arts of the Pamirs], 13.

### ***Rabbob* and the Expression of Religious Identity**

Today, the *rabbob*, as a musical instrument, serves as a site where the religious identity of the Pamiri Ismaili Muslim is expressed. The existence of such conversion stories, once again, offers insight into the importance of the *rabbob* in the life of the Pamiri Ismailis, in particular how it acts as a medium between human beings and the spiritual world. These stories show how the instrument is embedded in the everyday life of the Ismailis and integrated into Ismaili devotional practices.

It is not only the origin stories about the *rabbob* that suggest this association with the religious identity of the people, but there are also other ways in which the *rabbob* is linked with religion and considered a sacred musical instrument in the region. One way of expressing their identity through the instrument is the devotion shown by people towards the instrument and the way it affects and transforms the state of their being when played. For instance, many Pamiri Ismailis believe that the soul and the *rabbob* are connected from the “first time” (*az rūz-i azal*), meaning the creation of human beings. Therefore, they play this instrument during funeral ceremonies. Today, people who participate in funeral ceremonies also confirm that during that moment of sorrow, the sound of the *rabbob* is very soothing. Lutfiya, a young woman in her 20s, told me that the sound of the *rabbob* had a consoling affect on her when she lost her brother at a very young age. She emphasized that during the funeral of her brother, the only thing that soothed her pain was the sound of the *rabbob*. “It somehow penetrates your soul and it makes you feel calm and relaxed,” she said.<sup>31</sup>

The *rabbob*'s sacrality can also be noted in the way people take care of it. The instrument is always placed in high places in the Pamiri house and is not usually put on the ground. In case it is put on the ground, it is always placed upright. People talk about the *rabbob* with great enthusiasm because they consider it an instrument that preserved their faith for a millennium. In this regard, as a symbol of their religion and their religious identity, it was presented to the Imam of the Ismailis, the Aga Khan IV, as a gift in 1995, when he visited the Pamirs for the first time. Musicians from the Pamirs consider the instrument to be a bearer of their history and tradition. The reason they gifted the instrument to the Imam of the Time because they did not see the Imam until 1995, and they asserted that they always had a spiritual connection with the Imam through the *rabbob*.

We can see here that the *rabbob* acts as a means of expressing devotion and connection of the Pamiri Ismailis to their Imam and their faith. They treat and cherish the instrument with respect and care. Usually, when one asks musicians in the Pamirs why the *rabbob* has a special status in the community, they answer the question by reciting the following verse:

*Donī, ki rubob-i mo chiho megūyad?*  
*Az zot-i pok-i Murtazo megūyad.*  
*Īn pora-yi chūb-i qoq az qudrat-i ū,*  
*Bo kom-i zabanī khud Khudo megūyad.*

Do you know what our *rabbob* says?  
[It] talks about pure progeny of Murtazā [‘Alī].  
This piece of dry wood with the great power of Him,  
With its own tongue, says the name of God.

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31 Lutfiya Mamadsafoeva, interview, October 2011, Ishkashim district.

In the above verse, which alludes to the first Imam of the Ismailis, Ali, the Ismailis in Tajikistan assert the centrality of the figure of the Imam of the Time and validate the legitimacy of his authority. They also sing of the religious significance of the *rabbob* during religious musical performances. For example, in the following verses sung in the Shughnanī language by a singer called Shirinbek, in the *falak* melody, the religious meaning of each string of the *rabbob* is metaphorically expressed, projecting the religious identity of the singer:

<i>Naghaghed dam rabbob yet chiz sukhan kekht</i>	Listen to what the <i>rabbob</i> says!
<i>Qarib ved yet rawon jon az badan kekht.</i>	It accompanies the departed soul!
<i>Yi porcha-yi zor az qudrat-i Haq</i>	A piece of wood with the power of God;
<i>Khuthoy luvd-at imom turd luvd yet beshak</i>	Only talks about God and the Imams.
<i>Naghagh yet bezevath turd luvd an al-Haq</i>	Listen! Without a tongue it says <i>an al-Haq</i> .
<i>Naghaghed dam rabbob yet chiz sukhan kikht</i>	Listen to what the <i>rabbob</i> says!
<i>Ei musulmonon naghaghed yet chize turd luvd.</i>	O Muslims! Listen to what it says to you!
<i>Sukhan az panj tan (h)ar pinz zil luvd</i>	All five strings talk about the five bodies.
<i>Shashum zingak ta turd az Jabrail luvd.</i>	The sixth string, <i>zingak</i> , talks about Gabriel.
<i>Naghaghed dam rabob yet chiz sukhan kikht</i>	Listen to what the <i>rabbob</i> says!
<i>Yakum zil az Muhammad kixt rivoyat</i>	The first string talks about Muhammad,
<i>Duyum luvd az Ali sha(h)-i viloyat</i>	The second is about the King ‘Alī.
<i>Sayum kixt naql az khotun-i jannat</i>	The third talks about the Lady of Paradise.
<i>Naghaghed dam rabbob yet chiz sukhan kikht</i>	Listen to what the <i>rabbob</i> says!
<i>Di chorum zil neghegh yet chiz nawo kikht</i>	Listen to what the fourth string says!
<i>(h)ikoyat az Husain-i Karbalo kikht</i>	It talks about Hussain of Karbala
<i>Hasan yod panjumin zil bekhato kikht</i>	Without a doubt the fifth string talks about Hasan.
<i>Naghaghed dam rabbob yet chiz sukhan kikht</i>	Listen to what the <i>rabbob</i> says!

The verses above reveal that the performers and the listeners see the *rabbob* as strongly connected to the symbols and stories of their faith. They express their religious identity through this instrument. Although each string of the instrument has a musical name – *bam*, *mukholif*, *zīr*, *zingak* – in respect to their association with the religious belief system of the Pamiris, these strings also have religious names and meanings. Each string of the instrument has been metaphorically assigned to the five bodies (*panj tan*), a religious symbol and identity for the Pamiri Ismailis. The Pamiri Ismailis until recently referred to themselves and by others as *panjtani*, the followers of the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, his son-in-law Ali, and his grandsons Hasan and Huseyn.

The musicians convey their devotion and religious sentiments via poems to legitimize their argument. This suggests that the *rabbob* has its origins in the distant past, and that it suits the local construction of Muslim identity in the Pamirs today. It recalls the process of Islamization in the region and shows that the notion of identity is grounded in the legends and stories about such instruments.

## The Physical Construction of the *Rabbob*

Making a *rabbob* is a long and persevering process that demands that the maker have considerable knowledge and skills. Abdulmamad Yormamadov, a *rabbob* maker from Wakhan, locally known as *usto* (craftsman), recounted that in the past, making a *rabbob* was a ritual process in itself.



Usto (craftsman) Abdulmamad Yormamadov making a future *rabbob* in his work shop, Langar Village, Wakhan. Photo by Chorshanbe Goibnazarov, August 2014.

To begin with his work, the master had to follow the rituals. He must perform an ablution and prayer (*namoz*), sacrifice a sheep, and prepare a meal from the sacrificed animal, locally known as *khudoyī* (literally, God's meal), which was shared with others. The gut of the sheep was set aside to prepare the strings for the future instrument. After the *khudoyī*, the skin used for the head of the *rabbob* had to be soaked in water for 5–10 days, which facilitated removing the fleece before it is stretched out over the instrument's soundboard. A tree, usually apricot, mulberry or walnut tree had to be cut down, and a part of it considered suitable for the future instrument was cut and then left to soak in water for another 10–15 days, in order to prevent the wood from cracking.<sup>32</sup> In order to make the instrument last longer, the *rabbob* makers use the aforementioned hardwoods. One can still find *rabbobs* in Pamiri houses intact that are more than a hundred years old. For instance, the *balandmaqom*, a unique type of *rabbob* in the Wakhan valley of the GBAO, made by Sufi Mubārak-i Wakhānī, is estimated to be about 200 years old.

Today, the ritual process of making the *rabbob* differs from the past, as construction methods have changed from earlier times. Thus, the ritual formerly practiced with the construction of the *rabbob* is no longer performed, and the gut strings of the instrument have been replaced with nylon strings. According to Abdulmamad, the non-observance of the ritual does not undermine the instrument's significance. The classification of stringed instruments into “instruments of hell” (metal-stringed instruments) and “instruments of paradise” (gut-stringed instruments)<sup>33</sup> no longer applies. The nylon strings that replaced gut strings sound reasonably good. They are readily available and more practical and are faster to prepare than gut strings. As Abdulmamad remarked, “some of our work has become easier, but that does not affect the nature of the *rabbob* as a sacred (*muqaddas*) instrument.”<sup>34</sup>

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32 Abdulmamad Yormamadov, interview, October 18, 2011, Langar village.

33 On this classification, see Faizulla Karomatov and Nizam Nurdjanov, *Muzykalnoe Iskusstvo Pamira* [Musical Arts of the Pamirs], 12-13.

34 Abdulmamad Yormamadov, interview, October 18, 2011, Langar village, Wakhan.

*Rabbob* makers decorate the instruments with various motifs. The various patterns carved or inscribed on the instruments illustrate the way people construct and express their identities. The decoration on the *rabbob* can be made of one motif or several that cover the entire instrument. These motifs are believed to represent the natural and spiritual aspects of life. There are manifold interpretations for the decorations on the instruments. The instrument conveys a complex set of meanings, and embodies Pamiri religious beliefs, exemplified by the prayers and patterns carved or written on the neck or skin of the instrument.<sup>35</sup> For instance, Masain Masainov produces different forms of the *rabbob* with symbolic designs and depictions.

Inscriptions in Arabic, or Tajik written in Cyrillic, such as *Allah*, *Bismillah-i Rahman-i Rahim*, *Yā 'Alī Madad*, and *Yā 'Alī* illustrate the way the instrument makers express their identity as Muslims and particularly their identity as Ismaili Muslims.

The peculiar shape and construction of the *rabbob* also articulates its sacredness and shapes the identity of the Pamiris. This is done by associating anthropomorphism and zoomorphism with the instrument, e.g. with the nomenclature of the instrument's components associated with human body parts, such as the head, neck, belly, and ears,<sup>36</sup> or with legends and stories that are built around the creation of the instruments, associated with angels and the miracles of saints.

The shape of the *rabbob* is often compared with the human body, and its six strings, which along with the specific Ismaili symbolism of the *Panj Tan*, are thought to represent the six prophets: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. The sixth string, representing the Prophet Muhammad, ends midway along the instrument's neck, or fingerboard, signifying the end of the prophethood and the beginning of the Imamate in Ismaili Islam. The



*Balandmaqom* made by Mubārak-i Wakhānī. Photo by Chorshanbe Goibnazarov, Yamg Village, Wakhan, 2014.



The *rabbob* in the middle has a body carved with word *Allah* in Tajik language with Cyrillic made by Masayn Masaynov, from Gharan Valley, Ishkashim. Photo was taken at an exhibition in Khorog. Photo by Vatani Alidodov, June 2014.

35 Benjamin D. Koen, *Beyond the Roof of the World*, 80-82; Benjamin D. Koen, "Medical Ethnomusicology in the Pamir Mountains: Music and Prayer in Healing," *Ethnomusicology*, vol. 49:2 (2005): 287-311.

36 Kartomi Margaret, "On Metaphor and analogy in the concepts and classification of musical instruments," *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 37 (2005): 25-57.



The neck of balandmaqom resembles the crest of a hoopoe. Photo by Chorshanbe Goibnazarov, 2014.



Neck of the rabbob resembles the head of a horse. Photo by Muyassar Goibnazarov, 2021.

zoomorphic representation is depicted by shaping the instruments into the form of totemic animals.<sup>37</sup> In some cases, the Pamiri Ismailis associate the *rabbob* with images of totemic animals and birds – the horse or the hoopoe (*hudhud*).

Stories exist in many cultures that illustrate the wide range of symbolism and attributes of the hoopoe,<sup>38</sup> and in Muslim cultures and Persian poetic culture in particular, it is associated with devotion and virtue.<sup>39</sup> The shape of the horse symbolizes *Duldul*, the horse of the Prophet Muhammad or Imam Alī. There are many stories in which a horse is converted into a supernatural and mythical being. According to Islamic belief, Gabriel brought such a supernatural and mythical being *Burrāq* from the heavens and the Prophet rode it on the Night of Ascension (*Shab-i Merāj*).<sup>40</sup> This association articulates the sacredness of the instruments.

Changes occurred in the *rabbob*'s design soon after the visit of the Aga Khan to the Pamirs. Instrument makers began to express their religious identity through utilizing different religious-institutional patterns, such as the logo of the Institute of Ismaili Studies, AKDN, which is the hand of five, a symbol representing the *Panj Tan*. In this way, the artists and craftsmen attempt to adapt their past traditions to modern forms and to integrate into the institutionalized form of their religion, establishing a connection with the global Ismaili community.

A distinctive type of *rabbob* is the *balandmaqom*, literally, “high stage”, a nineteen-stringed lute that was devised by a Sufi poet, astronomer, and musician from the Wakhan, Mubārak-i Wakhānī (d. 1903). The nineteen strings of the *balandmaqom* denote the Arabic letters in the phrase “*Bismillāh-i Rahmān-i Rahīm*” (In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful). The original *balandmaqom* is still preserved in the house of Mubārak's great-grandson, Lutfulloh Zaraboev, in Yamg village in the Wakhan. This musical instrument, today, represents not only the inheritance of a particular person, a family, or an ethnic group, but also manifests the cultural heritage of the whole Tajik nation, as many copies of it exist in the museum dedicated to Mubārak-i Wakhānī that function as cultural institutions under the Ministry of Culture in Tajikistan today.

37 Jean-Sebastien Larently, “Anthropomorphism, zoomorphism and abstraction in the musical instruments of Central Africa,” in *Sounding forms: African Musical Instruments*, ed. M.T. Brincard (New York: The American Federation of Arts, n.a.), 46-51.

38 See Sheldon Oberman, *The Wisdom Bird: A Tale of Solomon and Sheba* (N.a.: Boyds Mill Press, 2000).

39 Nancy Hatch Dupree, “An Interpretation of the Role of the Hoopoe in Afghan Folklore and Magic,” *Folklore*, 85, 3 (1974): 173.

40 Tayebe Jafary and Morteza Hashemi, “Analyzing the Prophet Muhammad's Symbolic Horse in His Spiritual Ascension,” *Asian Culture and History*, 5:1(2013): 74-78. See also Khalid Sindawi, “The Donkey of the Prophet in Shī'ite Tradition,” *Al Masāq*, 18:1 (2006): 87-98, doi: 10.1080/09503110500222278.

The illustrations on the instruments can be understood not only as aesthetic objects that are the product of skilled craftsmanship, but as cultural artifacts that hold symbolic meanings, represent the identity of the community, taste, or fashion; and evoke feelings of connection to religion, place, and people. These distinctive features of making the *rabbob* show the particular cultural processes of producing such an instrument, expose something about the particular type of music prevalent in the area, and reveal something about the values and beliefs constructed around the instrument. The religious and social identities of the masters, the players, and the music consumers are integrated into the production of the *rabbob* and the consumption of its music. This provides us with a rich and complex model for studying the ways in which the *rabbob* fits into, and even shapes, a particular cultural world.

### The Pamiri *Rabbob*'s Expression of Cultural and National Identity

“Nation” and “national identity” are both socially constructed terms that exist as political and cultural inventions to serve ideological purposes.<sup>41</sup> Upon gaining independence, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the bloody civil war, Tajikistan found itself in a position to rally its people towards the exercise of nation building and felt the need to construct a singular national identity. Various forms of cultural expression have been instrumental in constructing that identity. However, there is a tendency among different groups within the nation to not appreciate or value the cultural diversity of the country. These people seek to impose their own views of cultural values, which often are stereotypical in nature. Thus, they continuously question and contest the notion of national identity. Focusing on the distinguishing features of language, religious affiliation, geographical location, and cultural values, these groups advocate cultural and political differentiation. Identity, in this case, as David Morley and Kevin Robins note, is formed through re-composition process of the social system, where relations and representations play significant role through constituting and continually linked dimensions of self-identification and affirmation of difference.<sup>42</sup> Such a negotiation is an ongoing process and is subject to change. Strands of culture come to occupy dominant and prominent facets of national identity through such negotiation. These strands are visible in cultural representations of the *rabbob* that are affected by political and cultural changes, and are clearly articulated in the perception, utilization, and construction of the physical instrument.



A *rabbob* with the logo of AKF (Aga Khan Foundation).  
Photo by Vatani Alidodov, 2021.

41 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture, Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

42 David Morley and Kevin Robins, *Mass Media, Electronic Landscape and Identities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 46.

The *rabbob* is now valued, not only as a religious musical instrument, but also as an important expression of cultural heritage within ethnic communities and national culture, through different cultural programs. Through its commodification and exhibition, the instrument signifies national values, and introduces the musical culture of ethnic groups and the Tajik nation more broadly, along with the artistic and creative aspects of this culture, to the international arena as an embodiment of national values. Young people are now learning to play the instrument at cultural venues and music educational institutions. Performers are invited to play on national television programs and at art festivals. The instrument's sacrality has been transformed, and it is received now as a cultural product that represents not only the culture of a particular ethnic group, but articulates the cultural diversity of Tajikistan, and internationally, of Muslim cultures in general.

The *rabbob* makers, as noted above, produce the *rabbob* not only for ritual purposes, but also for consumption by cultural institutions, for the purposes of tourism, concerts, and promotion of the arts. Within this process, they establish a proper perspective for viewing their religion and culture through this instrument by combining the past with the present and religion with culture, and to negotiate

their identity within competing cultural and political domains. This is also a process of transferring vernacular cultures into globality, by turning a traditional musical instrument into a piece of art.



A *rabbob* with the emblem of Tajik State covered on the body of the instrument. Photo by Vatani Alidodov, 2020.

Today, the master craftsmen use different shapes and forms to adapt the old *rabbob* to the tastes and interests of the market and cultural institutions. They are currently more decorated and include more patterns and icons that represent the national symbols of Tajikistan, such as the emblem and the flag.

It is not only the form and shape of the instrument, but the way it is played during performances that illustrates the new notion of identity. The *rabbob* players sit on chairs on the concert stage, in contrast with the performers who play the instrument during religious settings, where they must sit on the ground.

Modified versions of the *rabbob* have been assimilated into official cultural life. In 1941, the first orchestra of folk music was established and performed in Moscow.<sup>43</sup>

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43 I.V. Stalin, *Sochineniya* (The Essays), 211-212.



The first Pamiri Children's Ensemble participated in the Decade of Tajik Art, in Moscow, on April 22, 1941, as a national ensemble from Tajikistan SSR. Photo from the archive of Gurminj Museum, Dushanbe, August, 2013.

The creation of such an ensemble entailed both reconstructing traditional Pamiri musical instruments for orchestral performances and adapting the traditional performance culture of Tajik music to the new social venue of concert halls.



The President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon holding the Pamiri rabob at the De Pamiri Handicraft in Khorog. Photo by Vatani Alidodov, 2016.

During the Soviet period of modernization, the state and non-governmental organizations encouraged local craftsmen to produce their goods and supported them economically. Such promotion of folk culture, showcasing traditional Tajik culture and spirituality, contributes to its visibility in the public international domain today. Organizations like De-Pamiri Handicraft and the Aga Khan Music Initiative promote, develop, and revitalize musical culture in the region, including the craft of *rabbob* making. Today, the instrument has been revitalized and reintroduced into mainstream performances. It is featured frequently at national concerts, festivals, exhibitions and in folk music performances.

One of the ways to arrive at a sense of a shared identity, based in common social practices, can be through musical instruments.<sup>44</sup> The Tajik national identity is expressed, first, through individual contributions and creativity, and through the depiction of nationalistic images on the body of the instruments. Secondly, the instruments project that identity symbolically, through their physical display at cultural festivals, cultural programs, and the mass media. The *rabbob* is not just an instrument for music, but also an instrument for expressing the identity attached to that music.

### The *Daf*

Another musical instrument, which plays a significant role in expressing identities of the people in the Pamirs, is the *daf*. The *daf* is a circular framed percussion instrument which comes in different sizes and construction patterns, with or without jingles. In the GBAO, the instrument is played in various musical genres by both men and women. Women play *daf* in the Shugnan and Rushan regions for welcoming and sending off brides and grooms to their wedding ceremony, welcoming guests and starting happy occasions.



Women playing *daf* at the Roof of the World Festival to start the event.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1991), 3.

<sup>45</sup> Source: <https://www.facebook.com/ROTWF/photos/843295372535299>



Performance of *dafsoz* during celebration of Aga Khan IV's Diamond Jubilee.<sup>46</sup>

It is also played in some parts of the GBAO to announce the death of a member of the community. In this case, the performance of the *daf* in the GBAO is categorized as *daf-i shodī* [*daf* of happiness or joy] and *daf-i gham* [*daf* of misfortune]. Men play the *daf* when performing a musical genre called *dafsoz*.<sup>47</sup> This musical genre is performed exclusively by several men, sitting in a circle, each holding and playing the *daf*. The *dafsoz* is usually performed during wedding ceremonies or happy occasions. In this context it is also called *hofīzi* since many of the sung texts are related to the famous Persian poet of the 14<sup>th</sup> century Hafez Shīrāzī (1315-1390).

The *daf* is also played during the *qasīda-khonī* or *maddo-khonī* performance. However, its utilization during the performance in Wakhan is limited as compared to its use in Shughnan and Rushan districts. In Wakhan, the *daf* is associated with joyful occasions and, therefore, is not played during the performance of *qasīda-khonī* in funeral ceremonies. According to *qasīda-khons* in Wakhan, the *daf* symbolizes joy and festivity. If somebody dies in a village where a wedding is about to take place, a member of the family who wishes to celebrate the wedding, together with the village leader, visits the bereaved family to ask their permission to proceed with the celebration and play music at the wedding. During the meeting they invite relatives of the deceased to play the *daf*.<sup>48</sup> This custom of seeking permission has a dual role; it shows the visitors' respect for the family's grief, while at the same time helping them to break their mourning. The family's acceptance of the invitation to play the *daf* signifies their consent to the wedding arrangements and the performance of music. In this context, musical instruments "serve as an area of shared experience,"<sup>49</sup> and help to delineate communal identity, social interaction, and solidarity.

## Gender and Musical Instruments

The gendering of musical instruments is common to many cultures. It is typically women, rather men, who are restricted from playing musical instruments in Muslim societies, and in certain cases, even from seeing particular instruments. For example, in the GBAO, the *rabbob* is traditionally played

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<sup>46</sup> Source: <http://ton.ru.net/v/16300>.

<sup>47</sup> Gabrielle van den Berg, *Minstrel Poetry from the Pamir Mountains*, 38.

<sup>48</sup> Alipano Yaqubekov, interview, October 17, 2011, Shirgin of the Wakhan.

<sup>49</sup> John Baily, "Recent Changes in the Dutar of heart," *Asian Music*, Vol.8, No.1, (1976): 55.

only by men. This prejudice weakened, however, during the Soviet period of modernization, when women were encouraged to learn all types of musical instruments. This was a part of the social legacy of the Soviet Union's campaign to integrate women into economic, social, and artistic life, which brought an entire generation of talented female singers, dancers, and instrumentalists into the public domain. Female *rabbob* and *tanbūr* players today play at various national cultural festivals.



Mohjon Nazardodova, a famous female singer and rabbob player, on the left, Gulsara Rajabova, and on the right Sohibbegim Arbobova. They are performing during "Buston" a musical festival in the 1970s. The photo is from the personal archive of Mohjon Nazardodova's daughter Mahingul Nazardodova's collection.

## Conclusion

After the collapse of Soviet Union, when Tajikistan gained its independence, religious and national consciousness became crucial to the life of the people. The political and socio-economic changes then led to the realization and articulation of various identities among the people. These forces of change contributed to the construction of such identities, which were then expressed in various cultural ways. Through the playing and making of instruments, the masters and the musicians play a role in constructing and shoring up regional, religious and national identities. This tendency emerged as a broader cultural development towards modernization, based in changes in cultural values, aspirations, and notions of identity. This broad resurgence of interest in their culture and practices drove the *rabbob* makers and musicians to restore traditional instruments by opening workshops in which to make and repair the instruments, by training students, and by producing musical souvenirs with depictions of different cultural and national patterns on the bodies of the instruments. The *rabbob* has become a touristic product for consumption. National patterns, such as the national flag, and the emblem of Tajikistan, are carved on the instruments. Religious, ethnic, and national expressions are blended together on their bodies and are presented in a way that manifests the complex, multiple, and interconnected identities of the region. The result of these processes of representation, differentiation, and commodification is the reconfiguration of local and global identities.

The reintroduction and revitalization of the Pamiri *rabbob* tradition and its identarian expressions can be witnessed through cultural programs, such as music festivals and exhibitions, and national events, such as Independence Day (*Rūz-i Istiqloliyat*), the Day of Union (*Vahdat-i Millī*), Nawruz, and so forth. The purpose of these programs is manifold, but one function is common to all: to raise awareness of the composers and instrument makers along with promoting their contribution to the national musical culture.

The underlying argument of this article is to show a relay between the transmission and transition of interconnected identities of the musicians, instrument craftsmen, and the Pamiri Ismaili community. The *rabbob* and the *daf* have played an integrative function in articulating and elaborating ethnic, gender, religious, musical, and national identities. I attempted to understand and articulate the different identities that exist and their interconnections through performative contexts. The *rabbob* and the *daf* represent a complex intermingling of spiritual practice, ethical models, and historical memory, evolving from its medieval Islamic origins while also becoming a tool for cultural and political expression in the globalized world. I also discuss the ways that musical instruments facilitate the building of interconnected identities and networks, and the extent to which delocalization and relocation lead to the formation of new belongings.

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