

Cultural Preservation Amid Imperialist Borders: A Look into Badakhshan's Autonomy



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Picture this: you are lying on top of Art Hill with your makeshift picnic (to-go food from a classic restaurant in Tower Grove). You use the rare sighting of sunshine in February as a mood-amplifier, while the midwestern winds simultaneously embrace your body and blow the crumbs off of your piece of gooey butter cake.

Going about your normal St. Louis activities, you are met with alarms, tanks and a sudden warning; as of today, you now have restricted access from entering many St. Louis neighborhoods that resemble the beautiful midwestern culture you have come to love in your dear city. You can no longer freely roam Forest Park as you once used to and you need to apply for a permit at your local embassy in order to go to Cherokee Street—despite it being literally down the road, and supporting its local establishments being a family tradition.

The worst part about this abrupt shift in an area where your family has lived for generations is that these borders were instated by someone who has no relation to St. Louis or knowledge of little things you love about your city. This border creator is not even from St. Louis—say, a Canadian even. These new borders impede your ability to venture out to cultural hubs in your city, limiting your future generations' knowledge of their community's roots.

These restrictions also force loyal customers of small businesses to stop supporting these classic spots that make up St. Louis food culture, and small-locally owned businesses fail to make ends meet. Not only do these borders cause a generational decline in the community's traditions and cultures, but many attractions and landmarks that played vital roles in creating the culture of your region suddenly no longer exist—with economic instability trailing behind.

A sudden shift in free movement and abrupt restrictions on fueling a local economy are only some of

the outcomes that autonomous regions face. Autonomous regions are pockets of land typically occupied by Indigenous or minority ethnic groups who seek independence (yet, might have some self-governance) from the human-made countries their regions are located in, according to Lucas I. González in “Political Power, Fiscal Crises, and Decentralization in Latin America.” These are like political islands: landlocked and threatened by the majority on the outside.

In these regions, surrounding nations and greedy imperialists constantly bicker over taking control of the lands that minorities and their ancestral roots are located in—with no respect for the community's livelihood. These outside forces have no remorse for the turmoil they employ in the land, by attempting to cleanse the region of minority cultural and spiritual identities. In our metaphor, your beloved St. Louis has become someone else's stomping ground; but this is a very watered down version of how autonomous regions come to be. The reality is that there are many more gruesome acts—ethnic cleansing, civil war, mutilation—that intersect during the creation of an autonomous region.

The St. Louis analogy—again, an extremely reductive example—showcases how harmful restrictions on free movement can be. In autonomous regions worldwide, these restrictions can prevent future generations of Indigenous minorities from understanding their cultural identities—from ancestral spiritual beliefs to ethnolinguistics—while also wreaking havoc on the economic stability of the community. This is what has happened to Badakhshan—a rural, mountainous region located in the heart of the Pamir Mountains—where newly created countries (Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan) share an occupied space in a region belonging to varied Pamiri ethnic groups.

Not only are these ethnic groups indigenous to Badakhshani land, but this region itself is saturated with historical and visually stunning cultural practices. White whirling gowns contrast with the red-threaded patterns embellished along the seams of traditional Pamiri dance outfits. The intricate threaded patterns are sewn by hand, with each woven technique enhancing the vibrancy of the red patterns. The increased tempo in music guides the dancer into exerting faster swirling motions, expanding

the bottom hems of the gown into a perfect circle. The white base and red-threaded embroidery contrast in the air, creating a color palette seen only when the fast-tempoed circular motions are in place. The intensification of music and swirling motions transcend the dancer into an esoteric state of peace, as if they are intoxicated by the ample amount of divine tranquility seeped through their bloodstream, as they become connected with the earthly elements around them.

Musicality is prevalent in all functions of Pamiri society, since it serves as a source for both meditation and celebration. From religious events and weddings to students praising the end of their final exams, one can commonly find the joyous, rhythmic movements of dance and the earthly sounds of Central Asian instruments at all Pamiri functions.

Dance and music together provide an emotional, psychological and spiritual release from everyday problems. Each movement and sound is correlated in accordance to energy flows; each beat trembles within oneself, allowing for the flow of internal energy to reach all points of the body, making oneself feel balanced. A source of bewilderment for many medical ethnomusicologists, dance and music are sacred to the Pamiri people and their tradition.

The arts are not only exemplified through cultural appreciation, but are also a source of spiritual connection. Throughout the world's regions, where there is a predominant ethnic minority group, there is commonly a correlating minority religious or spiritual practice that is affiliated with all members of the community. This is true to Badakhshan, where everyone in this region practices Shia Imami Nizari Ismailism: the religion I practice as well.

Ismailism is a spiritual branch of Shia Islam. The Ismaili community is a small one, but is closely linked to minority ethnic group identities, such as Pamiris and their sister ethnic group the Khojas (my ethnic group). In autonomous regions such as Badakhshan, the Indigenous peoples' sacred cultural ceremonies and communal spaces are subjected to division by imperialists.

For ethnic and religious minorities living in autonomous regions, community gatherings that serve as a source of devotional rejuvenation become disrupted by the forceful separation through man-made borders. Members of the same group are no longer able to cherish communal events that are sacred to their identities in a large-scale community setting like they once were able to. Local artisans and farmers that created their family's living wage on bazaar sales are also restricted from regions where they once sold their goods, or are only allowed in their neighboring countries' borders through permits—rather than the original ability of free flow.

This is not because of animosity between the region's occupants, but rather the ignorance of imperial forces.

Imperialists invaded surrounding regions of Badakhshan, while also picking apart the region itself. They then included it into the newly created countries of Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The imperialists' greedy efforts to take over land bountiful with natural resources disrupted the independence of Badakhshan and caused the creation of unjust borders that separated a region belonging to the Indigenous community of Pamiris, halting the free-movement of Indigenous inhabitants in their own region.

The war atrocities incited by imperialists established national borders between Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Currently, non-Badakhshani monitor the border, mandate order and intimidate residents, according to the Human Rights Watch. These are imperialist strategies to repress Pamiri autonomy and restrict their movement across borders.

Even the internationally recognized name of this region has been changed to a name given by the imperialists themselves: Badakhshan's internationally recognized title is Gorno-Badakhshan-Autonomous-Region (GBAO), but this is not the name declared by the inhabitants of the region themselves. Even something as personally patriotic as the name of the region has been remade in accordance with non-Indigenous jargon.

The least we, non-Badakhshan residents, can do is shed light on the original name of this region: Badakhshan. This is one effort that can be done to advocate for cultural conservation of Indigenous heritages that fear the extermination of their communities' cultural and spiritual identities.

The brave and courageous efforts made by the Pamiris in preserving their land is what led to the region being recognized as an autonomous one, years after imperialists drew the borders. Normalizing culturally-appropriate terminology and educating oneself on the presence of these Indigenous identities is a means of sustaining competency and honoring these cultures. It is important to spread awareness on the presence and sacrisy of these identities; cultural extermination has wiped out centuries worth of traditions and knowledge before, and it can do it again.