CHAPTER 13

Gashtak: Oral/Literary Intertextuality, Performance and Identity in Contemporary Tajikistan

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Dedicated to the Memory of Aziz Rahimov (1932–2009)

The gashtak1 (Tajik; daura in Iranian Persian) is a voluntary group that gathers periodically to enjoy social conversation, food and drink, perhaps to pursue or reinforce a social agenda, activity or set of interests shared by the group. The institution is known under a variety of names across Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, with a history going well back before the Soviet era. The eminent Tajik writer of the twentieth century, Sadruddin Aini, wrote: ‘Gashtak indicates a gathering of individuals, once per week, with each member hosting a meal in turn. Insofar as the meal is rotated (gardesh karda) from turn to turn, to each individual, it is called gashtak’ (Aini 1963: 15). One or two people may take the lead to organize a gashtak. Admission is by invitation, with additional invitations by consensus

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1 Note on transliteration: both in the body of this article and in the transliterated texts in the Appendices, we have used – except for poetry – a simplified transliteration system representing spoken Tajik which generally reflects Cyrillic orthography and minimizes diacritics. For a few proper names, e.g. ‘Pasurkhee,’ the transliteration retains previously established and published practice. Likewise, alternative transcriptions for proper names and titles of publications in Persian in Arabic script supplement the Tajik spelling in the notes.

* Joint research and authorship are always a complex operation, and an enriching one. Ravshan Rahmoni, acting as a participant observer, recorded all or parts of several different meetings of one gashtak group in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, during 2003–2005, from which these and other portions were selected and translated by Ravshan Rahmoni, Margaret Mills, and Hafiz Boboyorov. Some of the participant observation and all the initial transcription and translation activities for this article were supported by a US Dept. of State Title VIII Special Initiatives Grant for 2005–2006, gratefully acknowledged here. The overall project title was ‘Everyday Ethical Speech in Post-Soviet Tajikistan,’ collaborative research for which M. Mills was grant author and Principal Investigator with five Tajik colleagues. Dr. Rahmoni provided additional background information on the gashtak participants and the community of Pasurkhee village, District Boysun, Uzbekistan, and other matters mentioned in these conversations, which supports the current detailed interpretation of particular conversational exchanges. Any errors of emphasis, translation and interpretation in the current presentation are the responsibility of Mills.
of the members. From our interviews it seems that gashtak groups in general meet more regularly in winter, and are fairly ephemeral, lasting for a season, or a year or two with breaks.

Gashtak groups were and are formed for a variety of reasons, and are usually single-sex, male but sometimes female. Quite recently, mixed groups are also reported. Gashtaks may be formed by groups of age-mates, friends, classmates, co-villagers, co-workers, neighbours, even men who have completed the hajj. The particular male gashtak under discussion here, due to its specific agenda, provides a window on a rich mix of oral and literary narrative and poetic performances, in an informal group organized for the explicit purpose of performing and sustaining a group identity. With this stated purpose, it may also be unusual for its longevity, having continued for several years. This gashtak, of which co-author Ravshan Rahmoni is a charter member, was formed to address very specific socio-political conditions in Dushanbe in the aftermath of the demise of the Soviet Union, as interest in national cultural identities intensified throughout the region, following the Tajik civil war and the closing in the 1990s of the formerly open borders between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

The closed borders on top of severe economic crisis cut off regular travel for this group of Tajik-speaking, Dushanbe-resident male professionals (including writers, journalists, academicians, doctors, military officers, and a musician2) who were all but one native to the village of Pasurkhee, Boysun district, in Uzbekistan less than four hours by road from Dushanbe itself. During the Soviet period they were able to travel home weekly if they wished, keeping tabs on their parents and taking part in extended family gatherings and customary life cycle and calendrical rituals. In the two decades since, years might pass between visits. In Dushanbe during the economic crisis that followed the demise of the Soviet Union and the ensuing civil war in Tajikistan, people were so occupied with the logistics of living that they might not even see their village fellow-immigrants in Dushanbe itself for a year or more. Maintaining connections with historical roots and sustaining customs practiced by previous generations, as basic social identity work, became the focus for the group described here, who are almost exclusively from the one village. They created a gashtak for themselves to make a social space for the citation and performance of a combination of oral and literary verbal art in various named genres and approved performance styles, and for memory work in the form of local oral history narratives and discussions about their place of origin. Selections from two gatherings of this gashtak, in February and April, 2005, will serve to

2 The list of members as of 2005 is provided in Appendix A.