



Till Mostowlansky on Muslim Humanitarianism

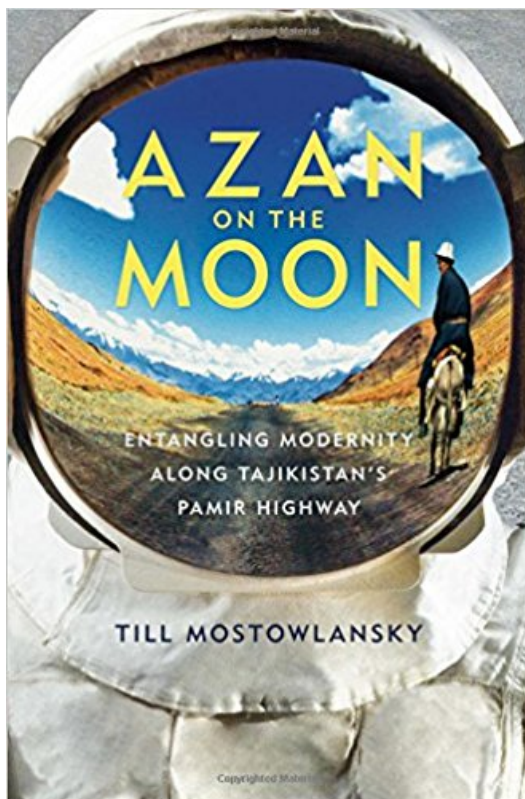
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Till Mostowlansky is a Research Fellow at the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the Graduate Institute in Geneva who was awarded an Ambizione grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation. His research explores notions of modernity, development, charity, humanitarianism in the borderlands of Afghanistan, Tajikistan, China and Pakistan. Allegra interviewed him to understand what he intends to study in the years to come.



Your first monograph, 'Azan on the Moon', was an ethnography of the border region along the Pamir Highway that explored issues of infrastructure and modernity. How did you move from such a focus to your current research on Shia development organizations in the borderlands of Afghanistan, Tajikistan, China and Pakistan?



In 'Azan on the Moon' I focus on modernity in specific sites along the Pamir Highway traversing southern Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In the course of my research I encountered a range of past and present actors promoting ideas of modernity: Soviet officials, road constructors, Islamic missionaries, the Tajik government and, of course, development institutions. In this regard, several NGOs of great importance in everyday life, especially in the western Pamirs, are part of the Aga Khan Development Network. The Aga Khan Development Network is chaired by the Aga Khan IV, leader of Shia Nizari Ismailis worldwide, and has been present in Tajikistan since the early 1990s when the Aga Khan

Foundation provided much needed humanitarian aid to people in the Pamirs in the context of the Tajik civil war. A majority of Pamiris are Ismaili and since the 1990s the Aga Khan Development Network has installed a powerful development machinery in the region which operates through close ties to the international donor scene and is based on the Aga Khan's religious authority.

In my first book on modernity, development institutions were just one part of the story, but I always felt that the merging of concepts from international development with forms of Islamic legitimacy deserved more attention. Once I had finished my research for 'Azan on the Moon' I began to focus on the role of Aga Khan institutions in everyday life and I soon realized that this required an



understanding of transnational and transregional dynamics. Ismailis are not only present in Tajikistan, but also in adjacent border areas in Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, and far beyond in other places in Asia, Africa, Europe and North America.

Initially I followed institutional and inter-personal links from Tajikistan to northern Pakistan where I began fieldwork in 2012. Some areas in northern Pakistan have been veritable development laboratories for Aga Khan institutions since the late British colonial period and have not only inspired later work in Tajikistan but have also influenced broader strands of rural development around the world. In northern Pakistan, there are, however, also sizeable Twelver Shia communities which have begun to compete in these development endeavours and who offer historical and contemporary intersections with Ismaili work throughout Asia. In the course of my research I have followed these connections in the borderlands and beyond. I am invested in better understanding these lesser-known forms of globalization that transcend a range of assumed frontiers - political, religious, institutional and social.

In your book 'Azan on the Moon', you defend the idea that spaces of 'marginality', of economic and political exclusion, are simultaneously spaces where people strive toward a modernity perfected by tradition. It seems like the organizations you are planning to study deeply contribute to shaping people's vision of a 'better future'. How is this 'future' imagined by organizations such as the Aga Khan? What kinds of translocal social imaginaries are mobilized in order to foster popular adhesion to such projects?



These are fantastic questions which certainly lie at the heart of the project. At the same time, it is perhaps too early to come up with polished answers; I hope to be able to provide these in my next book. For now, let me try to tackle this from a broad angle: research that I have already completed suggests that there are often disagreements between different actors



about how a 'better future' might look. I found that this is the case within the mentioned institutions, both in Aga Khan organizations and in Twelver Shia NGOs, but also amongst local populations in interaction with them. Positioning vis-à-vis the state, pressures faced by donors, conflicting political legacies and questions of class, race and gender add more layers of complexity.

The official position of all organizations with which I have worked can be summarized with the "unity in diversity" mantra that is popular with humanitarian organizations across the globe. This mantra incorporates the notion of shared humanity that is at the same time structured by national, ethnic, cultural and religious divisions. In everyday encounters, this mantra is of course contested as resources have to be secured, boundaries have to be defended and authority needs to be reinforced. In short, the idea of a 'common future' for humankind is continuously challenged by centrifugal forces pulling at and adapting this abstract vision. In this respect, the Muslim NGOs on which I focus are not different from other humanitarian and development organizations that highlight their secular legitimacy. I think it is important to emphasize that Muslim organizations which have come under much scrutiny and suspicion since 9/11 often promote the hope of a 'common human future' as much as other NGOs. As anthropological research suggests the unintended afterlives of their projects, too, are related to broader issues in international development. In my view, this is less about these organizations' alternative ethical foundations - the genealogies of



their visions for development - but about systemic inequality in the development sector, the rise of development bureaucracy and the continuous expansion of neoliberal managerial practices.

You argue that Shia organizations are part of a broader turn to development in the Muslim world, where charitable institutions and forms of giving are entangled with international and nation-state development discourses and practices. How did these organizations emerge historically? In which ways are they connected to 'the West' and to national development projects?

Existing literature on this question is still patchy, but there are now a number of insightful studies in the making. What these studies tell us is that ongoing reform within charitable Muslim institutions alters concepts of administration, giving and selfhood. This seems to be a phenomenon that is quite pervasive across different countries and regions. In my own research, I have come across managerial reinterpretations of Muslim charity, ideas of 'meritocracy' and a shift away from a focus on the intentional aspect of giving to results-based debates. Clearly, fragments of neoliberalist discourse have made their way into such discussions. But it is important to note that this is not a one-way process. These fragments also get appropriated into broader Islamic humanitarian thought. Seemingly, Young's sociological satire on 'meritocracy' and events from early Islamic history are not necessarily incompatible.



The question of how the specific organizations on which I focus have emerged historically is quite crucial. The short story is that colonial and post-Cold War events were central for Ismaili institutions to expand, first in the context of the legal framework of

British India. More generally, the legal and economic infrastructure of the British Empire served Ismailis, but also Twelver Shia communities, as a steppingstone to build long-lasting communal institutions and networks. In this regard, mobility between Asia, Africa and Europe was important for trade and to raise funds. Coming back to the borderlands of today's Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and Tajikistan, colonial and Cold War interventions and nation-state development have blazed trails for a range of different Muslim institutions. Without British telegraph lines and mail services communal schools and scholarships would have hardly been built in northern Pakistan in the 1940s. Ismailis in today's Tajikistan experienced the full force of Soviet modernization policies and infrastructures which the Aga Khan Development Network later utilized to enter Central Asia in the 1990s. The NATO invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 opened the ground for large-scale development projects in Badakhshan and Chinese construction and investments continue to provide opportunities and restrictions to Muslim organizations in the region.

Your research is focusing on a rather large area covering four countries. Which research methods are you planning to use? Why, in your view, are 'borderlands' particularly appropriate regions to focus on when researching development?

As mentioned earlier, my choice to focus on the intersection of four countries –



Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and Tajikistan - has developed quite naturally from my interest in the broader social history of the organizations on which I focus. I have been following personal and institutional connections for a number of years now. These journeys have not only led me across multiple borders in the region, but also to institutions and diasporic communities in, for example, the UK, India and Iran. My approach is anthropological, with a strong interest in historical aspects that has emerged from the reading of local histories about development projects in the area.

The question of 'borderlands' is an important one for my project on two planes: first, I see my project as situated in the broader endeavour of studying phenomena at the fringes of Central and South Asia outside the containers of the nation-state or 'the region.' For a historical and anthropological understanding of Shia organizations operating in the area



this seems inevitable to me. The centre of my study is thus not only located at the intersection of four countries, but at a former Cold War frontier that continues to be subject to various forms of imperial interventions. Speaking with Kuan-Hsing Chen, I see this as both a duty and opportunity to consciously decolonize, "de-Cold War" and de-imperialize my own thinking without neglecting the historical legacy of these processes. Second, with my project I would like to engage with scholarship on borderlands that has brought forward some intriguing studies over the past decade. A useful conclusion in the field is that borderlands do not just offer alternative views on supposed centres but that they are sites where entities like 'the state' are both done and undone. For the purpose of studying development organizations I would like to speak of 'humanitarian borderlands' which are crucial to the very existence of the organization as a whole. This is where 'success' can be achieved and battles get lost. These 'humanitarian



borderlands' do not have to be located in the fringes of the nation-state. As institutionally defined 'borderlands' they can be the 'suffering other' in the heart of the metropolis, too.