

# THE STUDY OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE ASSOCIATED TO THE HISTORICAL-CULTURAL OBJECTS AND HOLY PLACES OF TAJIKISTAN

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## INTRODUCTION

Tajikistan is home to hundreds of historical, cultural, and natural monuments, which constitute an integral part of its national heritage and symbolize the ancient civilization of the Tajik people. The historical and cultural landmarks encompass fortresses, palaces, mosques, madrassas, towers, shrines of notable figures, cemeteries, sacred sites, imprints of 'holy steps,' and similar structures. In addition to these monuments, the country boasts numerous natural sites of cultural and spiritual significance, including caves, mountains, peaks, springs, monumental stones, ancient trees, and other objects. Each of these features preserves oral histories, legends, beliefs, customs, healing practices, and other traditions, making them of interest not only to local communities but also to scholars and tourists.

The primary objective of this article is to examine key characteristics of certain historical and natural sites in Tajikistan that hold sacred and cultural value for its people. This research aligns with the thematic focus of the ongoing project 'Study of Intangible Cultural Heritage Associated with Historical and Cultural Monuments and Sacred Places of Tajikistan' (2021–2025), conducted by the Research Institute of Culture and Information (RICI).

Under the initiative of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, H.E. Emomali Rahmon, the years 2019–2021 were declared the 'Years of Rural Development, Tourism, and Folk Crafts.' During this period, Tajikistan witnessed substantial growth in its tourism and folk craft sectors, alongside a notable increase in the number of tourists compared to previous years. Among the attractions drawing visitors are not only the country's picturesque landscapes and modern architectural landmarks but also its unique natural and cultural heritage sites.

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To effectively introduce and promote these historical and cultural sites to a wider audience, including tourists, a comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach is essential. This involves studies in ethnography, architecture, history, art, cultural studies, and other related fields. To date, no comprehensive inventory of Tajikistan's natural landmarks and sacred sites has been compiled by any institution or researcher. Addressing this gap, the RICl initiated the scientific project 'Study of Intangible Cultural Heritage Associated with Cultural and Historical Sites and Sacred Places of Tajikistan.' This project, approved and funded by the Ministry of Economic and Industrial Development in 2020, is being implemented over a five-year period (2021–2025).

The project's overarching aim is to collect, analyse, and document the intangible cultural heritage associated with these sites. This work contributes to preserving intangible heritage, safeguarding ecosystems, and promoting sustainable tourism within Tajikistan. Furthermore, the project's objectives align with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goals 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and 15 (Life on Land).

In addition to intangible cultural elements, the project examines the cultural and natural objects that play a significant role in the daily lives of local communities and the broader population. Through this research, the RICl aims to enhance awareness of Tajikistan's rich cultural legacy while fostering the development of sustainable tourism and the preservation of the nation's heritage.

## **SACRED NATURAL OBJECTS: INTERRELATION OF TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE**

### **Explanations of Terms**

Among the population of Tajikistan, as well as in many regions of Central Asia, various terms are used to denote sacred cultural and natural sites. These include terms such as *mazār*, *ziyāratgāh*, *qadamjāy*, *maqbara*, *āstāna*, *qabr*, *gour*, *shahid*, and *langar*. However, the most commonly used terms are *mazār*, *ziyāratgāh*, *qadamjāy*, and *āstāna*.

The term *mazār* originates from Arabic and refers to a place or object visited for pilgrimage. Among the Tajiks of Central Asia, *mazār* typically denotes the graves or shrines of notable religious figures, poets, or rulers. In contemporary usage, even local cemeteries are often referred to as *mazār*, which reflects a certain logic. People frequent these sites particularly on the eve of holidays or other significant occasions, as they visit the graves of their ancestors to recite verses from the Quran and offer prayers as a sign of respect for the deceased. Beyond serving as burial sites, *mazār* and *ziyāratgāh* are also believed to fulfill additional

functions, including providing spiritual healing, resolving personal issues, granting wishes, and offering psychological solace.

The term *qadamjāy* or *qadamgāh* derives from Tajik/Persian and translates to ‘the place where the foot of a blessed person, saint, or great figure stepped.’ Such sites are often associated with legends that the footprint of a revered individual was imprinted on a stone or mountain, or that their step caused a spring to emerge and flow. In some instances, it is believed that a tree sprouted at the spot where the sacred figure once stood, and this tree remains as a symbol of their presence. Similarly, marks attributed to the hooves of a saint’s horse on a stone or mountain are venerated as evidence of their arrival.

In the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO), the term *ziyāratgāh* is referred to as *āstān*. In Tajik, *āstān* or *ostona* translates to ‘threshold’ or ‘entrance.’ It can also signify a place of residence, courtyard, or palace. In colloquial usage, *āstān* denotes the temporary dwelling of a revered figure. Linguistically, the term is associated with the Tajik/Persian words *istādan* (to stand or stay) and *ist* (to stop), as well as the suffix *-istān*, which denotes a place, land, or territory (e.g., *gouristān*—cemetery, *sangistān*—land of stones, *gulistān*—flower garden, *Tajikistan*—land of Tajiks) (Figure 1).

Interestingly, the term *āstān* is also found among Turkic-speaking peoples and other groups in Central Asia and Russia. For instance, it is plausible that the name of Kazakhstan’s capital, *Astana*, derives from the same linguistic root (Rakhimi, 2023).

The following sections provide an overview of the characteristics of each type of sacred cultural and natural site, highlighting their significance in the daily lives of local communities.



**Figure 1** Shāh-Qambari Āftāb, Rushan district, Tajikistan (© A. Alamshoev, 2008)

## Healing Springs

The faith and beliefs of people, deeply rooted in ancient worldviews and myths, emerge from fundamental human needs and desires. The necessity for health, the birth of healthy children, peaceful lives, happiness, abundance, and fertility in agricultural and artisanal activities underpins the formation of various ritual customs and the veneration of natural elements. These beliefs and rituals have also inspired a wealth of oral narratives and legends, which collectively constitute a significant part of the social institution of worship.

Among the natural elements, water plays a pivotal role in the traditional world-view and culture of the Tajik people. As one of the four fundamental elements of nature, water is revered as the source of life. This is encapsulated in Tajik wisdom expressions such as ‘Life is water, and without water, there is no life’ and ‘Water and well-being.’ The veneration of water, alongside fire, soil, and air, can be traced back to ancient Iranian civilizations, as reflected in the sacred text *Avesta* (circa 2700 years old), Middle Persian literature, Persian-Tajik literary works, artistic creations, and folklore.

In Tajikistan, many shrines and sacred sites are associated with springs that possess mineral and healing properties. Some springs, offering sweet drinking water, are considered sacred and are integral to daily life. Their abundant flow often feeds ponds, such as the Khāja Qaynar pond in the Vose district, the Qaynar-atā pond and Berinji spring in Panjakent, and Chiluchār-chashma in the Shahritus district. These springs attract pilgrims and are regarded as sources of physical and spiritual healing.

The mineral waters from these springs, enriched with various elements, are used for drinking, bathing, and treating ailments. Bowls and cups placed near the springs facilitate the pilgrims’ use of sacred water. The faith in the healing power of these springs is particularly strong. For instance, villagers in Porshinev, Shugnan district, believe that drinking water from the Shāh Nāsir spring cures a variety of illnesses, especially those affecting the nervous system. In some springs, sacred fish are found and consuming them is considered a grave sin (*ubāl*), believed to cause illness or even death.

They apply clay from the spring to the affected areas, believing it to be curative (Kamol, 2005, p. 137). Similarly, in the Gulchechak mausoleum of the Khorasan district, pilgrims prepare clay balls from the spring’s water and apply them to affected skin areas. The drying process is believed to correspond with the disappearance of ailments, an example of ‘sympathetic magic,’ as described by James George Frazer, based on the principle of ‘that like produces like’ (Frazer, 1986, pp. 19–20).

Fortune-telling rituals are another tradition tied to these springs. Pilgrims extract sand from the springs, searching for coins, beads, or other symbolic items as signs of favorable outcomes. If such items are not found, they repeat the process three times while maintaining hope for divine intervention. If no encouraging sign is observed, the prognosis for the patient is deemed uncertain, prompting the healers to say: 'God knows, and He heals; He will certainly grant healing.' Through methods such as fortune-telling or scooping sand, individuals seek reassurance and return home with renewed hope for recovery.

A modern custom involves throwing coins into the springs as an act of respect or in the hope of resolving personal difficulties. Some pilgrims bring the coins close to afflicted body parts before offering them to the spring as a symbolic plea for healing.

There are numerous legends regarding the origins of springs, many of which share a common narrative: a saintly figure arrives in a region, perceives the scarcity of water and the hardship it causes for the local population, and strikes the ground with a staff, prompting a fountain of water to emerge from the earth. For example, the Shāh Nāsir spring (Figure 2) is linked to the knowledge and blessings of Shāh Nāsir Khōsrav, whose wisdom is said to revive even dead trees. Similar legends surround Chiluchār-chashma in Shahritus district.

The sanctity of a spring often depends on its association with a spiritual figure. Springs created by ordinary farmers, though appreciated for their utility, lack the spiritual reverence afforded to those linked to religious leaders or saints. This distinction underscores the cultural importance of springs as both physical and spiritual sources of life, a tradition rooted in pre-Islamic Tajik history.



**Figure 2** Shāh Nāsir spring in Shughnan, Tajikistan (©D. Rahimi, 2023)

The Shāh Nāsir spring is seen as a symbol of the knowledge and wisdom that Shāh Nāsir Khōsrav brought to the mountains of Badakhshan. According to local beliefs, this knowledge is so profound that it is said to bring life even to a dead tree. Spring is thought to flow eternally, delighting all who encounter its purity. A similar narrative exists about Chiluchār-chashma in the Shahritus district. Such legends often link the healing properties of spring water to revered figures, such as saints or religious noble man, highlighting the water's sanctity and exceptional qualities. In contrast, springs or streams created by ordinary individuals, such as farmers, are not regarded as holy. While the water from these sources may be appreciated as drinkable, and the community may express gratitude to those who constructed them, they do not hold the same spiritual significance. However, when the origin of a spring is associated with the actions of a spiritual figure, it enhances the perceived sanctity of the water and elevates the status of the individual in the eyes of the community. The reverence for springs as sources of life-giving water has deep historical roots among the ancestors of the Tajiks, originating in the ancient pre-Islamic period.

### **Sacred Stones**

Throughout the territory of many sacred sites, stones of various shapes have become objects of reverence and faith over the centuries (Figure 3). These sacred stones are typically categorized into two types based on their size: large stones and small stones, both commonly associated with shrines in mountainous regions. For instance, in the Mountainous Badakhshan region, numerous shrines feature stones of various shapes and significance. The Persian-Tajik word *sang* (stone) frequently appears in the names of such shrines across the country, including Sangi Kabutak and Khāja<sup>2</sup> Sangvāti Vali (Hisar), Khāja Sang (Ayni district), Sangi Jumbān (Panjakent), Khāja Sangu Khāk (Rudaki district), Mazar Vali (Istaravshan), Teshuktāsh (Asht), and others.

In Tajikistan's Badakhshan region, smooth and uniquely shaped stones often serve as the central element of sacred sites. Tajik folklorist Nisor Shakarmamadov, in his study of Badakhshan's holy places and shrines, observed that many derive their names from the distinctive characteristics of these stones, including their shapes, colours, and the legends of transformations associated with them. Examples include Azhdahār-sang (Shirgin), Shutur-sang (Yamg), Nalayn (Vrang), Duldul (Sokhcharv), and Teghi Barahnagān (Khuf) (Shakarmamadov, 2015, p. 32).

Another category of stones, often found around graves or mausoleums, displays a wide variety of shapes and features. In northern Tajikistan, such stones, known

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<sup>2</sup> Khāja – from Persian/Tajik language means lord, possessor.



as *qairāq* or *qairāqsang*, are typically smooth and sometimes bear inscriptions. These stones are placed by the *mōttavali*, the caretaker of the shrine, and are notable for their unusual shapes and vibrant colours.

Some of the most distinctive stones resemble mushrooms, with slightly protruding upper and lower parts. These stones range in size, with heights varying from 5–8 centimetres to 70–80 centimetres. Scholars have observed such stones at shrines and cemeteries, likening them to elephant legs or describing them as mushrooms with faintly visible ‘caps’ (Kislyakov, 1970, p. 9).

Russian ethnographer Alexey A. Bobrinsky documented similar peculiar stones in the Muhammad Bāqir mausoleum in the village of Sardim. These stones, locally referred to as ‘camel’s leg,’ are accompanied by legends explaining their origins (Bobrinskiy, 1908, p. 116).

In general, stones resembling mushrooms are regarded as sacred by the local population. Bringing these stones to a shrine is considered a blessing, while removing them is seen as a sin. Their distinctive shapes and colours have inspired numerous legends and traditions, with names such as ‘camel’s leg,’ ‘elephant’s leg (Figure 4),’ ‘mushroom,’ ‘boot,’ and others being commonly used to describe them.

During pilgrimages, locals engage in rituals such as touching and kissing the stones, cleaning them with their hands or sleeves, walking around larger stones, and reciting prayers while seated nearby. Imitating the actions of elderly, experienced, and respected individuals is a vital aspect of these pilgrimages, reinforcing traditional customs and practices. For younger visitors, especially those making a pilgrimage for the first time, adhering to these established rituals is essential. Without proper knowledge of the rules and procedures, a pilgrimage may be



**Figure 3** Stones near the shrine Shing, Tajikabad district, Tajikistan (©D. Rahimi, 2022)



**Figure 4** Stone ‘elephant’s leg’, Khorasan district, Tajikistan (©D. Rahimi, 2022)

considered disrespectful to the sanctity of the site. Consequently, inexperienced pilgrims rely on the guidance of the *mōttavali* (caretaker of the shrine) or seasoned elders.

For example, the pilgrimage process typically begins with the recitation of *Bismillah*<sup>3</sup>, followed by approaching the sacred stone with both hands, stepping onto the holy site with the right foot, sitting down to drink the holy water, stepping back respectfully from the saint’s grave, bowing, and finally exiting the mausoleum in an orderly manner.

The unusual shapes of these stones often inspire individuals to create stories and legends about their origins and healing properties. Their irregular forms and colours are believed to be manifestations of divine power, leading to their veneration. While contemporary reverence for such stones is frequently associated with Islamic beliefs or significant religious figures, the roots of these practices trace back to antiquity, originating in the primitive belief system of fetishism.

### Sacred Trees

Trees are among the most significant elements in the beliefs and rituals of the Tajiks and other Iranian peoples. With their roots in the earth, trunks rising above the ground, and crowns reaching the heavens, trees have inspired numerous beliefs and myths. Legends often portray ancient and massive trees as symbolic links between three realms: the earth, the world above the earth, and the sky.

The presence of sacred trees near shrines and places of worship is a widely recognized and common feature of mausoleums. Among the tree species most frequently venerated are *čīnār* (plane tree), *tut* (mulberry tree), *burs* (cypress), *savda* / *sadda* (elm), and *savr* (pine). Other species, such as poplar, sandalwood, and willow, also become objects of reverence when located in the courtyards or

<sup>3</sup> *Bismillah* (from Arabic) is the abbreviated version of the phrase ‘Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim’ – In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.





**Figure 5** 1,300-year-old sypress tree, Istaravshan city, Tajikistan (©A. Aminzoda, 2024)

near mausoleums.

The reverence for sacred trees, particularly ancient ones, far surpasses that for younger trees. For instance, at the Sabristān mausoleum in the city of Istaravshan, a cypress tree over a thousand years old stands as a testament to enduring sanctity, its age confirmed by biologists. Similarly, in Panjakent's central park, a 700-year-old mulberry tree continues to thrive. In the village of Simiganj, located in Vahdat town, a venerable elm tree (*sadda*) is likewise considered sacred by locals (Rakhimov, 2012, p. 111).

Sacred trees are typically not pruned, and their wood is rarely used for practical purposes; only in cases of necessity might a branch be removed. Many folk legends narrate the origins of these ancient trees and their sanctity. For example, the cypress tree at the Sabristān shrine is said to have grown from a tent peg left behind by Arab missionaries spreading Islam in Istaravshan 1,300 years ago (Figure 5). According to the story, this wooden peg sprouted, eventually growing into the massive tree that stands today.

The perceived sacredness of trees, as detailed in legends, arises from various reasons, including:

- **Respected origins:** A sacred tree may have been planted by a revered figure or grown from his walking stick.
- **Longevity:** Trees that are ancient, often over a century old, are deemed sacred.
- **Unusual forms:** Trees with distinctive shapes often inspire legends and beliefs.
- **Mythological connections:** Sacred trees are believed to link the three planes of existence—underground, above ground, and the sky.
- **Religious associations:** Certain trees, such as fig and apple, carry religious significance as fruits of paradise.

- **Life cycle symbol:** Trees mirror the life cycle of humans and animals. From their seeds sprouting and maturing into fruit-bearing entities to their eventual decay and death, trees encapsulate the cycle of birth, growth, reproduction, and mortality. Additionally, the seasonal cycles of shedding leaves in the fall and rejuvenating in the spring evoke themes of death and rebirth, reinforcing their symbolic importance (Rakhimov, 2012, p. 143).

Among the traditions associated with sacred trees in Tajikistan and the wider region, several practices and beliefs highlight their deep cultural and spiritual significance. While we have outlined several reasons why local people regard trees as sacred, there may be other explanations as well. Some pilgrims believe trees serve as intermediaries between humans and God, providing a means to alleviate personal hardships. It is not coincidental that rituals aimed at relieving difficulties are often performed under sacred trees. The reverence for these trees is so profound that they are anthropomorphized and referred to as *Bābā Chinār* (Grandfather Plane Tree), *Chinorbābā* (Grandfather Plane Tree), *Bibi Savr* (Grandmother Elm), and similar names (Rakhimov, 2012, pp. 110–111).

### **Ritual of *Lattabandi* (Attaching Rags)**

One of the most distinctive rituals tied to sacred trees is *lattabandi*, or the tying of rags to tree branches (Figure 6). This custom is widespread in Tajikistan and other countries of the region. Pilgrims attach pieces of fabric—often taken from the clothing of the sick or those in need—to the branches of sacred trees as a symbolic act of transferring hardship and expressing hope for healing, fertility, or good fortune.

For instance, near the mausoleum of Khāja Muhammad Bashārā, about 180–200 metres south on a hill, there is a spring and a towering mulberry tree. Pilgrims seeking blessings, healing, or children tie rags to the branches of this tree. Similarly, at the underground mosque (*Er-Machit*) in Chashma, Khorāsān district, fabrics from newborns' clothes, older children's garments, or women's scarves are hung on the tree branches.

The origins and purpose of tying rags have been interpreted in various ways:

- **Expression of Wishes:** Hamza Kamol observed that the ritual symbolizes a wish or prayer made with respect for the shrine (Kamol, 2005, p. 134).
- **Travel Protection:** Nikolay A. Kislyakov noted that travelers embarking on dangerous journeys tied cloth to trees near mausoleums, seeking safe passage (Kislyakov, 1960, p. 115).
- **Symbolic Dedication:** According to Nikolay S. Terletsky, tying rags represents a symbolic offering to the spirit of the shrine or the revered individual associated with it. He described this as a magical act of establishing a connection between



**Figure 6** The custom of attaching rags, Sharitus districts, Tajikistan (@D. Rahimi, 2007)

the pilgrim and the sacred element (Terletsky, 2007, pp. 88-89, 119).

Despite these explanations, the primary purpose of the ritual remains a topic of debate. N.S. Terletsky's observations highlight the intricate relationship between individuals and sacred objects, particularly trees, though the deeper motivation behind such practices remain partially obscured. In our view, the ritual of tying rags to sacred trees (*latabandi*) has ancient origins, deeply rooted in mythological thought and principles of sympathetic magic. At its core, this ritual symbolizes the transfer of one's pain and hardships—be it disease, infertility, misfortune, or poverty—onto the tree, which acts as a sacred intermediary.

This act signifies both a spiritual and emotional release. Pilgrims believe that by transferring their afflictions to the tree, they will find healing and resolution for their struggles. The ritual not only provides solace but also fosters hope and strengthens faith in divine intervention.

This practice reflects a harmonious blend of Islamic teachings with ancient, pre-Islamic traditions. While the pilgrims invoke Allah for healing, the ritual itself embodies elements of animistic and magical thought, where the tree serves as both a divine conduit and a symbolic absorber of human suffering.

Another form of tree worship involves walking around them, typically three or seven times in a counterclockwise direction. For instance, at the mausoleum of Khoja Aqiqi Balkhi, located in the village of Sebistān in the Danghara district, women pilgrims, along with the sick and the needy, customarily walk around a small elm tree seven times. N.S. Terletsky drew parallels between such tree-walking rituals performed by shaman-healers and participants in ceremonies, and

the practice of walking around a pillar during Sufi rites, suggesting that this act is intended to invoke and gain the favor of spirits (Terletsky, 2009, p. 138).

It is possible that this practice among the other people, who continue to preserve shamanistic traditions and their remnants, serves as a means of summoning helper-spirits. However, we propose that walking around green trees may also be a symbolic act aimed at transferring pain and misfortune to the trees.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on examples, discussions, and scholarly research, several important conclusions can be drawn. Islam, which has been the predominant religion among Tajiks and other Central Asian peoples for over 1,300 years, has in various instances, merged with local traditions and, in others, reached compromises. Traces of ancient religious practices, such as animism, fetishism, sympathetic magic, and nature worship (e.g., reverence for the sun, fire, and water), as well as Zoroastrianism, Islam, and other belief systems, remain evident. The Islamization process in the early stages of the religion's spread often involved integration with pre-existing local religious and mythological frameworks. This syncretic approach facilitated the incorporation of Islamic beliefs into the cultural and spiritual practices of the region.

In contemporary times, remnants of these early religious forms are still observed in customs and practices, such as visiting tombs and sacred sites. Pilgrims commonly view shrines, graves, stones, trees, springs, and similar objects as mediators between themselves and the divine, using these symbols as channels to express their wishes and prayers. For pilgrims, the origin of specific beliefs or rituals is often secondary to the personal sense of solace and spiritual connection they seek.

During the Soviet era, many of these ancient shrines, springs, caves, mountains, large stones, and monumental trees were dismissed as sources of superstitions. However, in the post-independence period, these cultural and natural sites are increasingly recognized as significant elements of both material and spiritual heritage. They are now protected under national laws and cultural preservation programs, serving as historical, cultural, and natural landmarks that not only honor traditional beliefs but also promote cultural awareness, support tourism development, and enhance religious consciousness. Ethnographic studies and research into the intangible cultural heritage associated with these historical, cultural, and natural objects continue to be conducted by scholars from the Research Institute of Culture and Information, alongside other academic institutions.

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