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# A 'Stan whose people, culture remarkably similar to ours

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A 'Stan whose people, culture remarkably similar to ours

Karim-Aly Kassam

For The Calgary Herald

Sunday, August 06, 2006

This is not just "another 'Stan." When I told friends in Calgary that I was going to the mountainous region of Badakhshan in Tajikistan to undertake research, their response was striking.

Some simply did not know there was such a country. Others dismissively responded "not another 'Stan!" After all, our media describe this region as exotic and violent.

According to media images, a divergent and narrow interpretation of Islam pervades in these lands. Before my departure, security experts proclaimed this area as "extreme risk."

My experience of Tajikistan is contrary to media images of this region and the claims made by security experts. The capital city, Dushanbe, and the province of Badakhshan give no proof of any of these stereotypes.

Women here are highly educated and are key participants in public life.

In the former Soviet Union, Badakhshan had the most educated citizens per capita compared to any other region in the U.S.S.R. They continue to hold this position in the Republic of Tajikistan.

I have yet to see a woman dressed in the burka characteristic of Saudi Arabia and some other parts of the Middle East. Women wear jeans or their traditional long free-flowing dresses suited to the climate.

They make eye contact, smile, shake hands and work hard at home as well as in offices.

They lead major institutions and direct men in their homes as well as work.

People here consider themselves European in their attitudes. Historically, they draw inspiration from Persian heritage and situate themselves as Muslims in their faith.

This land is rich with multiple influences: ex-communism, the western world and Islam. Their ancestors were Buddhists and Zoroastrians. Their traditions today draw upon all these influences to make a pluralistic culture that is confidently coming to terms with changing global conditions after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Long before the well touted "Orange Revolution" in the Ukraine, in the early 1990s, the people of Tajikistan, who are known for their diversity and gentleness, illustrated their understanding of democracy by utilizing its major tenet, the right to choose its leaders.

They peacefully protested against rigged elections. The ex-communist apparatchik, never having faced popular dissent, did not know how to handle this among their citizens. The situation descended into civil war.

Wars are easy to start, as the history of Europe and the Middle East constantly remind us. But finding peace is another matter. It requires faith in humanity.

The ability to live with someone you fundamentally disagree with requires a type of self-confidence that seems to be increasingly absent from certain regions. Between 1992 and 1997, atrocities were committed by both sides; innocent civilians were brutally killed.

Many regions, especially the mountainous province of Gorno Badakhshan, faced famine. Yet, the culturally diverse peoples of Tajikistan managed to find peace and a way of working together.

The people here do not culturally identify with violence and have no appetite for war. The Sufi interpretation of Islam, characteristic of this region, does not have room for revenge.

The eye for an eye mentality does not have cultural underpinnings here. In Badakhshan, the Shiite Ismailis and Sunnis live in peace among many ethnic groups.

Certainly, this is no Shangri-La, poverty is significant and Russian-style organized crime is well established, supported by the illegal drug trade through the border with Afghanistan.

Ninety-seven per cent of Badakhshan is mountainous and the other three per cent of the land cannot agriculturally sustain its population displaced by the civil war.

However, the trade in drugs need not be illegal.

There is a global shortage of morphine for medical purposes and it can easily be channelled legally to pharmaceutical companies if there is political will in the West and central Asia. This would provide poor farmers a legal avenue and reduce the role of organized crime.

After the initial negative reaction of friends and colleagues, many followed up with a thoughtful question: "Why do you want to go?"

The fact is the region of Badakhshan is not unlike Canada. It is pluralistic. It is diverse culturally and ecologically.

In addition to Russian and Tajik, more than eight distinct languages are spoken here. This area is highly mountainous, reminiscent of Kananaskis.

In fact, Alpine communities and Arctic regions share similar concerns.

Like aboriginal peoples in Canada, these people have lived here literally for thousands of years.

They have a vast knowledge of agricultural methods and a profound ecological awareness that can inform humanity.

Their sacred spaces are defined by their ecological habitat.

This is similar to aboriginal peoples of Canada.

Not only are there prospects to contribute to the development of this region as it faces common challenges in the 21st century such as food, security and climate change, but more importantly, there is opportunity to learn.

Karim-Aly Kassam is a professor in the faculty of communication and culture at the University of Calgary who normally does research in the Arctic. Currently, he is undertaking human ecological research in mountainous regions of Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

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