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AVJ: PORTRAIT OF A PAMIRI VILLAGE
Master's Project

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Avj is our beginning and Avj is our end.

(Khadicha Davlatmamadova)

Avj is my paradise.

(Davlatmo Navruzova)

Every little stone in Avj is very dear to me.

(Soyabegim Ghoibnazarova)

Only people with a good heart can go to the mountains.

(Maybonu Navruzova)

Avj is my life purpose. I want to die here. Avj for us is everything. Everything!

If Avj doesn't exist, I don't exist either.

(Qudrat Navruzov)

These places are created by God.

You are not allowed to go against His will or complain about His creation.

(Jonoro Ziyobekova)

God gave us nothing but the mineral spring. It is our wealth.

(Chorshanbe Davlatmamadov)

I feel free in Avj.

(Asanbek Rustamov)

Avj gives me energy, it recharges my batteries.

(Zevard Davlatmamadova)

Avj is Avj. Some spirits live here.

(Qurbonali Khojaliyev)

Introduction

No matter what their life conditions, education, wealth, place of permanent residence and other factors are, all the inhabitants and visitors of Avj spoke with a great love towards this village. The same inexplicable love brought me back to Avj and inspired to write a book *Where Mountain Spirits Live: Portrait of A Pamiri Village* which serves as a practical component of my Master's Project. Avj is a tiny village in Gorno-Badakhshan, Tajikistan, which has only seven houses with permanent residents, yet there is a sanatorium, two hotels and a phytopharmacy.

I went to Avj for the first time on 19 July 2017 as a volunteer and got warmly 'adopted' by the family of Dr. Shirinbek Davlatmamadov. In the following three months that place became my Pamiri home. I was wandering around the mountains and collecting medical herbs for the doctor and helping his wife in different household chores.

When I later applied for my studies at the University of Tartu, I knew I would like to go back to the Pamirs and explore this region deeper. Initially, I was thinking about a different research topic, flatbread baking traditions, but later I felt that I have to come up with a new subject. Such an idea was hiding in my mind since I participated in *Methods of Data Collection and Analysis II* class where I had to contribute to *My Landscapes* project, thinking and writing about memories connected to different places and landscapes. I understood how easily I attach to places and how important places are to me. I was curious whether others experience the same attachment to places. Still trying to formulate the new topic for my project, on 29 June 2019 I arrived in Tajikistan for the second time. On 4 July 2019, one day before going to Avj, I had a conversation with Samandar Pulodov, a folk musician and an enthusiast of anthropology. This conversation was the turning point, and once back in the hotel, I decided - my project was not going to be about flatbread baking traditions or any other specific customs or traditions, my project was going to be about Avj itself.

The practical component of my Master's Project is an ethnography *Where Mountain Spirits Live: Portrait of A Pamiri Village* where I seek to explore the relationship between Avj, its inhabitants, and guests. What does the village mean to them? What are the most important places to them? What legends travel around? I believe that each inhabitant portrays the village in a way, but the village is a portrait of its inhabitants. This idea even goes hand in hand with the Ismaili religion practised by the locals, "in the Ismaili faith, the relationship between us human beings and the places we inhabit is deeply

interwoven” (Oudenhoven and Haider 2015: 53). The practical component of my Master’s Project is a blend of ethnography, autoethnography, travel writing and photography, a book of a textual and visual portrait of Avj in a specific point of time and through my very personal lens as a foreigner living with Dr. Shirinbek Davlatmamadov’s family.

The main aim of the book is sharing stories from and about the village which is not even depicted on *Google Maps*, and letting the locals tell their own stories, even if they were framed by my questions. This ethnography is meant to produce new knowledge on the region about which so little is known, giving an opportunity to international audience to learn more about rural life in the Pamirs and the way how locals perceive the place they inhabit. Despite many development programs and projects taking place in the Pamirs, the region is still under-researched. My ethnography is mostly addressed to international audience with interest in the region, post-Soviet space, Muslim and Ismaili worlds, rural communities, ethnographies of places.

I gave the title *Where Mountain Spirits Live: Portrait of a Pamiri Village* to my book because locals in Avj often referred to different spirits, especially mountain spirits and guardian spirits of Avj. They approached spirits and asked for their support and protection. Before going to the mountains, villagers asked mountain spirits to allow them to go up in the mountains and come back home safe and sound. Thus, this seemed a proper title which characterizes the way how the locals perceive Avj. Similar practices are said to be present in other Pamiri villages too.

Where Mountain Spirits Live: Portrait of a Pamiri Village consists of three primary components: interviews with locals; my own field observations and experiences; photographs. In the book, one can find portraits of my interviewees, photographs of objects and places important to them as well as moments of a daily routine. I gathered these materials during my fieldwork from 5 July 2019 to 30 August 2019, as well as supplemented them with my diaries and photographs from 2017. My fieldwork took place in Avj, a small and remote mountain village in the Pamirs, Tajikistan. The fieldwork was based on participant observation living with Dr. Shirinbek Davlatmamadov’s family and being a part of their daily life. Language of communication between me and the locals was mostly Russian. Not all villagers spoke Russian, so during my interviews I was accompanied by Bakhtbegim Shirinbekova.

The aim of the theoretical component of my Master’s Project is to give a context to the practical component, as well as to self-reflect on the whole process of carrying out

the project. This theoretical component consists of five chapters. In the first chapter I give only a very concise background information on Avj. More elaborate geographical, historical, religious and cultural context on the region is included at the back of *Where Mountain Spirits Live: Portrait of a Pamiri Village*. In the second chapter I provide a brief overview of previously done research on the region. In the third chapter I seek to understand what characteristics are attributed to ethnographies, what different approaches one can apply to writing an ethnography and what is the role of photography in ethnographies. In the fourth chapter I explore the concepts of space and place. In the fifth chapter I analyse the whole process of creating my own project: fieldwork and participant observation, interviews, photography, writing the book, ethics and reflexivity, and publishing.

1. Pamiri Village Avj

Avj is a remote mountain village (see Photo 1), similar to other Pamiri villages yet very specific and unique. The life in Avj circulates around the thermal mineral spring and the sanatorium located by the roadside, but also around other locally significant objects. Inhabitants live higher up in the mountains. Besides the sanatorium, there are seven houses in Avj with permanent inhabitants, one house inhabited during the summer season only, three houses under construction whose owners live in the neighbouring village Mulvoj, two hotels, one hotel under construction, a phytopharmacy, and a roadside café (see map in Appendix 1).



Photo 1. Avj from the coast of Afghanistan, 2019

Avj is located in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast, Tajikistan (see map in Appendix 2), in the Pamir Mountains on the coast of the Panj River. The river serves as a natural and official border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

Avj is not mentioned on *Google Maps* (see Figure 1), it is visible only on the satellite view using the following coordinates: 36.924032, 71.501736 (see Figure 2).

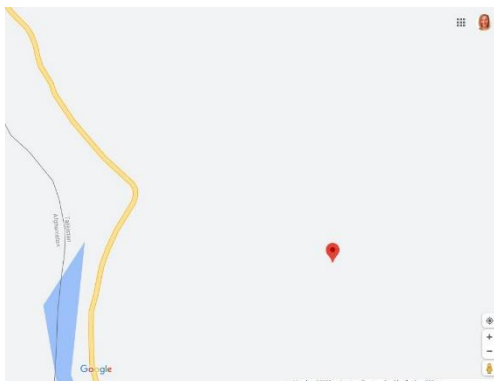


Figure 1. Location of Avj



Figure 2. Location of Avj

Nowadays, when one can find almost any place on *Google Maps*, this just shows how little attention this region has received. Moreover, the satellite view is about fifteen years

old, as houses built after 2005 are not visible. Better and more recent satellite view is offered by *Mapcarta*. There are two other thermal springs in the region, Bibi Fatima and Garm Chashma. As these two are famous in the whole country and often mentioned among popular international tourism destinations, they appear on *Google Maps* search with a red marker. Nevertheless, the red marker and name is the only information visible, the roads are still not represented. Even in such a relatively big city as Khorugh, the capital of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast, only a few main streets are depicted on *Google Maps*.

Given almost no research on the history of Avj, there is no clear evidence when the first inhabitants arrived, and these are oral rather than scholarly histories which mostly circulate. According to Dr. Shirinbek Davlatmamadov, the oldest resident of Avj, his grandfather moved to Avj in 1927, but his ancestors were Farsi speaking people whose origins are not clear. In the middle of the 1960's, small villages in Tajikistan were joined together as a part of Soviet politics, and land was forfeited. Inhabitants of Avj were asked to move away. Most of them moved to the neighbouring village Mulvoj, and came to Avj only to work in the *sovkhos*'s [state owned farm] fields, and later also in the sanatorium which was founded in 1972. Avj was uninhabited for several decades until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Most of people whose forefathers were from Avj, returned back to the village in the 1990's.

Although, the major religion in the rest of Tajikistan is Sunni Islam, most Pamiri, including inhabitants of Avj, consider themselves Ismailis, branch of Shia Islam. Contrary to Sunni Muslims, Ismailis do not have mosques, their home is their shrine (Middleton and Thomas 2012: 644).

Officially, the state language in Tajikistan is Tajik, also known as Tajik Persian. At the same time, almost each valley of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast is a home to different ethnic groups with their own unwritten languages (ibid.: 626). Inhabitants of Avj speak Badakhshani dialect of Tajik which is spoken also in "Mulvoj, Yakshivol, and in the administrative district centre of Ishkashim on Tajik side of the river, as well as in Badakhshan province of Afghanistan" (from online conversation with Dr. Olimi Shirinbek 2020).

The lingua-franca during the Soviet period in Gorno-Badakhshan was Russian, but nowadays it is Tajik. Russian is still widely spoken and understood (Middleton and Thomas 2012: 626), and even interwoven in Tajik and Pamiri languages (Mostowlansky 2017: 21) as separate words or expressions.

2. Overview of Research on the Region

One of the most famous olden day explorers of the region was Marco Polo who travelled along the Silk Road in the thirteen century, leaving his seminal observation for future generations in his travel book. Long after, in the nineteenth century, the Pamirs experienced visits of many travellers, explorers, militarists, adventurers, and scientists who placed this region on the map. A lot of them were fascinated by the Pamirs and left their accounts of romanticised views of the region. Most of the visitors arrived from the Russian Empire (Middleton and Thomas 2012). When Tajikistan was included in the Soviet Union, the Pamirs were broadly explored by Soviet scientists. Among Soviet researchers of the region was linguist Ivan Zarubin, orientalist, cultural researcher and ethnographer Mikhail Andreev, orientalist and folklorist Aleksandr Boldyrev, as well as archaeologist Boris Litvinsky.

Until now, the research on the region has been mostly conducted by scholars of Tajik or Russian origin. This might be explained by the remoteness of the region, as well as by the language barrier, as one needs to know at least Russian, if not Tajik (or local languages or dialects), to communicate with locals, besides deep research in a specific topic might need an access to historic pieces of research, which has mostly been published in Russian. Many topics are still under-researched, for example, Badakhshani dialect spoken in Avj. Among researchers of the region one can mention historian Abusaid Shokhumorov (*Razdelenie Badakhshana i sudby Ismailizma*, The Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2008), historian Abdulmamad Iloiev (*Popular Culture and Religious Metaphor: Saints and Shrines in Wakhan Region of Tajikistan*, Taylor and Francis Online, 2008), anthropologists Lydia Monogarova and Valentin Bushkov (*Ethnic Processes in Gorno-Badakhshan*, CA&C Press, 2000), historian Qudratbek Elchibekov (*Ismailism na Pamire*, Payvand, 2005), anthropologist Tokhir Kalandarov (*Shugnantsi: istoriko - etnograficheskoe issledovanie*, Nauka, 2004), researcher of post-Soviet space Sarfarozi Niyozov (*Shi'a Ismaili Tradition in Central Asia: Evolution, Continuities and Changes*, CA&C Press 2003).

I also have to mention my host Dr. Shirinbek Davlatmammadov who has done research on folk medicine, local history and traditions, and has written and published sixteen books providing emic perspective on his research questions: *Nabototi darmonbakhshi Badakhshon va istifodabarii onho* (2012) on medical herbs and their usage, *Ganjina Goronzamin* (2014) on Ghoroni folklore, *Vuh diyer ganj. Ganji*

Vakhonzamin (2016) on Wakhi folklore, *Taomhoi millii Badakhshon* (2017) on Badakhshani national cuisine, *Dasturamali gyohpizishk* (2017) on phytotherapy.

As the AKDN supports universities, education and scientific programs, a lot of research is conducted under their programs, financed or co-financed by their funds. A few examples of research supported by the AKDN are *Food Systems and Agrobiodiversity in the Mountains of Central Asia* by conservation biologist Marc Foggin, Matthew Emslie-Smith and socio-ecological system researcher Christian Hergarten (International Mountain Society, 2018), *Natural Resource Management Dynamics in Border Communities of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan* by sociologist Asel Murzakulova and geographer Irene Mestre (Mountain Societies Research Institute, 2016), *The Conception of the House in the Shughni Linguistic Worldview* by linguist Shahlo Nekushoeva (Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit of UCA, 2020), *The Music of Central Asia* edited by ethnomusicologist Theodore Levin, ethnographer Saida Daukeyeva and anthropologist Elmira Kochumkulova (Indiana University Press, 2016).

Despite the remoteness of the region, there are several great sources of information published by Western authors too. One of the greatest ethnographies on Badakhshan, officially named as a cookbook, is *With Our Own Hands. A Celebration of Food and Life in the Pamir Mountains of Afghanistan and Tajikistan* written by Frederik van Oudenhoven and Jamila Haider (LM Publishers, 2015), supported by the AKDN. This book provides very diverse information on the region and its culture, based on interviews with locals, historical materials, fieldwork, and is written together with researchers from the region, giving a broader perspective. Another good source of information is *Tajikistan and the High Pamirs* written by Robert Middleton and Huw Thomas (Odyssey Books, 2012), who were both involved in the AKDN. Although this is a travel guide, it provides broad information about history, culture, geography and historic research on the region. A very good insight in the life along the Pamir Highway and changes in the society caused by the Soviet Union is depicted in Till Mostowlansky's ethnography *Azan on the Moon. Entangling Modernity along Tajikistan's Pamir Highway* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017).

Some authors offer romanticised and mystical views of the region exactly as many of the nineteenth century explorers. Such is a book *Pamir. Aryan memory. History, Culture, Religion and Customs* written by Sergey Zavialov (Kailas Records, 2007). Although this book provides a colourful insight in the culture, religion and music, often reminding me of the worldview presented by the locals, it is focused on spirituality and

Aryan heritage and could be used, if at all, with a very critical approach only. Interestingly, this book is based on field expeditions in 1992, 1996, 1999 and 2002, and literature research, yet it does not present a scientific perspective.

While previous research is mostly dedicated to a broader region, in *Where Mountain Spirits Live: Portrait of a Pamiri Village* I decided to focus on a certain village and create its portrait which also serves as a portrait of Pamiri villages in general. Unlike most of other researchers, I chose a very personal approach to my ethnography and wrote about the place from my own perspective, combining it with full-length interviews with the locals. Thus, I invite the reader to explore the daily life of Avj through my eyes and through locals' stories. A very important part of my ethnography is photographs, offering a visual portrait of the village. With my ethnography, I intend to enrich previously done research on the region with a work dedicated to a rural village and the relationship between the village and its inhabitants.

3. Ethnographic Writing

Finishing my fieldwork, I had countless amounts of written notes, thirty-seven interviews with locals and hundreds of photographs. The ‘only’ thing left for me to do was to “write it up” (Gullion 2016: xi) and to connect texts and photographs in a single entity, but the question was - how to write an ethnography? What is considered to be an ethnography and what is not? What is the role of photography in ethnographies? In this chapter I seek to find the answer, mostly referring to authors who not only provide theoretical discussion on ethnography but also practical suggestions on ethnographic writing.

3.1. Overview of Ethnographic Writing

Ethnography as a term has been used since the nineteenth century for denoting a process of qualitative research and a product of such research, an ethnography, “the aim of which is cultural interpretation” (Hoey 2020: 60). In the beginnings ethnographies were often produced by scholars relying on fieldwork data collected by others, but Bronislaw Malinowski changed it and “his fieldwork became the template for later ethnographic practice” (Scott-Jones 2010: 15) with a focus on deep immersion in the field and stressing out the importance of contextualisation and framing field descriptions by theoretical paradigms (ibid.: 18). Since the beginnings, ethnography was “torn between contrary impulses: to present empirical observations gathered through specific methods and processed with theory, or to appeal to readers’ imaginations with colourful stories” (Narayan 2012: 2). Some researchers see ethnography as a useful tool for representing a certain society while others perceive it as a form of art where self-reflection is more important than objectivity. “Yet others attempt to find a middle ground, stressing the subjectivity of their accounts but nonetheless trying to produce communicable knowledge of particular social and cultural worlds” (Blasco and Wardle 2007: 1-2). Elliott Oring also speaks about two approaches of ethnographers: ethical and intellectual. Those who choose an ethical approach “put the pursuit of social justice before knowledge” while others do the other way around. Oring does not see any benefit from trying to find a middle ground between these two perspectives as “dichotomies help to keep positions clear and people honest” (2006: 215). Barbara Tedlock too mentions two pathways - in the past ethnographers either chose to share their fieldwork experiences in a form of

entertaining novels, often hiding their scholarly identities and using pseudonyms, or “to abstract the meaningful data from the objects of study and to remove all traces of the observer” which was the most common choice among ethnographers for a long time (1991: 72). In the second half of the twentieth century it was a widespread practice to publish first-person field accounts or ethnographic novels separate from entirely theoretical monographs based on the same field data, sometimes with a few years in between (ibid.: 76).

As a great example of early ethnographies written in the first person, active voice and present tense Tedlock mentions *Spider Woman: A Story of Navajo Weavers and Chanters* by Gladys Reichard in 1932. In this book the author provides “precise descriptions of the details of everyday life, including her own unspoken thoughts and reactions to events she shared with her Navajo family” (ibid.: 74). Tedlock’s review of this book sparked my interest, and as much as I peeked in this book, it did look like a great novel and descriptive ethnography at the same time which I could take as an example for myself.

According to Paloma Gay Blasco and Huan Wardle, “the central prisms through which writers of ethnography look at the world” are “comparison, contextualisation of a life world, and an exposition of the relationships involved” (2007: 5). Ethnographers should compare what they experience in the field not only against their own lives and environment, but also refer to other anthropological discussions and studies. It is important not to forget that ethnography should be understandable for a reader who does not necessarily have a background knowledge about the question of research (ibid.: 4). Ethnography is not only a description of an experience and observations, it should reflect on the experience, it should interpret and analyse (ibid.: 26). Tedlock reminds that all ethnographer’s actions involve choices, “what we see or what we fail to see, reporting a particular misunderstanding or embarrassment, or ignoring it [...] We also make a choice when we edit ourselves out of our final written ethnographic product” (1992: 72).

Some ethnographers choose creative approaches on writing, and ethnography can look similar to a novel, but an important distinction is the fact that “the ethnographer is answerable for their ethnography as true knowledge” (Blasco and Wardle 2007: 195). This applies to my work a lot, as I chose a creative and personal approach on writing ethnography yet it is not a fiction and is intended to enrich the research on the region. Writing ethnography means describing complex social activities and to explain their complexity (Blommaert and Jie 2010: 11).

Jan Blommaert and Dong Jie emphasize that ethnography is an interpretive and subjective science, where “the object of investigation is always a uniquely situated reality: a complex of events which occurs in a totally unique context – time, place, participants, even the weather [...] even if events look completely the same, they never are” (ibid.: 17). Still, both authors state that even very specific and unique events reveal a bigger picture of processes in society (ibid.: 13), therefore I believe that ethnography of Avj allows to have a glimpse into what an average Pamiri village life looks like.

Jessica Smartt Gullion says that “ethnographers are culture detectives. We immerse ourselves in a field [...] we then share the experience of that social reality with others [readers] through our writing” (2016: 3). Oring stresses out that “the task of the folklorist is to amplify, broadcast, and validate the voices of the folk - or, at least, *some* folk - in an effort to redress the grievances of the past and ameliorate the injustices of the present” (2006: 209). Most texts of social sciences are written about bigger groups and categories of people, while creative nonfiction focuses on certain individuals, but “ethnographic writing blends these perspectives in different measures, depending on the form” (Narayan 2012: 47). General ethnographies incorporate examples of individuals, while autobiographies provide “shared patterns of experience” (ibid.: 48). Although in my book I write about a certain village and certain people, their life stories are similar to others from the same region.

Although many definitions of what is ethnography have been changing during the course of time, social sciences and humanities do not have such strict paradigm shifts as natural sciences (Blasco and Wardle 2007: 165), and there can be various interpretations of what is considered as a good practice of ethnography.

In the last decades, it is common to include autoethnographic elements in ethnographies, giving another layer of context (ibid.: 176-177). Autoethnography “displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis and Bochner 2000 as cited in Mendez 2013: 281). Exactly as there are different approaches to ethnography, there are different approaches to autoethnography. Anderson mentions analytical and evocative approaches. Analytical autoethnography means that the researcher is “a full member in the research group or setting; visible as such a member in published texts; committed to developing theoretical understanding of broader social phenomena” (2000 as cited in Mendez 2013: 281). Generally, autoethnographies have different levels of emphasis on “auto- (self), -ethno- (the sociocultural connection), and -graphy (the application of the research process)” (Reed-Danahay 1997 as referred to in

Wall 2008: 39) and this is what move them closer to one or another approach. Autoethnographies have a power to make readers “reflect on and empathise with the narratives presented. Through reading a cultural or social account of an experience, some may become aware of realities that have not been thought of before” (Mendez 2013: 282), what could be considered a main goal of writing an autoethnography. On the other hand, this genre of ethnographic writing has been criticised for “being self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective and individualised” (Atkinson, 1997; Coffey, 1999 as referred to in Mendez 2013: 283). Richardson proposes following criteria for evaluation of autoethnography: “substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, the impact the narrative causes the reader, and how much the narrative expresses a reality” (2000 as referred to in Mendez 2013: 285).

As it turns out, how many authors, so many opinions on ethnographic writing. Dilemma is mostly between creative or plainly theoretical way of writing. For *Where Mountain Spirits Live: Portrait of a Pamiri Village* I chose creative approach and writing from an autoethnographic perspective which has been my writing style, my ‘writing voice’ already for some time. Regarding writing ethnographies, there is one thing all authors agree on - the importance of contextualisation. I provided theoretical context based on previously done research on the region at the back of my book, but I also included some general reflections already throughout the book. Although I chose artistic and personal approach of writing, my goal was to provide new knowledge about life in a Pamiri village and the way how inhabitants perceive this place, showing it through my perspective. Ethnographies in general “do not claim to produce an objective or truthful account of reality, but should aim to offer versions of ethnographers’ experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context” (Pink 2012: 124).

3.2. Using Photography in Ethnographies

Ethnographies are often enriched with photographs, providing another layer of knowledge to the written text. In *Where Mountain Spirits Live: Portrait of a Pamiri Village* photographs play very important role, supplementing text and creating a visual portrait of Avj.

Although, photographs can provide more information than text, photographs represent only a narrow angle, it “holds a visual trace of a reality the camera was pointed at” (Edwards 1994 as referred to in Kharel 2015: 149), leaving everything else outside

the frame. Photography is never an objective representation, it is only a subjective choice of a photographer what to include in the frame and what to leave outside the frame exactly in a way as writing is a subjective choice of the author – what to write about and how to write about it; generally the whole fieldwork is a very subjective process. Darryn Crowe argues that “the process of ‘pushing the button’ is a manifestation of all possible information available to the photographer until such point” (2003: 480), which is followed by capturing only the chosen information. Taking photographs is a personal process, the photographer is “eye pressed to the viewfinder, finger on the shutter control, scientific procedure occurs in the calculating of the light [...] yet the act of taking a photograph is [...] creative one and, therefore, never objective. Certain responsibilities lie, then, with the photographer” (ibid.: 475-476). “Photographic texts are more valid reproductions of ethnographic experience than [...] prose [...]. Although photography implies a selective process, there is little chance to edit images, once captured” (ibid.: 482).

Howard S. Becker speaks about differences between visual sociology, documentary photography and photojournalism, saying that they are social constructions, and “photographs get meanings, like all cultural objects, from their contexts” (1995: 8). Becker gives examples of how after placing a photojournalistic photograph in another context, it might gain the meaning of visual sociology and vice versa (ibid.: 10). Sarah Pink too says that “anthropologists and sociologists have argued that no image or photographic practice is essentially ethnographic ‘by nature’, but the ‘ethnographicness’ of photography is determined by discourse and content” (2001: 50), and by “how it is situated, interpreted and used to invoke meanings and knowledge that are of ethnographic interest” (2012: 125). Edwards states that “an anthropological photograph is any photograph from which an anthropologist could gain useful, meaningful visual information” (1992 as cited in Pink 2001: 50). Based on this, I would say that my field photographs, placed in the context of *Where Mountain Spirits Live: Portrait of A Pamiri Village*, gain meaning of visual ethnography. The same applies to photographs taken in 2017 which were not captured for ethnographic aims, but “material can move in and out of the anthropological sphere and photographs that were not created with anthropological intent or specifically informed by ethnographic understanding may nevertheless be appropriated to anthropological ends” (ibid.: 51).

“The meanings of photos are importantly conditioned by their captions” (Harper 2003: 262), especially if they are used as a medium of knowledge on their own. In the case of *Where Mountain Spirits Live: Portrait of a Pamiri Village*, I provide only short

captions with brief description of what is depicted on the photograph, the author of it and the year. As the photographs are directly linked with events or objects described in the text, it did not seem important to provide longer captions – the text itself serves as a context to photographs.

4. Concepts of Space and Place in Anthropology, Ethnology, and Folklore Studies

In this chapter I have a brief overview of the concepts of space and place in anthropology, ethnology, and folklore studies. As the main subject of my Master's Project is a village and I seek to explore how locals perceive the place they inhabit, it is important to understand what role space and place play in this relationship.

Space is considered to be a “central element of social life” (Aucion 2017: 396) closely interrelated to concepts of time and culture which are “universal and yet variously conceived and experienced by different cultures” (ibid.). Place is a “framed space that is meaningful to a person or group over time” (Thornton 2008 as cited in Aucion 2017: 396). Place gains its meaning through lived experience. As experiences change, the meaning of space and place is not fixed and can be changed too (Aucion 2017: 397). According to Setha Low, place, landscape and space can be perceived as “an expression of culturally shared mental structures and embodied processes” (2000 as cited in Aucion 2017: 402). “Space can be used to carry social meanings that are culturally and historically constructed as well as contested, while a sense of place develops out of human relationships, feeling, and imagination (Aucion 2017: 407). Space often corresponds and communicates the values and rules of a society. Pauline McKenzie Aucion draws on Clark Cunningham's example of how interior space of the Atoni of Indonesia house reflects their social divisions (1964 as referred to in Aucion 2017: 405). Similar example can be seen in the Pamiri house which has a specific symbolic structure, and during such ritual ceremonies as weddings, everyone has his own place for sitting according to the rules of society. There are different places for women and for men, for special guests, for close family members.

Another concept related to space is the concept of home. Home is often described as a “space of safe containment, a haven and sanctuary” (Grohmann 2020: 7). Many inhabitants of Avj referred to home as “place where I feel free and peaceful”, “where nobody disturbs me”, “my sacred place”. This perception of home as a safe space is criticized for offering romanticized and idealized description of a space that might even mean ‘prison’ for certain groups of a society, for example, in some cultures home to women might mean a place where “women may be menial, brutalised, servants; legal chattel; sexual chattel; reproductive chattel” (Dworkin 2000 as cited in Grohmann 2020: 91). In this context one interview from Avj comes to my mind where the interviewee said

that “home is a place where I know everything and nobody shows me how to do this or that”. It was said by a female interviewee about her parents’ home, while she is a married woman and lives in another city. It might be that her parents’ home is her ‘safe space’ while in her husband’s place she has to live according to their rules. The concept of home includes two contradictory explanations, it is placed “between extremes, from the place of highest aspiration to that of the deepest despair” (Grohmann 2020: 91). This contradiction is visible in the Pamirs, where they do not have mosques and their home is their shrine, the place where they can connect to God in their prayers, while for women in rural villages home often means hard labour and taking care of the whole household and parents-in-law.

“Places can be experienced through stories and vice versa” (Valk 2020: 136). I could draw on my own experience in Tajikistan how much the perception and experience of the place depends on stories. In 2017, Avj seemed to be a usual rural village. I noticed that people had some strange fear of going to the toilet in the yard alone at night, and generally they did not like to go anywhere alone, but nobody really explained the reason. In 2019, I asked people to tell me legends about Avj, and suddenly, the village showed a completely different face full of spirits. While most of the spirits are believed to protect the village, apparently, there is a woman all in white who tends to appear at the most random places and scare people, some of the villagers even attributed vampire’s teeth to her. These legends allowed me to experience an absolutely different village than before, and I started to share with locals the fear of supernatural apparitions. Suddenly, it did not seem attempting to walk through the cemetery alone at night or walk around the yard in the darkness.

Edward Casey says that places have such a trait as gathering, according to him, “places gather experiences and histories, even languages and thoughts. Think only of what it means to go back to a place you know, finding it full of memories and expectations, old things and new things, the familiar and the strange” (1996: 24). This trait of places allows to return to place “again and again as the same place and not just as the same position or site” (ibid.: 26).

In the practical component of my project I state the idea that the portrait of Avj serves as a portrait of Pamiri villages in general. Casey says:

Particular places tell us how a region is [...] Precisely in their comparative sameness, places prove to be universal: they are the necessary basis for regional specification. Without places, regions would be vacuous and thus all too easy to collapse into each

other-ultimately, into abstract space. As it is the essence of a place to be regional, so it is equally essential to a region to be anchored in particular places. (ibid.: 32)

Keith Basso says that thoughts connected to places often lead to thoughts of “other things - other places, other people, other times” (1996: 55). This explains why several of my interviewees started to tell their life stories and whole biographies, simply triggered by my questions about Avj.

“Relationships to places have different forms of expression, and often are expressed through “myth, prayer, music, dance, art, architecture, [...] religious and political ritual [...] Places and their meanings are continually woven into the fabric of social life, anchoring it to features of the landscape” (ibid.: 56-57) Speaking of religious rituals and landscape, I have to mention *mazors* [sacred places made out of stones and mountain goat horns] in Avj. Most inhabitants pointed them out as sacred places to them, although they do not go there often. *Mazors* completely blend with the landscape, and without telling one would never notice them. They are usually attended by individuals when they are seeking for a blessing of spirits; they are attended collectively during Muslim celebration when some rituals with homemade incenses and prayers take place there.

Steven Feld says that “as place is sensed, senses are placed; as places make sense, senses make place” (1996: 91). Feld states that in fields of ethnography and cultural geography, perception of place has been “dominated by the visualism deeply rooted in the European concept of landscape” (ibid.: 94). In his essay, Feld suggests to pay more attention to sonic perception of landscape. My research in Avj undoubtedly was more focusing on classic visual perception, especially, as photographs are such a crucial part of my work. Nevertheless, I tried to explore the village through other senses too, asking locals about sounds and smells reminding them of Avj. Unfortunately, I forgot to ask these questions to all my interviewees. Personally to me, the wonderful and strong aroma of herbs has a very direct link to all memories connected to Avj, and it might even have stronger effect on me than the visual landscape. Some locals also mentioned the same effect of this herbal aroma.

Miriam Kahn briefly summarizes the idea mentioned by many authors that “places are complex constructions of social histories, personal and interpersonal experiences, and selective memory” (1996: 167). Kahn also says that meaning attributed to place or landscape reveals through stories, rituals, myths and language. “Places capture the complex emotional, behavioural, and moral relationships between people and their

territory. They represent people, their actions, and their interactions” (ibid.: 168). Therefore, I can say that Avj portrays its inhabitants, but its inhabitants portray the village.

Kahn says that “it is impossible to talk about place, or to talk about how people talk about place, without encompassing biography, including one's own at the points of social interaction” (ibid.). Kahn approaches her own research on Wamiran place through their biography and perspectives and her own autobiography and feelings about the place, in order to “highlight the sense of place as meaningful shared experience” (ibid.). I too chose to write about Avj through a very personal point of view and to combine it with the locals’ perspective showed through my interviews with them.

Generally, space, landscape and place are deeply interwoven with history, biography, memory and emotions (ibid.). In *Where Mountain Spirits Live: Portrait of a Pamiri Village* one can find passionate statements of locals “I love Avj!”, among tears caused by memories of the Civil War and loss of close family members, biographic stories of individuals, memories related to history of the region, and joyful memories of childhood. This all entangles together in a portrait of Avj.

5. Self-Analysis of the Process

The basis of my Master's Project is a fieldwork conducted in Avj, Tajikistan, from 5 July 2019 to 30 August 2019, as well as photographs and diaries from 2017 when I spent three months volunteering in Avj. My fieldwork was followed by transcribing and translating field interviews from Russian to English, going through fieldwork notes and diaries, turning them into stories and reflections, choosing the best photos and, finally, combining all these materials in the book *Where Mountain Spirits Live: Portrait of A Pamiri Village*. In this chapter, I analyse the whole process from the beginning till the end.

5.1. Participant Observation

Participant observation is the foundation of ethnographic research in which “researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning [...] the aspects of their life routines and their culture” (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011: 1, 2). During my fieldwork I lived together with Dr. Shirinbek Davlatmamadov and his family: his wife Khadicha, niece of his age Soyabegim, son Nozim, and granddaughter Bakhtbegim. A few other grandchildren stayed there for a couple of weeks too: Anais, Zavar, Jamshed, Adees, Bibidavlat, Dushan.

Blasco and Wardle write that sometimes there is a specific event which moves the anthropologist from being an outsider to “an adopted member of the group” (2007: 148). As I lived with this family for three months already in 2017, I was warmly welcomed as one of their grandchildren when I returned back in 2019. I was very surprised and touched when I got to know that they slaughtered a rooster for the *plov* [rice dish] to honour my arrival. Another similarly meaningful event was digging my host family's potato field in 2017. After digging the whole field, I felt that I was accepted as a member of the family, and going back to Avj in 2019 was like visiting my relatives. In order to be accepted by other inhabitants of Avj and just to feel as a part of the environment, this time I chose to wear typical Tajik women clothes - simple dress and pants from the same fabric.

In 2017 I was a volunteer and my main task was to help Dr. Shirinbek, a famous phytotherapist, to collect and cut wild herbs for medical teas, as well as to help his wife in the household. Although I kept in touch with Khadicha and their grandchildren via *Facebook*, and everyone was informed that this time I was coming back to Avj to conduct

a fieldwork and work on my project for the university, I was still afraid that my Pamiri ‘grandparents’ and I could have quite opposite ideas in our minds on how it was going to work. My fear was that as they perceive me as a member of their family, they could expect me to work in their household and help them more than I could afford. It turned out quite opposite. Dr. Shirinbek, Khadicha and Soyabegim are highly educated people. Dr. Shirinbek has written and published sixteen books about folk medicine and local traditions. Khadicha has written and published her memoirs, she spent evenings typing her husband’s new manuscript on the computer as well as working on her own book. Soyabegim used to sit on the *tapchan* [outdoor furniture] with a computer and work on her book dedicated to the history of the Pamirs. They understood really well that working on a research or on a book is considered as ‘work’, although it might not look like that from most of the locals’ perspective. Each morning I offered my help, sometimes there was some urgent work to do in the household, sometimes I could focus on interviews right away. I tried to spend at least half a day helping my Pamiri ‘grandparents’ and the other half - conducting interviews. Every evening, no matter how late it was or how tired I was, I wrote a diary entry - my observations, everything that had happened during the day, description of the environment of interviews and notes related to them. At first, I tried to start transcribing and translating interviews right away in the evenings, but I felt that in this way I am missing out too much of the local life. In the end, I spent more time getting involved in the local life and helping my ‘grandparents’ or going down to the sanatorium with Bakhtbegim than working on my interviews or photographs on the computer. I believe that my fieldwork and participant observation only benefited from this, even though later back home it was really hard to find enough time for working on the materials collected during the fieldwork.

Language of communication between me and the locals was Russian with a few exceptions when some of my hosts' English-speaking grandchildren arrived. Prior to going to the field, I took Russian classes at the University of Tartu in order to improve my Russian skills. Russian is my second foreign language, and I do not master it, but it was sufficient enough for communication (evaluating according to CEFR, my understanding of Russian is at level of C1, while speaking is at level of B1-B2). I understand Russian quite well, so the only problems I encountered were connected with formulating my thoughts and questions. Of course, when locals spoke among themselves, they used the Badakhshani dialect of Tajik, often supplementing it with Russian words or expressions.

Even though I was accepted as a member of my host family, “there is always an observer’s effect, and it is essential to realise that: you are never observing an event as if you were not there. You are there, and that makes it a different event” (Blommaert and Jie 2010: 27). For example, when I attended a *golovomoyka*, the bride’s preparation for the wedding, in another household, first I was helping to prepare the table exactly as one of the locals, but later when the celebration took place, I got the second piece of a cake right after the bride as a special guest. This is just a small episode which shows that I was not unnoticed and my presence did change the event.

5.2. Field Interviews

Interviews constitute a large part of my project. During my fieldwork I conducted interviews with thirty-seven people of different age and gender: locals living in Avj permanently, relatives of locals, visitors and employees of the sanatorium, as well as one mini-interview with an Afghan man living opposite to Avj on the other side of the river.

The choice of my interviewees was rather coincidental than planned out beforehand as it is hard to predict something in this region. Different events happen spontaneously, previously arranged meetings might get cancelled a second later, people suddenly need to go to a funeral or somewhere else, so I did not even try to plan out anything. Such an approach also illustrates life in Avj the best – spontaneous flow of a daily life rather than sticking to a perfect plan. Regarding residents of Avj, my goal was to interview at least one person per household, and then see who else is open and available for giving an interview. I did manage to interview at least one person per household and most of the permanent inhabitants, except those who were not present in Avj during the period of my fieldwork. People often left Avj for a longer time, they went to visit their children or grandchildren in Dushanbe, Moscow or other places and came back only after several weeks or months. Some people were always so busy that it was impossible to meet them at home. A few individuals refused to give me an interview. They said that they do not know anything about Avj or that they have moved there only recently. I tried to explain that I am interested in their personal relationship with the village, but they did not change their minds. Generally, I wanted my interviewees to present as wide spectrum as possible – youngsters, middle age people, seniors, permanent residents, visitors and relatives, females and males. Regarding visitors and employees of the sanatorium, Bakhtbegim and I simply went there on different times, talked to people and tried to

convince them to give short interviews. I did not have a specific goal to conduct interviews with certain amounts of visitors or employees.

I chose semi-structured interviews, having a list of questions prepared beforehand (see Appendix 3, 4, 5), yet being open to any other interesting topics to come up (O'Reilly 2009: 126). I tried to keep my questions short and avoid multi-part questions, as "the interviewee can only answer one thing at a time" (Winick and Bartis 2016: 17). The first question to inhabitants of Avj was always "How are you connected to Avj?", which often revealed not only straight answer to this question, but also information which I could use for coming up with extra questions later. Other than that, the order of questions was not always as showed in Appendix 3, but freely arranged according to the flow of the interview. I tried to ask questions which would reveal what places are important to them in Avj, what memories they have connected to Avj, whether they have sacred places in Avj and what do they miss from Avj the most when they are not there. These questions helped to reveal a 'portrait' of Avj, its residents and the relationship between people and place. Although my question "What objects are important to you here?" might not seem very relevant, "a person's cherished objects can reveal aspects of her or his biography and values" (Narayan 2012: 55), giving another aspect for the portrayal of the village. I was afraid that my question "What does Avj mean to you?" might be too abstract and difficult to answer, as sometimes "people have no opinion about most of the things that happen around them" (Blommaert and Jie 2010: 3), but surprisingly everyone had something to say. To visitors of the sanatorium I asked about their reasons of choosing Avj out of all available thermal springs in the region, as well as about their impressions of the village. With the chosen questions (see Appendix 4), I wanted to understand what brings them to Avj and what makes them to return several years in a row, if that was the case. To medical employees of the sanatorium I asked about the sanatorium and cases of people getting rid of heavy illnesses thanks to the mineral water treatment (see Appendix 5). Regarding the mini-interview in Afghanistan, I did not have any questions prepared beforehand as I did not expect that I will meet anyone, I went there mostly for seeing Avj from the other side of the river and being able to capture the whole village in one photograph from a distance. The opportunity to have a conversation with a man living opposite to Avj came out of blue, so the interview was really short. Besides, he had been in Avj only once, so he did not have much to say about it.

For interviews I was accompanied by Bakhtbegim Shirinbekova, Dr. Shirinbek's seventeen years old granddaughter. Badakhshani dialect of Tajik is her native language,

Russian is her second language which she has mastered while living and attending school in Moscow. The villagers knew Bakhtbegim, some of them remembered me from 2017, so they welcomed us warmly and it was easier to explain who I am and what I am doing in Avj. As Russian was lingua franca during the Soviet times, most of the villagers spoke Russian, but not everyone. Bakhtbegim was my interpreter, translating from Russian to Tajik and vice versa when necessary. Sometimes locals understood my questions in Russian, but replied in Tajik as it was easier for them. As Bakhtbegim was not a professional interpreter, her translations were shorter than the original, sometimes very general like “she knows a legend about the same lady in white what the previous interviewee told you about”, but then I tried to explain to her that even the tiniest details are important to me. Short translations might be explained by the fact that “in the actual interviewing situation, no interpreter [...] has the time to think through a completely accurate translation of the informant’s words” (Phillips 1959: 188) or by not understanding the importance of providing detailed translation, as well as not sufficient language and interpretation skills. “A competent interpreter for qualitative interviewing is described as a person who is experienced in verbal translation and who shares a cultural background with the person being interviewed” (Pitchforth and van Teijlingen 2005 as cited in Bramberg and Dahlberg 2013: 241), Bakhtbegim was not a professional interpreter, but at least she shared the same cultural background with interviewees. When they did not know what to answer, she tried to give some examples. On one hand, it helped them to come up with answers, on the other hand, it definitely interfered with their thoughts and changed their possible answers. “The presence of the interpreter is an active and relevant presence, and that the interpreter him/herself has a positionality which affects the process and content of the interview” (Ficklin and Jones 2009: 121-122), and it affects the outcome too.

Sometimes when the locals did not understand why I would like to interview them and what I am doing in Avj, I used the following story: “Do you know the movie *Kavkazskaya plennitsa* [popular Soviet comedy]? Remember, Shurik was studying folklore and he went to the Caucasus to collect the local toasts, customs and legends. So, that is similar to what I am doing here”. This reference to a widely known Soviet comedy really helped to explain my presence in Avj, besides it also showed that there is a part of our cultural background which we have in common.

As one can see in the *Where Mountain Spirits Live: Portrait of A Pamiri Village*, I conducted interviews of different length, some of my interviewees gave only very short

answers, some started to tell detailed stories. It was mostly a matter of language. Those who knew Russian really well wanted to talk more, besides I could interact with them directly and ask extra questions. In the cases when Bakhtbegim translated from Russian to Tajik and back, her translations were short, and interviewees in general did not talk a lot. The relationship between me and my interviewees played an important role too: those who knew me better, mostly my host family and their relatives, were more willing to open up and tell longer stories. Another factor which influenced the length of the interviews was the level of education of my interviewees. People having a higher level of education were more interested in revealing detailed stories than people with basic education. Higher educated villagers thought it is really important to share their story with ‘the rest of the world’.

No matter how short or long were the interviews, “every interview yields something” (Blommaert and Jie 2010: 56), and in this case the interviews revealed a story of Avj and its inhabitants in a specific point of time and through the conversation with me as a foreigner.

5.3. Photography

I decided to supplement written stories and interviews with photographs, as they “can reveal some insight that is not accessible by any other means” (Banks 2007 as referred to in Kharel 2015: 148). In the book *Where Mountain Spirits Live: Portrait of a Pamiri Village* one can find portraits of my interviewees, photographs of objects and places important to them as well as moments of a daily routine. I included not only photographs taken by myself, but also photographs captured by the locals. In this way, I show not only my impressions of Avj and life there, but also their own interpretation of what seems important enough for capturing in photographs, mostly, family gatherings and meals. Locals often captured moments of their daily life, either simply for memories, either for sending them to their relatives living in other places.

My decision to take portraits of people I met in Avj was led by willingness to create a portrait of Avj in a specific point of time; therefore, it seemed important to capture portraits of the villagers, to capture individuals who were present at this specific time. Harper says that “the marriage of text and image produces [...] exceptional intimacy because it invites analysis, imagination and memory” (2003: 258). I believe that portraits of my interviewees help the interviews to come alive in the reader’s imagination.

I took portraits of my interviewees after finishing each interview. Not everyone wanted to be photographed saying that they are ‘too ugly’ or ‘in working clothes’, and my efforts to change their minds failed, therefore there are a couple of interviews without portraits of interviewees. A few times photographing portraits was challenging, because the locals said: “If you want my portrait, you can shoot it right here!”, although there was poor light or bad shadows falling on the face. I tried to explain that it would be better to go to another place, but not always successfully. In the end, some of the portraits are not as good as I wanted. Sometimes people wanted to change their clothes before allowing me to photograph them, so I could not photograph what I saw but I had to photograph what they thought to be a proper representation of them (Pink 2001: 59). The same applies for the cases when locals showed me from which perspective I have to take photographs of their properties or their belongings in order to show them ‘as good as possible’. After interviews, I also took photographs of items, and sometimes places, which my interviewees mentioned as important to them. Regarding capturing moments of a daily life - I did not like to disturb the flow of a daily routine with my big DSLR camera, so sometimes I took photographs with my phone, losing photo quality but staying more discreet.

In order to see how Avj looks from aside, I went to Afghanistan to photograph Avj from the other coast of the Panj River. It was like ‘zooming out’ and seeing Avj as a whole, which was hard while being in the village.

5.4. Writing Process of *Where Mountain Spirits Live: Portrait of A Pamiri Village*

The most difficulties regarding the writing process I experienced in the beginning as I had a pile of data: diaries and photographs from 2017 and 2019, field notes, interviews. I did not know how to structure and arrange everything.

I was inspired by the beautiful *With Our Own Hands. A Celebration of Food and Life in the Pamir Mountains of Afghanistan and Tajikistan* written by Frederik van Oudenhoven and Jamila Haider (2015) even before I knew I will ever attempt to write a book by myself. All photographs, research on the region, recipes, interviews, stories create a very rich portrayal of life in Badakhshan on both sides of the Panj River and allow to imagine how the life looks there. Photographs are a very crucial part of their book, and I followed this pathway in my ethnography too. While *With Our Own Hands. A Celebration of Food and Life in the Pamir Mountains of Afghanistan and Tajikistan*

gives insight in a very wide region, I chose to portray only one specific village. They tell the story of Badakhshan via recipes and food, but I chose Avj itself as the main topic of exploration. Opposite to other books of such kind, they too use the real names of their interviewees which encouraged me to take a similar step.

A very difficult question was choosing the tense for writing – the past or the present. The use of the present tense has been criticized as it “freezes societies in time” (Fabian 1983 as referred to in Birth 2008: 4) and “removes the Other from the flow of time and denies the human propensity to change” (Birth 2008: 4). Johannes Fabian introduced “the distinction between coevalness of fieldwork and the allochronism of writing” as during the fieldwork an ethnographer shares the same time with the community under research, but during the writing process the ethnographer places the community in a different time than himself if writing in a present tense (Fabian 1983 as referred to in Hastrup 1990: 51). Kirsten Hastrup objects that the ethnographic present can be read as “an implication of a shared time. Using the ethnographic present is to speak from the centre of another time-space” (1990: 51). Simon Sinclair also says that “the present tense in anthropology, rather than separating anthropologists and the people they study, in fact brings them together - the use of past tenses is much more likely to cause such separation” (1993: 34). Hastrup says that “the ethnographic present is, evidently, a literary device, and as such it needs to be questioned” (1990: 45). I tried to look at both tenses as literary devices: using the past tense would provide easier navigation between ‘now’ and ‘then’ and jumping between different events, whereas the present tense would give a sensation of ‘being in the story right now’. In the end I chose the latter because I wanted to draw the reader into the life of Avj allowing to explore the village through my eyes. I mentioned in the introduction of the book that this is a portrait of Avj in a specific point of time, and the timeline is very clear in the book, so I believe that I did not ‘remove the villagers from the flow of time’. By using the present tense, I did not attempt to say that the life in Avj was, is and will be the same, I simply used it for drawing the reader into the story.

The decision to write in the present tense made the other choices easier and I decided to write in a chronological diary style, basing everything on my notes and diary from 2019, and using materials from 2017 only when necessary in addition.

There are different approaches to writing ethnographies, some people approach them like novels, others see them as purely theoretical and impersonal accounts, while others try to find a middle ground. My approach to ethnography is writing in a personal

diary style, reminding more of a nonfiction novel than a theoretical analysis of previously done research. I believe that such personal stories and interviews with locals can speak to a wider audience, and inspire the reader to explore more about this topic later on his own.

In *Where Mountain Spirits Live: Portrait of a Pamiri Village*, I chose to keep the real names of my interviewees against the common practice of making one's interviewees anonymous in ethnographies or any other kind of anthropological data output (Gullion 2016: 31) as I seek to portray Avj in a certain point of time, and these certain people are part of this portrait. Besides, I wanted to approach them as individuals with their own opinions and worldviews rather than an abstract and large mass of Pamiri people. All interviewees agreed that I was going to use their real names.

As I intended to write an ethnography and not only a purely literary piece, I tried to self-reflect throughout the book, and I also provided a theoretical background information, but separate from the personal writing style part. I chose on purpose to give the general context about geography, history, religion and culture of the region only at the back of the book. I have seen books where theoretical texts destroy the flow of the story and I did not want *Where Mountain Spirits Live: Portrait of A Pamiri Village* to be the case, especially considering that I have a quite personal writing style that would contrast with theoretical context too much. The book is meant for an international audience with interest in the region or in exploring places and people unknown to them, but not necessarily scholars, which is another reason for keeping stories and interviews from Avj separate from the theoretical context. Also, I did not want to place the theory in the beginning, as “pages and pages that set up the story are boring” (ibid.: 55).

Gullion says that nowadays “ethnography is conventionally written in first person, from the researcher's point of view. Point of view is analogous to the camera angle in film - we see the action through a particular perspective” (ibid.: 65), so I chose to write my book in first person. I hope that I managed to keep the balance between ‘me’ and ‘local life’ as there is always a threat of writing too much about oneself and not enough about the topic of one's research interest (ibid.). *Where Mountain Spirits Live: Portrait of A Pamiri Village* undoubtedly incorporates autoethnographic elements, and emphasis often is on “auto- (self)” and “-ethno- (the sociocultural connection)” rather than on “the application of the research process” (Reed-Danahay 1997 as referred to in Wall 2008: 39).

As I based the book on field notes from 2019 when I was already quite familiar with the environment, I noticed that I sometimes tend to forget to describe and explain in

Where Mountain Spirits Live: Portrait of A Pamiri Village phenomena that seemed something very unusual and worth mentioning in 2017, but nothing significant in 2019. As Blommaert and Jie explain it, “things that strike you as strange and remarkable in the beginning cease to do that soon after, and after some time all kinds of initially remarkable things are taken for granted because they have become part of your own outlook on things” (2010: 32). I had to keep this in mind while writing the book and trying to explain all the local phenomena.

Although, it is not a common practice, I decided to include full length interviews in the book for two reasons. First, considering how subjective are all the choices related to fieldwork, conducting interviews, contextualising, and that “all ethnography is based on exclusion [...], all ethnographic writing is inherently authoritative” (Blasco and Wardle 2007: 152), using full length interviews was the least I could do in order to ‘let the locals talk’. Second, I wanted to leave for a potential reader the opportunity of making his own interpretations of the conversations. Kirin Narayan says: “By observing the flow of dialogue rather than being presented with summarized conclusions, readers too become actively involved in making sense of the materials” (2012: 76), and this was what I wanted to achieve. Most of the interviews are translated from Russian to English with a few exceptions when they were already conducted in English. Some interviews were interpreted from Tajik to Russian by Bakhtbegim and later translated from Russian to English by me. No doubt that some deeper meanings are lost between layers of translations, and the result is quite a subjective interpretation of the field conversations.

“Full inclusion is only granted if informants are considered to have theories, which can be argued with, as well as views, beliefs or feelings, which cannot” (Sinclair 1993: 42). I tried to include their theories about history and culture which I heard around lunch or dinner table in the book, some of them were confirmed by research papers, some stayed only at a hypothetical level. I believe that publishing full-length interviews in the book also gives more inclusion to my interviewees, and readers can get to know villagers’ worldviews, beliefs, theories.

I struggled a lot with transliteration from Tajik to English. Generally, I followed the BGN/PCGN transliteration system (see Appendix 6). Most of the native words, names and toponymy I only heard without seeing them written down. Following the logic of transliterating ‘*Хадуча*’ as ‘Khadicha’ I thought that ‘Khabib’ would be correct too, but it turned out that it should be ‘Habib’ as “Habib and Khadicha are Arabic names. Habib is حبيب and starts with ح [Tajik ‘X’, Latin ‘H’], while Khadicha is خديجه and starts with خ

[Tajik ‘X’, Latin ‘Kh’]” (from online conversation with Dr. Olimi Shirinbek 2020). This is something I could not know unless seeing these words written down in Tajik. Some of my interviewees wrote down Russian versions of their names losing Tajik letters which made a difference when transliterating. For example, one interviewee wrote her last name as ‘*Гоибназарова*’ which transliterates as ‘Goibnazarova’, while actually her last name in Tajik is ‘*Ғоибназарова*’ and the correct transliteration is ‘Ghoibnazarova’. Luckily, Dr. Olimi Shirinbek kindly agreed to help me and proofread the list of transliterated Tajik and Russian words and names used in the book.

5.5. Ethics and Reflexivity

Ethnographers work “in a real social environment on which all sorts of forces operate: culture, language, social structure, history, political relations, and so forth. Being a man or a woman, 22 years old or 47 years old, rich or poor [...] makes a difference” (Blommaert and Jie 2010: 17). From all my possible characteristics I felt that I am perceived as a young and unmarried woman from a former ‘friendly Soviet republic Latvia’ which once was an ‘educated and cultural West’ for Tajiks. On the one hand, being perceived as a young and unmarried woman did not help me - men of all ages tried to flirt with me and offered to find me a local husband which was annoying, disturbing and unavoidable. On the other hand, it helped to keep interviews joyful, alive and open people up through joking and flirting. Despite that I was born already after the collapse of the Soviet Union, I was still perceived as ‘one of them’ thanks to our common history. This common history definitely helped to build trust between me and my interviewees. Although they perceived Latvia as a developed West, it was ‘their West’. Still, I felt that some locals perceived Latvia as a ‘better place with more educated people’, besides, “as an interviewer, you will often be imagined as a figure of authority. You approach people with the label of researcher stuck on you” (ibid.: 50). For example, when I asked one interviewee why he hung the horseshoe on the door with its ends pointing down and told him that we hang it the other way around, after the interview he changed the placement of the horseshoe saying: “We are uneducated! I will listen to your advice!”, although I was simply curious why he hung it this way. The fact that I could communicate with locals in Russian really helped me. As I have spent some time in Avj before, some locals even referred to me as ‘almost one of the villagers’ and were happy to share their stories with me.

“Recordings are always sensitive materials, things that people may experience as threatening” (Blommaert and Jie 2010: 34), I observed this in Avj when locals, seeing my big DSLR camera and hearing “I would like to interview you”, were afraid that I wanted to shoot a video of them. When they learned that the camera was only for photographing, they calmed down, and in most cases agreed to have an interview. Before starting each interview, I explained to the interviewee why I need it and how I am going to use it - with his or her real name published in the book, as well as possibly sharing online. Considering that I reveal the real name of the village and include photo portraits of the inhabitants, there would not be much point in hiding their names anyway. I did not ask my interviewees to sign any agreement because in Avj it would seem inappropriate.

Blommaert and Jie says that “they might also request that you do not record certain things, or that you restrict your recording to specific times and occasions” (2010: 34). I had only one such occasion when the interviewee was telling me stories and legends, when she suddenly said: “Oh, I know another scary story, but it is a private family story, please, stop your recording for a moment!”, so I stopped the recording. I did not even write it down in my notes, and now it has completely faded from my memory.

“Should we ask consent from the people involved in autoethnographic narratives?” (Mendez 2013: 283), this was a question that I had in my mind when writing stories based on my field notes and diary. Regarding interviews everything was absolutely clear, as I asked the permission to my interviewees to publish this content with their names and portraits, but how about my daily life observations? I was most concerned about publishing stories related to toasts and the consumption of hard alcohol which is forbidden by Ismaili religion, but nevertheless older men like to sip some stronger drinks sometimes. Finally, I decided to keep these stories as they reveal a very interesting culture of toasts. “It seems that there are no straightforward responses to this or to other ethical questions that may arise when engaged in autoethnography” (ibid.).

5.6. Publishing

I am planning to publish *Where Mountain Spirits Live: Portrait of A Pamiri Village* and make it available for online purchases as a paperback and an electronic book. I have not contacted any possible publishers yet, so this is left for future work. In case I am not successful in my searches for publishers, I see *Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing* self-publishing option as an alternative.

It might be said that a digital version of this project, for example, a website, could reach a wider audience than a book, but it is not a lasting medium. I do believe that Avj and its inhabitants deserve their stories to be shared exactly via a printed book.

Where Mountain Spirits Live: Portrait of A Pamiri Village is meant for an international audience with interest in Central Asia, Tajikistan, Pamir Mountains, post-Soviet space, Muslim and Ismaili worlds, rural communities, ethnographies of places. Those are readers who like to explore places and people unknown to them by reading, they could be scholars, passionate travellers or simply curious people. The book is written in English, and there is a short geographical, historical, religious and cultural context provided at the back of the book for those who know little or nothing about the region. However, I intend to provide a paperback to all my interviewees. Some of them understand English, some of them have relatives who can translate for them, but for others there are photographs, a visual language without a language barrier.

As the main goal of the project is sharing stories from Avj and the Pamirs, I have published excerpts of some of the interviews on *Lossi36.com*, a website dedicated to articles on Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Also, I have published stories about Avj, the Pamir Highway and Afghanistan in Latvian magazines: *Starp zālītēm, Allāhu un preciniekiem: dzīve Avdžas ciemā Pamirā* (EJ, 2020/4), *Pamira lielceļš: divvirzienu kultūršoks* (EJ, 2020/1), *Afganistāna: lazurīta zilais sapnis* (SestDiena, 13.09.-19.09.2019).

Conclusion

The goal of my Master's Project was to create an ethnography *Where Mountain Spirits Live: Portrait of a Pamiri Village*, a textual and visual portrait of Avj, and to share stories from and about Avj. The book aims to produce new knowledge on the region about which so little is known, giving an opportunity to international audience to learn more about rural life in the Pamirs, and have a glimpse into a daily life of a Pamiri village and the way how locals perceive the place they inhabit. Although, the book is a portrait of a certain village, it still provides knowledge about Pamiri villages in general.

I really hope that I will succeed with publishing the book and it will be able to fulfil its mission, but even until now it has managed to play a tiny role in lives of some people. Locals were thankful for asking them to think about their village. Although, Avj is very dear to them, they had not previously thought about the village from the perspective I asked them to think. During our interviews, they had an opportunity to reflect on these thoughts and their memories connected to the village. After sharing excerpts of some of the interviews on *Lossi36.com* website, I received such messages as “thank you for the interview, only now I understood why she [relative] is the way she is, this interview helped me to understand her better”, “after reading these interviews, I got to know new legends about Avj!” Also, an ex-editor of *Lossi36.com* said: “Your interviews inspired me to launch my own interview project!” During the writing process, I often contacted Dr. Shirinbek Davlatmamadov's grandchildren and asked them various questions. Sometimes, they did not know the answers and needed to contact their grandparents. They both said that in this way they learned a lot about Avj. In general, this project was not only my learning process, but it helped the locals to reflect on their beloved village, as well as to get to know it better by reading the interviews. I wish they all could read the book later, but it is mostly meant for an international audience and written in English, yet I am intended to provide a book for every interviewee - they will be able to see the visual portrait of Avj, if nothing else.

Interviews, writing, photography, these all were processes curated by my subjective choice; therefore, *Where Mountain Spirits Live: Portrait of a Pamiri Village* is a subjective interpretation of Avj through my foreigner's perspective, yet it provides true knowledge. There are many approaches on ethnographies, some are more creative, some are more theoretical, some seek to find the middle grounds. I took a path less chosen

by deciding to have a very personal approach of writing, and revealing identities of the people I met in Avj. Jessica Smartt Gullion says:

Our job as writers of ethnography is to express that meaning to our readers through our texts. To illuminate the drama of events, to embrace and express the emotion, rather than distance ourselves from the researched through percentages, tables, and graphs. Ethnographers are the witnesses. We listen to and retell stories - like oral historians before us, we are the keepers of the stories. We keep them alive. We honour the people and places and things in our ethnographies. (Gullion 2016: 8)

I hope I succeeded in honouring Avj, its inhabitants and visitors.

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Interviews

Online conversation with Dr. Olimi Shirinbek. November 2020.

List of Photos and Figures

Photo 1: Kaļva, Solveiga. 2019.

Figure 1, 2: Google Maps

<https://www.google.lv/maps/place/36%C2%B055'26.5%22N+71%C2%B030'06.3%22E/@36.9240363,71.4995473,17z/data=!3m1!4m5!3m4!1s0x0:0x0!8m2!3d36.924032!4d71.501736> (accessed 19 November 2020).

Resume in Estonian

Magistriprojekt *Avj: Pamiiri küla portree* on pühendatud Tadžikistanis Pamiiri mägedes asuvale väikesele Avj külakesele. Magistriprojekt koosneb kahest osast, praktilisest osast ja teoreetilisest osast.

Magistriprojekti praktiline osa on etnograafiline *Kus elavad mägede vaimud: Pamiiri küla portree*, kus püütakse selgitada Avj, selle elanike ja külaliste suhteid. Mida küla nende jaoks tähendab? Mis on nende jaoks kõige tähtsamad kohad? Millised legendid liikvel on? Autor usub, et iga elanik kujutab küla omamoodi, kuid küla on selle elanike portree. Magistriprojekt on raamat Avj tekstilisest ja visuaalsest portreest konkreetsel ajahetkel ja läbi autori väga isikliku objektiivsuse dr. Shirinbek Davlatmamadovi peres elanud välismaalasena. Raamatu peamine eesmärk on luua portree Pamiiri külast ning jagada lugusid külast ja küla kohta, mida pole märgitud isegi Google Mapsi kaartidel, ning lasta kohalikel oma lugusid rääkida, isegi kui neid raamistavad autori küsimused. See etnograafia on mõeldud uute teadmiste loomiseks piirkonna kohta, mida vähe tuntakse, andes rahvusvahelisele publikule võimaluse Pamiiri maakohtade elu lähemalt tundma õppida ning teada saada, kuidas kohalikud oma elukohta tunnetavad. Hoolimata paljudest Pamiiris kasutatavatest arenduskavadest on see piirkond endiselt vähe uuritud.

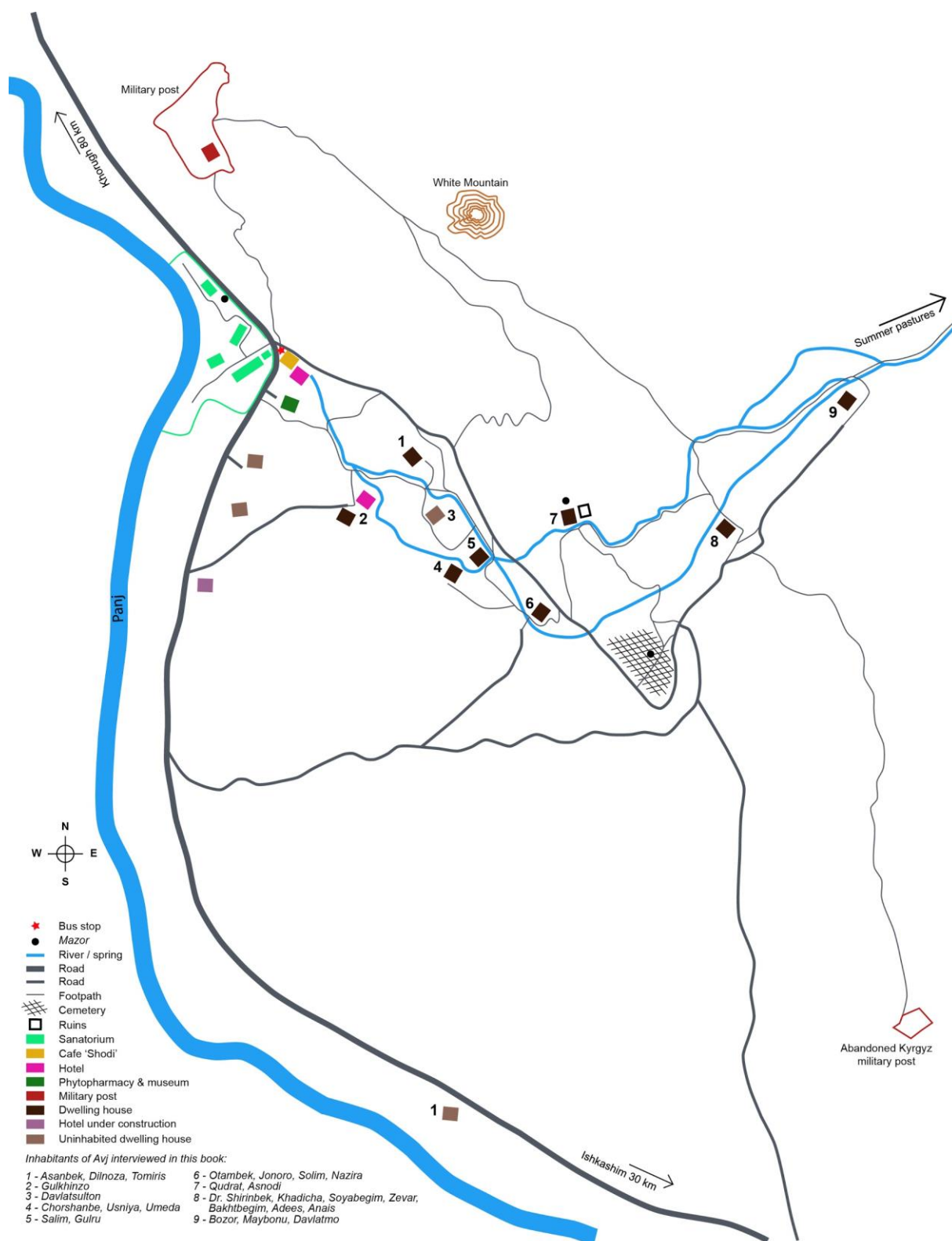
Kus elavad mägede vaimud: Pamiiri küla portree koosneb kolmest põhikomponendist: intervjuud kohalikega; autori enda tähelepanekud ja kogemused kohapealt; fotod. Need materjalid koguti välitöödel 5. juulist 2019 kuni 30. augustini 2019 ning neid täiendasid päevikud ja fotod 2017. aastast, mil autor veetis Avjs kolm kuud vabatahtlikuna. Autori välitöö Avjs põhines osaleja tähelepanekutel dr. Shirinbek Davlatmamadovi peres elades, ning olles osa nende igapäevaelust. Autori ja kohalike suhtluskeeleks oli peamiselt vene keel. Kõik külaelanikud vene keelt ei rääkinud ja seega oli intervjuudel autoriga kaasas Bakhtbegim Shirinbekova.

Autor kavatseb *Kus elavad mägede vaimud: Pamiiri küla portree* avaldada ja muuta veebist ostmiseks kättesaadavaks nii paberkandjal kui e-raamatuna. Autor ei ole veel võimalike kirjastajatega ühendust võtnud, see töö seisab ees. *Kus elavad mägede vaimud: Pamiiri küla portree* on mõeldud rahvusvahelisele publikule, kellel on huvi Kesk-Aasia, Tadžikistani, Pamiiri mägede, nõukogudejärgse aja, moslemi- ja islamimaailmade, maakogukondade ja kohtade etnograafiate vastu.

Magistriprojekti teoreetilise osa eesmärk on anda praktilisele osale kontekst ning peegeldada kogu kirjutamisprotsessi. Teoreetiline osa koosneb viiest peatükist. Esimeses

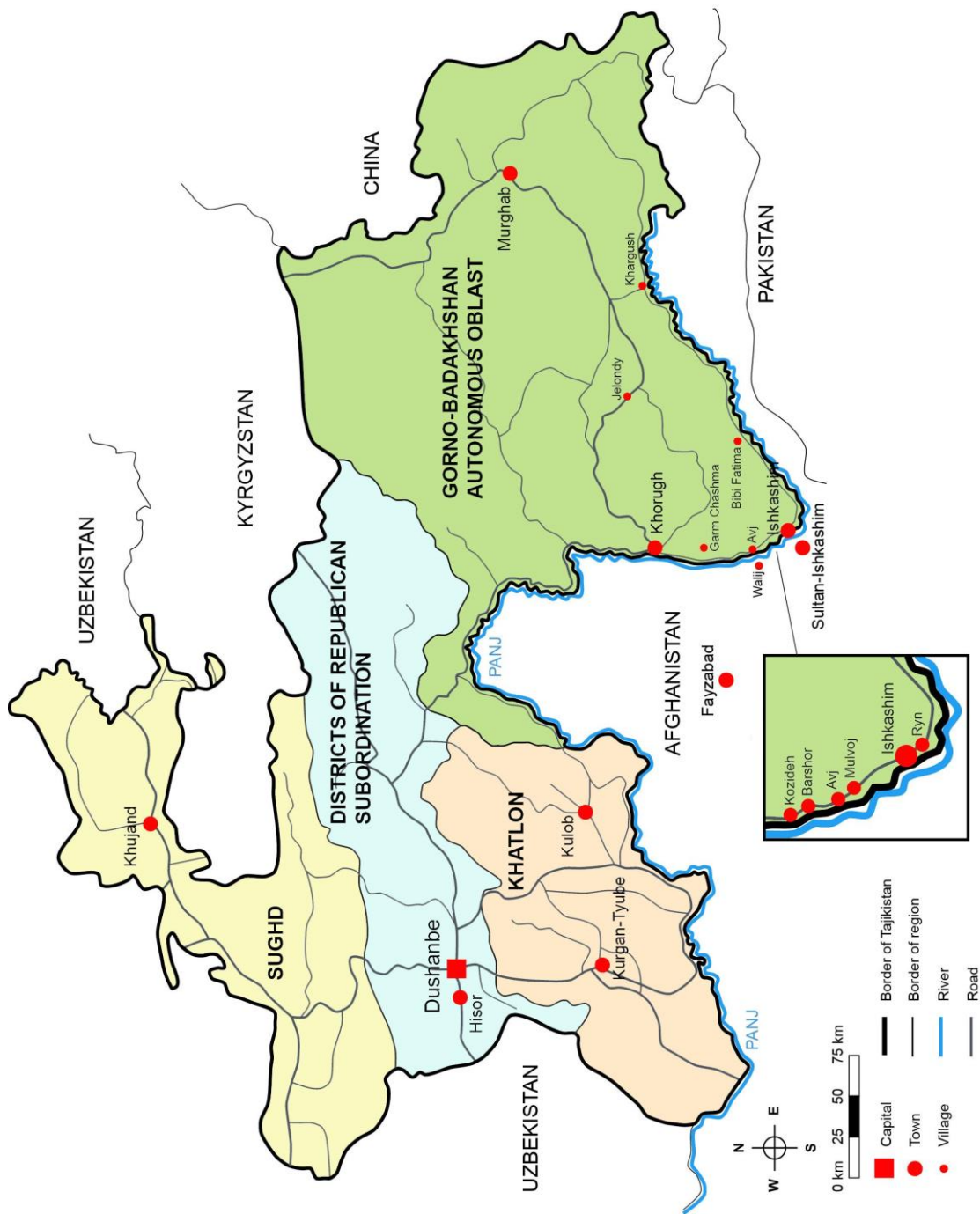
peatükis annab autor Avj kohta väga ülevaatliku taustainformatsiooni. Piirkonna täpsem geograafiline, ajalooline, religioosne ja kultuuriline kontekst on esitatud *Kus elavad mägede vaimud: Pamiiri küla portree* tagakaanel. Teises peatükis annab autor lühikese ülevaate piirkonnas hiljuti tehtud uurimistöödest. Kolmandas peatükis püüab autor aru saada, milliseid omadusi omistatakse etnograafiatele, milliseid erinevaid lähenemisi saab etnograafiast kirjutades kasutada ning milline on etnograafiates fotode roll. Neljandas peatükis selgitab autor ruumi ja koha kontseptsioone. Viiendas peatükis analüüsib autor kogu oma projekti teostamise protsessi: välitöid ja tähelepanekuid osalejana, intervjuusid, fotosid, raamatu kirjutamist, eetikat ja refleksiivsust ning kirjastamist.

Appendix 1. Schematic Map of Avj



Source: Kaļva, Solveiga. 2020.

Appendix 2. Schematic Map of Tajikistan



Source: Kaľva, Solveiga. 2020.

Appendix 3. Sample Questions for Inhabitants of Avj and Their Relatives

1. How are you connected to Avj?
2. What are the most important places to you in Avj?
 - 2.a. Why are these places important to you?
3. What memories do you have connected to Avj?
4. Are there any places that were important to you in your childhood (in the past), but what do not exist anymore?
5. What do you miss the most from Avj when you go (live) somewhere else?
6. What smells and sounds remind you of Avj?
7. (What do you bring home from Avj?)
8. What do you bring to Avj when you come here?
9. Are there any places in Avj that are sacred to you?
10. How often do you go there?
11. What legends do you know about Avj?
12. What does Avj mean to you in general?
13. What are the most important objects to you here?
 - 13.a. Why are they important to you?

Appendix 4. Sample Questions for Visitors of the Sanatorium

1. Where are you from?
2. How often do you come to Avj?
3. How many times have you been here?
4. For how long do you usually stay in Avj?
5. How did you get to know about Avj and the sanatorium?
6. Have you tried any other sanatoriums in this region, for example, Bibi Fatima or Garm Chashma?
 - 6.a. (Why did you choose exactly Avj?)
7. How does your day in the sanatorium look like?
8. Have you heard about cases of people getting rid of heavy illnesses in the sanatorium?
9. Have you heard any legends about Avj?
10. What do you like the most in Avj?
11. What is your favourite place here?

Appendix 5. Sample Questions for Employees of the Sanatorium

1. How are you connected to Avj?
2. Where are you from?
3. How did you decide to work in Avj?
4. What is your job position here?
5. Do you know about cases of people getting rid of heavy illnesses in the sanatorium?
7. What is the right way to improve vision here?
8. Should people come back for a repeated treatment in order to maintain the effect?
9. What are the most important places to you in Avj?
10. Do you know any legends about Avj?
11. What does Avj mean to you?

Appendix 6. Transliteration According to the BGN/PCGN System

Tajik	Latin		Tajik	Latin
А а	a		О о	o
Б б	b		П п	p
В в	v		Р р	r
Г г	g		С с	s
Ғ ғ	gh		Т т	t
Д д	d		У у	u
Е е	e		Ӯ у	ũ
Ё ё	yo		Ф ф	f
Ж ж	zh		Х х	kh
З з	z		Ҳ ҳ	h
И и	i		Ч ч	ch
Й й	í		Ҷ ҷ	j
Ӣ ӣ	y		Ш ш	sh
К к	k		Ъ ъ	'
Қ қ	q		Э э	è
Л л	l		Ю ю	yu
М м	m		Я я	ya
Н н	n			

Source: Romanization Systems.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/romanization-systems> (accessed 26 November 2020).

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