

## THE ORIGIN OF OUR BELIEF : HOW THE ISMAILIYA CAME TO GHOJAL IN HUNZA

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A spiritual authority (*pir*) from Badakhshan by the name of Shah Ardabil visited Hunza in the Karakoram mountains three times. During his first visit he pressured the local ruler, Mir Silum Khan<sup>1</sup>, to accept the Ismaili faith as the true belief. At this time the people of Hunza were adherents of the Twelver Shia sect of Islam (*Bara Imami, Ithna'ashariyya*). Silum Khan refused to comply and the *pir* returned to Badakhshan unsuccessfully. He was escorted by two porters (*virbar*) from Ghojal. They carried his luggage across the Irshad Uwin Pass. During this journey with the holy man, these two porters from the villages of Gulmit and Ghulkin adopted the Ismaili faith. When they returned to Hunza, the *mir* found out about their conversion and punished them severely.

After some years Shah Ardabil returned to Hunza. During his stay he succeeded in convincing Mir Silum Khan to adopt and spread the Ismaili faith. The *mir* of Hunza accepted the proposition under one condition. In his hour of death Shah Ardabil would have to be present and to support him in his parting from the world.

Some time later Mir Silum Khan and a group of followers took off for a pilgrimage to Panja Sho, a popular shrine (*ziarat*) in the Chupursan valley. Here the ruler forced the people to erect a defensive structure (*topkhanna*). Later on they continued their journey up the valley and reached Reshit. Near the famous shrine of Babaghundi Ziarat, Mir Silum Khan asked the people to build a house for himself. His followers became unhappy with their situation as he made them work very hard. Their absence from home had already lasted three months.

One night one of the men had a dream. In this dream a saint told him about a method to refrain from forced labour (*afsar, kar-i-begar, rajaaki*) or to get rid of the *mir*. He should perform his devotions in the following manner: His right-hand palm would point upwards in



The grave (*mazar*) of Mir Silum Khan in Gulmit is an architectural remnant and place of honour for the story of Ismailism related in the narrative.

prayer, while the palm of the left hand would do the opposite. If he would comply with this rule during his offerings they would be freed from the corvée. The dream came true the next day. When work was about to commence in the morning, the men received news that the *mir* felt ill and had ordered them to return home. They reached the village of Gircha in Upper Ghojal without any difficulty, but later on the *mir*'s state deteriorated and he had to be supported and carried. When the party reached Gulmit, Mir Silum Khan realized that his reign would be terminated soon. Mir Silum Khan ordered his sons to come from Baltit Fort to announce his decision about the succession to the Hunza throne. He interviewed three sons about their future plans. The eldest son, Shah Sultan, was interested in increasing the agricultural lands of Hunza. The *mir* entitled him with his property in Altit. The second son, Jamal Khan, supported peace with the rivals in the east and south, Nager and Gilgit, while he wanted to increase attacks on Wakhan. His father favoured the third son, Shah Ghazanfar, who recommended cordial relations with Wakhan and Sarikol in the Pamirs while attacking Gilgit and Nager. He suggested that the economic situation of Hunza should be improved by plundering trade caravans. This programme convinced Mir Silum Khan and he appointed Shah Ghazanfar<sup>2</sup> as his successor. After completing this final task as a ruler he awaited the arrival of his spiritual aide.

Shah Ardabil reached Hunza riding on a white horse with a blue cover and a decorated bridle. The people of Pasu were the first to see him pass by before reaching Gulmit. There he met with Mir Silum Khan and declared that he had fulfilled his promise to be there in time. Now the *mir* was asked by Shah Ardabil to comply with his promise. Mir Silum Khan announced that from now on the Ismaili faith would be the state religion of Hunza. After that he envisaged his hour of parting and passed away in Gulmit at the foreseen hour in the year 1825.

Before departing Shah Ardabil appointed a religious man in Gulmit by the name of Mulla Singan. This follower (*murid*) would recite the holy text brought by Shah Ardabil for a period of forty days. Afterwards his family should be the keeper of this holy book. When the grandson of Mulla Singan, Gohor Hayat, became village headman (*arbab*) his "milk brother" (*zarz*), Sarbuland Ali Shah, from the ruling dynasty of Wakhan took it away. Since that time the holy book has disappeared and has never been seen again.

This story was narrated to me in Gulmit in April 1990 by Panjshambi, son of Pir Ali, and translated by his neighbour, Ghulam-ud-din.

#### Notes :

1. Mir Silum Khan III ruled in Hunza from app. 1790 to 1825. His grave is located in Gulmit (see attached photograph).
2. Shah Ghazanfar ruled Hunza from 1825 to 1865 when he was murdered by his son Ghazan Khan.