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### MYSTERIOUS GILAN AND ITS OCTOGENERIANS' CLUB

The history of Central Asia, a land of numerous ancient towns, is inseparable from the world history. Even 2700 year old Shakhrisabs located here – at the foot of the Gissar Mountains – is considered to be a recent one. Close to Shahrisabs, at the altitude of the attractive, eternally snow-capped peaks and the radiant glacier of Severtsov, like an eagle nest stuck to the rock there is a village called Gilan. Its old inhabitants affirm that Biblical Adam and Eve lived just here. In any case, they have been here, exactly.

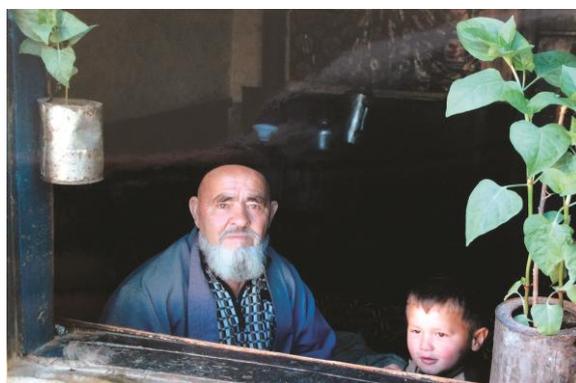
#### THE PHENOMENON OF GILAN

Many centuries from autumn to spring for long winter months a high-mountain village Gilan was cut off from the external world. This fact left its mark on uniqueness of Gilan inhabitants. Frankly speaking, to get there even in the summer is not easy. This enigmatic place is so wrapped up in legends and stories that it always uncontrollably attracts travelers.

It is curious that everybody tries to explain the secret of Gilan's uniqueness in their own way. Gilan

has got its own customs and traditions, crafts, mentality and even their own language. So, people keep a particular mode of life. Almost all sources explain this fact by the remoteness and difficult access for long centuries. This explanation is not complete. It goes without saying that it is 21st century with all advantages and technical achievements, radio, television, mobile and other kinds of communication. I guess, there is something else, special about Gilanians.

#### A TINY YARD ON THE NEIGHBOUR'S ROOF



Gilanians, the old and the young, are glad to meet travelers and guests. Coming across in the little narrow streets they meet everyone

with friendly open smile and answer any questions in detail. Even small children speak at least three languages but with brilliant, slight Gilanian accent. As a speaker of Uzbek and Persian I can assert that Gilanians express themselves in their own peculiar language.

Hospitality runs in Gilanians' blood which is manifested in their everyday life.

Perhaps it is not to be found anywhere else in the world that a tandir (clay or ceramic oven for baking flat bread) is fitted into the clay house wall on the street side as in Gilan. I have never seen such a rational use of living space, even by the experienced Japanese.



Life in Gilan goes on in its paced way. Nobody hurries anywhere, no one gets agitated. You can come across villagers walking, riding a horse or a donkey. You can see them riding an SUV or a bicycle, or even a motorcycle which brand and year of production unbeknown to the vehicle itself. Proceeding, you may peep into any slightly open door which directly leads to... a living room. Yes, to a living room, covered with woolen carpets, weaved runners spread over the felt base. There are a lot of kurpacha quilts and lulya-bolish cushions, and dastarkhan (a floor-dining spread), folded on one side.

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Open it and you will find flat breads made of Gilan-milled flour, which are always fresh, they do not grow stale or moldy. Small plates full of nuts and dried fruit from their mountain gardens. There is a back door leading to the yard, which is the roof of the neighbor living a floor lower. You will have piala of tea and enjoy some peaches, and only after that the host may ask you where you come from and why.

#### **WHEN EVERYONE IS THE GUARDIAN OF THEIR HISTORY**

Six thousand people live in Gilan. In the old days they raised seven or even twelve children in every family. Nowadays one family has got three or four. Incidentally, last year an information technology college was founded here. In spite of the fact that the lifestyle in mountain village is very traditional young people are getting the most contemporary occupations.

Culture layer of countless mountain caves around Gilan has not been explored yet by scientists. So, old inhabitants are in the firm belief that people used to live and cultivate the land here thousands and thousands of years ago. I do not exclude this version at all.

Let me reveal a little secret. Though scientists affirm that Gilan keeps its exceptional origin and ancient traditions only because of its isolation from the external world, it maintains its identity due to the people living here. For that very reason every person of this village is the guardian of their history and every family makes up an encyclopedia of Gilan. So, everyone remembers the

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names of famous craftsmen because they have an object created by them in every house. There is a carved door or composed of different kinds of wood, a column, a wicker basket, a copper dish – barkash, a jug – kumgan, a cradle – beshik.

There are some crafts in Gilan important in all times, but two of them mentioned with a special piety. It is a miller – tegirmonchi, and a blacksmith – temirchi. Today in this mountain village three heavy ancient watermills are still functioning. People remember millers' names from different centuries, such as Tosh-Tegirmonchi, Vafo-Tegirmonchi, Kilich-Tegirmonchi... all of them.

Special respect remains, since the depth of the centuries, for blacksmiths, from those times when they forged arms for their defenders and handcrafted tools for peasants and shepherds. Among them are ploughs and sickle – urak, spade – belkurak and hoe – ketmen. And no matter that now everything around us is factory manufactured and ready made things of imported brands, this craft is as vital as before for highlanders. A blacksmith is forging horse shoes as he was a thousand years ago, but indeed, nowadays people drag to a blacksmith's shop washing and sewing machines, bicycles and motorcycles, even old cross-country vehicle GAZ- 69.

#### **TO THE MOUNTAIN PEAK. TO THE SKY**

We climbed up to the outlying area to the top of the mountain. To the sky. What a sacred place. According to the legend near this holy waterfall Adam had constructed the first

watermill on Earth. And a grate-great-granddaughter of this watermill is still functioning. A two-storyed terrace – ayvan has been built over it in front of which you can see an ancient tree. It is sacred to all highlanders. And behind that tree is an open space, here the whole Gissar Range is to be clearly visible. The glacier named in the honour of a Russian explorer Severtsov is especially beautiful. I asked why they did not construct anything or lay out a garden here. My guides did not utter a word nodding to the direction of old men in white. Like in a fairy-tale, they start gathering into the terrace from different corners of the village. I am unusually lucky to appear on the second floor, in the holy of holies – at the council of Gilan's sages. It is a unique club of 80 year-olds. Actually, old men do not approve when strangers attend no matter what rank guests hold. Here you do not see an ostentations brilliance, tasteless carpets and plastic flowers. Everything is of the utmost simplicity and reserved manner. They make important decisions in order to help solving major and minor problems of the highland village.

This building, on the top of the mountain has been constructed here from time immemorial. But the ayvan was simpler and smaller then it is now. It acquired its new shape in the 50s. At the end of the 80s when Islam Karimov managed Kashkadaria Region he visited this place and had a talk with the council members. He entrusted the leaders of the region to improve it and build a glass-covered terrace. Six kilometers of a new road, through the mountains, was built at

the time. Neighbouring villages were supplied with telephone communication and water from the Tamshush river. So, such vital problems have been solved effectively by the elders. They admit physically and mentally fit 80 year-old men to the club.

#### HIGHLAND 80 YEAR-OLD CLUB



Today the council includes 25 members. They never take rash decisions. Every candidate to the club must raise deserving children and lead an exemplary lifestyle. All their life in the village is in full view of everyone right from their birth. Having passed the procedure a candidate can participate in all kinds of discussions and council meetings – *maslakhat*. The peculiarity of the club is that the participants must come and return only on foot using no transportation at all. This way every member proves his physical fitness every time.

Next morning, after arriving at a decision, all members of the council gather in the open space in front of the terrace where nobody constructs anything or does not lay out a garden. There they form a ring, and the eldest announces the name of a newcomer who should look to Gissar Mountain range and Severtsov glacier through the rising sun beams. He gives his word to follow the council rules. After

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that they throw over his shoulders a handmade gown – *chapan*, of local wea-ving.

They put on his head headgear of highlanders – *kulokh*.

The previous newcomer to the club hands him a wooden trident staff



– *asso*, metal points of which are forged by Gilan's blacksmiths. It is very comfortable to walk on icy mountain paths in winter and it is useful to protect from crawling reptiles and other unwelcome animals.

Times have changed and little by little introduced some amendments into everyday life of Gilanians and the 80 year-old club activity as well.

Under no circumstances do I depreciate the role and significance of local authorities in their contribution to the cause of peace and tranquility in Gilan, but one can and should thank Gilanian elders for the calm and peace. There are only three divorces in the village, no rows or thefts. One can leave the car unlocked with the key in it. Gilanians never stole horses a thousand years ago, and so it will remain within another thousand years thanks to the 80 year-old club and its 25 bright old men.

**Photo by  
Viktor VYATKIN and author.**

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