

**MUSIC AND HUMAN MOBILITY  
REDEFINING COMMUNITY IN INTERCULTURAL CONTEXT 2016**

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**THE RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION OF MUSICIANS  
IN AFGHANISTAN (1978-2014)**

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***Abstract:** This lecture outlines the movements of musicians in Afghanistan during the period of turbulent conflict that started with the Communist coup of 1978, followed by the Coalition government of the mujahideen in 1992, the rise to power of the Taliban in 1996, and the post-9/11 era of Karzai. The data show that music is a sensitive indicator of broader socio-political processes; music making in Afghanistan varied widely in frequency and intensity according to the dominant ideology of the time, fluctuations that often involved the movement of musicians from one place to another. Underlying these movements was a deeper conflict between ideologies of traditionalism and modernization in Afghanistan that started at the beginning of the twentieth century.*

***Keywords:** Religious persecution, music making, traditionalism, modernization, Afghanistan*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this lecture, I am concentrating not on the migrations of musicians as such but on a major factor leading to those migrations – religious persecution by Islamic fundamentalists. I deal with the hostility and ill-treatment they received, which reached its extreme form under the Taliban between 1996 and 2001. But it did not start with the coming to power of the Taliban, nor end with their defeat in 2001. A detailed account of this period of Afghan history can be found in Baily (2016).

## 2. MUSIC AND IDEOLOGIES IN AFGHANISTAN (1978-1992)

The people of Afghanistan are great music lovers. Music had received patronage from a succession of music-loving rulers from the 1860s. There were many families of hereditary professional musicians, particularly in Kabul, where they occupied a large musicians' quarter, the Kucheh Kharabat. The hereditary professionals were mainly responsible for music education through a master-pupil apprenticeship system. Distinct from the hereditary professionals were numerous amateurs, and some amateurs turned professional. State-owned Radio Kabul, run by the Ministry of Information and Culture, had played a central role in supporting music from its inception

in the 1940s and employed many fine musicians, performing Afghan classical, popular, and regional traditional music. From the 1950s to the 1970s, during the heyday of radio broadcasting, music was relatively unconstrained and flourished. State-run Radio Afghanistan, which succeeded Radio Kabul, broadcast a restricted range of texts: love songs, especially songs of unrequited love, and classical poetry, mostly in Dari (Afghan Persian), some in Pashto, often of a Sufi mystical nature. Song texts were monitored for poetic quality and content. Women were free to sing over the radio and in the theatres. Musicians acknowledged that their profession was subject to religious constraint in the past, but “who thinks about such things now” as one musician put it. One should avoid playing music during the *azan*, the call to prayer, and no music should be played for 40 days after a death in the family or amongst close neighbours. On the other hand, Ramadan may have been a month of fasting austerity, but it was also a time for nightly public concerts in cities like Kabul and Herat.

In 1978, there was a Marxist coup by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, the PDPA, followed by the Soviet invasion a year later to support the already failing communist government. The succession of four communist governments supported music, which was regarded as integral to the type of secular society they

aspired to establish. The new agenda envisaged a tolerant society with respect to women's rights, especially with regard to education and freedom of movement, freedom of interaction of young people, lots of music, and, controversially, the legalization of alcohol. This was a state of affairs very like those that prevailed in the Muslim societies of the USSR.

The communists came to power shortly after the opening of the television station in Kabul, when Radio Afghanistan became transformed into Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA). In due course local RTA stations were established in some provincial cities, such as Herat. Broadcasting remained under the control of the Ministry for Information and Culture, as had been the case with radio from its inception in the 1940s. Naturally, the Ministry now exercised tighter control over what was broadcast. Television was a state-of-the-art medium that introduced Afghans to a new kind of modernity and had an important role in broadcasting musical performances and promoting new artists.

Radio and television artists who complied with the new regime were treated well; they had good salaries, received medical care, and in some cases were allocated modern apartments and even motor cars. Many were ready to sing in praise of the new regime; others were not and felt it expedient to leave the country. They joined the exodus away from war and insecurity as Afghans crossed the borders into neighbouring countries, mainly Pakistan and Iran. The *jihad*, the holy war, got under way.

If music was encouraged by the PDPA in Afghanistan, across the border with Pakistan things were very different. Visiting Peshawar in 1985 for the purpose of making a film about musicians in exile I soon discovered that political ideology and music were strongly interconnected, and that there were unforeseen problems with my film project. The refugee camps were run by the seven Islamist *mujahideen* parties and they imposed a rigidly orthodox regime. Men had to grow their beards and were not permitted to wear western clothes. Music was forbidden in the camps by the mullahs and by party officials. The camps were maintained in a perpetual state of mourning, justified by the constant influx of new arrivals who had lost relatives in the fighting. Refugees were allowed to own radios so that they could listen to news programmes but they were not permitted to listen to music (though no doubt some did, quietly). Refugee musicians who were forced by circumstance to live in the camps hid their identities. On the other hand, there were active Afghan musicians living in the city of Peshawar,

where the *mujahideen* parties were not in control. Most of these musicians were Pashto speakers from Jalalabad, in southeast Afghanistan.

I had assumed there would be lots of songs about the war, but although Peshawar had a thriving cassette industry, cassettes in the bazaar were mostly of love songs; cassettes about the war were not easy to find. One of the few I could find had imitations of gunfire played on the *tabla* drums. Singers like Shah Wali Khan made their living performing for Pashto speaking Pakistani patrons, at wedding parties, 'Eid celebrations, and more intimate private parties. Songs about the war were not suitable for these occasions; the patrons wanted to hear modern love songs and spiritual songs from the great poets of the past.

The Soviet Union withdrew its forces in 1989. The *mujahideen* gradually extended their control and captured Kabul in 1992. Anticipating the worst, given the known anti-music policies of the *mujahideen*, some of the musicians who had remained in the capital during the communist era began to leave for Pakistan, sensing the difficulties they would face under a *mujahideen* coalition.

With the arrival of the *mujahideen* the musicians in Kabul, especially those connected with RTA, soon felt the brunt of the anti-music policies of the new government. Singers who had sung in support of the regime were particularly vulnerable to punishment. It was reported that musicians at RTA were abused and mistreated. Some had their heads shaved to shame them, some that were dressed in western suits and ties were stripped to their underwear in public, for the era of the mandatory beard and the compulsory wearing of traditional long shirt and baggy trousers had started. Apartments and motorcars that had been given to top musicians by the communist governments were confiscated.

All that was bad enough. Although there was some clandestine music making at private gatherings, work was becoming hard to find. Before long there were outbreaks of fighting between the various *mujahideen* parties. This was when much of Kabul was destroyed. The musicians' quarter was repeatedly hit by SCUD missiles in these battles. Many of Kabul's musicians now left with their families, some for Mazar-e Sharif in the north, some for Peshawar, some for Quetta, some to other destinations.

The situation of music in Herat in the time of the Coalition was rather different to that in Kabul. The city, which I visited in 1994, was at peace but in a condition of deep austerity under the rule of *mujahideen* commander Ismail Khan. The economy was recovering with the return of wealthy businessmen who had been in exile in

Iran. An Office for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice had been established to monitor and control public behaviour. The cinema and the theatre were closed, although the actors from the theatre were still employed by the Ministry of Information and Culture, and gave occasional performances on Herat TV. There was heavy control over music, but a certain amount of musical activity was allowed. Professional musicians had to apply for a licence, which stated that they could perform only songs in praise of the *mujahideen* and songs with texts drawn from the mystical Sufi poetry of the region. This cut out a large amount of other music, such as love songs and music for dancing. The licences also stipulated that musicians must play without amplification.

Male musicians could play at private parties indoors, but Herat's women professional musicians were forbidden to perform, and several were briefly imprisoned for having transgressed this ordinance. Technically, male musicians were permitted to perform at wedding parties, but experience had shown that often in such cases the religious police arrived to break up the party. They would confiscate the instruments, which were usually returned to the musicians some days later when a fine or bribe had been paid.

There was very little music on local radio or television. If a song was broadcast on television one did not see the performers on screen, but a vase of flowers was shown instead, a practice adopted from Iran. Names of performers were not announced on radio or television. The audiocassette business continued, with a number of shops in the bazaars selling music cassettes and videos, some recorded by Herati musicians. Professional musicians could hardly make a living from music. They depended on the generosity of their long-standing patrons, often from the wealthy business class, who would engage them to play at private house parties, or simply give them financial aid.

### 3. MUSIC UNDER THE TALIBAN

I'll now analyse the five years during which the Taliban were in control of Kabul and most of Afghanistan (1996–2001). The Taliban imposed an extreme form of music censorship, including banning the making, owning and playing of all types of musical instrument other than, perhaps, the frame drum. In Afghan culture the concept of 'music' is closely connected with musical instruments and the sounds they make. Unaccompanied singing does not, according to this definition, constitute music, a convenient way of classifying sound that allowed the Taliban

themselves to enjoy their own rather musical renditions of Taliban songs.

It was at this point that most of the professional musicians remaining in Afghanistan left, partly because it was now impossible to make any sort of a living from music, and partly because it was dangerous to remain. Anthropologist Andrew Skuse, working on his PhD during this period states:

The imposition of many restrictions stemmed from the Taliban's interpretation of urban and secular society as essentially corrupt, Godless and immoral. ... Thus, in many newly 'liberated' urban areas, Kabul included, the perceived anti-Islamic influences brought by indigenous modernizers and foreign occupants, such as western styles of clothing and hair styles, television, music and the emancipation of women, represented focal points for the activities of the Taliban's religious police force... (Skuse 2002: 273-4).

Under the Taliban's interpretation of Muslim *Shari'at* law, music was perceived as a distraction from the remembrance and worship of God, the logic behind this injunction being that it arouses the passions, lust and causes deviation from piety, modesty and honour (Skuse, 2002:273). The Taliban liked to invoke the following *hadith*: 'Those who listen to music and songs in this world, will on the Day of Judgment have molten lead poured in their ears.' This controversial *hadith* is regarded as false by many Islamic scholars.

The Taliban published pronouncements regarding the punishments for those who listen to music, such as (the English is theirs):

2. To prevent music... In shops, hotels, vehicles and rickshaws cassettes and music are prohibited... If any music cassette found in a shop, the shopkeeper should be imprisoned and the shop locked. If five people guarantee [,] the shop should be opened [,] the criminal released later. If cassette found in the vehicle, the vehicle and the driver will be imprisoned. If five people guarantee [,] the vehicle will be released and the criminal released later. (...) 12. To prevent music and dances in wedding parties. In the case of violation the head of the family will be arrested and punished (Rashid 2000:218–190).

The Taliban had their own 'songs without music', i.e. songs without instrumental accompaniment. It is clear that the Taliban had their own musical aesthetic, they admired the good singing voice, which is why they wanted the few well-known singers who had remained in Afghanistan to sing on radio. They liked to use recording studio effects, like delay, reverb and even pitch correction. My analysis suggests that many of these so-called *taranas* are closely related to Pashtun folk songs in terms of musical mode and

melody. This suggests that it was not so much a matter of banning music, but a competition between different kinds of music, one that uses musical instruments and one that does not.

#### 4. MUSIC, HUMAN RIGHTS AND CENSORSHIP

In the year 2000, the Danish Human Rights Organisation FREEMUSE invited me to write a report about the censorship of music in Afghanistan. The report was published in 2001 (Baily 2001), a few months before the *al-Qaida* attacks on New York and Washington. The book is accompanied by a CD with some recordings of Afghan music, including two Taliban *taranas*. It is free to download from the Freemuse website.

Heavy censorship of music continued after the defeat of the Taliban government by the Northern Alliance and ISAF forces in 2001. For a while there was a complete ban on women singing on state-run radio and television, or on the stage or concert platform. Women could announce, read the news, recite poetry and act in plays, but they could not sing and they certainly could not dance. This ban was the subject of intense argument within the radio and television organization, under the control of the Ministry of Information and Culture. The explanation offered for the ban was that to do otherwise would give the government's fundamentalist enemies an easy excuse to stir up trouble. In the case of television, further reasons given were that there were no competent women singers left in Kabul, and that the tapes in the video archive (dating from the communist period) showed women wearing clothes that would now be considered too revealing. This last excuse obviously did not apply to women singing on radio. Another reason – that it would place the women in danger of attack – could not be accepted either, since most of the music broadcast was from the RTA archive. The danger of attack was also offered to explain why women were not allowed to sing at a live-broadcast concert in Kabul on 15 December 2002 to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the BBC World Service.

If there was some censorship of music in Kabul, protected and patrolled by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), outside the capital much tighter restrictions were imposed by local fundamentalist commanders. The lengthy Human Rights Watch report, chillingly entitled "Killing You is a Very Easy Thing For Us": Human Rights Abuses in Southeast Afghanistan', published in July 2003, catalogued a string of abuses, including attacks on musicians in areas close to Kabul. Paghman, located in the foothills of

the Hindu Kush and once a royal resort, had a particularly poor record under the governorship of Zabit Musa, a prominent member of the powerful *Ittehad-e Islami* party led by Abdur Rasul Sayyaf.

A resident of Paghman described a visit by Zabit Musa and his gunmen to the local bazaar:

I was there – I saw the whole thing. It was morning ... He had three or four soldiers with him. When he got to the bazaar, he went towards some shopkeepers who were listening to tape recorders, to music, and he grabbed them and pulled them out of their shops. He yelled at them: "Why do you listen to this music and with the volume so high?" A shopkeeper said, "Well, it is not the time of the Taliban. It is our right to listen to music!" But the governor got angry and he said, "Well, the Taliban is not here, but Islam is here. Shariat [Islamic law] is here. We have fought for Islam – this fight was for Islam. We are mujahid. We are Islam. We did jihad to uphold the flags of Islam." And then he took them out of their shops and started beating them with his own hands. He beat up two people himself, along with his troops, slapping them, kicking them. And the others were beaten just by the soldiers. Then they closed the shops, locked them. Many people were there. It was not the first time these sorts of things had happened (Human Rights Watch 2003: 67–8).

Another example recounted by Human Rights Watch came from a wedding in Lachikhel, a village in Paghman district, when soldiers arrived at midnight to break up a wedding party: "They beat up the musicians, who had come from Kabul. They made them lie down, and put their noses on the ground, and swear that they would not come back to Paghman to play music. Then they destroyed their instruments." (Human Rights Watch, 2003:68). Not surprisingly, musicians from Kabul became very careful about where they would go to play and for whom; they had to feel adequately protected. Such precise information as that provided by Human Rights Watch for southeast Afghanistan was not available for other parts of the country, but it is clear that the situation varied greatly from place to place.

#### 5. TIMES OF CHANGE

By 2004 things were changing. On 12 January 2004, a few days after the ratification of the new constitution for Afghanistan by a *Loya Jirga* (National Assembly), RTA broadcast old video footage of female singers Parasto and Salma (Reuters, 13 January 2004). Explaining the reasons for this dramatic break with the recent past, the Minister for Information and Culture, Sayed Makdoom Raheen, told Reuters, 'We are endeavouring to perform our artistic works regardless of the issue of sex.' However, the action

provoked an immediate backlash from the Supreme Court. On the same day Deputy Chief Justice Fazl Ahmad Manawi told Reuters that the Supreme Court was 'opposed to women singing and dancing as a whole' and added 'This is totally against the decisions of the Supreme Court and it has to be stopped' (*Saudi Gazette*, 16 January 2004). On 23 January, the press agency AFP reported that Ismail Khan, the Governor of Herat, supported the Supreme Court's judgement and had banned the sale of audio and videotapes featuring women singers in Herat. Despite these statements, however, the radio and television persisted with the new policy.

Some of the stars of Afghan music who had settled in the West returned to give concerts. In 2004 Farhad Darya worked with local musicians in several parts of the country, leading to the very popular CD and DVD *Salaam Afghanistan*. His concert in Kabul was held in the football stadium to an unprecedented crowd estimated at 45,000. Farhad Darya later described the event:

It was like a national [independence] day in Kabul. In the stadium I felt like a cloud flying over the sky of the crowd. What was amazing was the presence of women. Men and women were sitting next to each other for a concert right where they had seen their beloved ones executed. Many of them were dancing and crying. It looked like they had forgotten the misery and pain of the past decades. Even the 700 armed security guys started to dance to the music and enjoy the new wave of hope. I wanted a fresh start in Afghanistan with music and we did it! (Broughton 2008: 47).

In the post-Taliban era, a number of independent radio and television stations were established, usually financed by outside agencies, such as Voice of America. The most significant of these was *Tolo TV* (meaning "Sunrise TV"), a commercial television station operated by the MOBY group, an Afghan-Australian owned company operating from Dubai, launched in 2004. By 2007 it had extended its coverage from Kabul to many cities in Afghanistan via satellite. From the outset it had a strong emphasis on programmes for young people and quickly established itself as a controversial institution, challenging the values of *mujahideen* ideology in Afghanistan.

Probably *Tolo TV*'s most successful show was *Setâra-ye Afghan* (*Afghan Star*), a singing competition based on the *Pop Idol* format. The first time the competition took place was in 2005, with auditions, then a series of eliminatory rounds with live accompaniment, with the audience voting by text messages from their mobile telephones. The

third season (2007) was the subject of the award-winning documentary film *Afghan Star* and proved to be particularly controversial. In one of the earlier eliminatory rounds the woman singer Setara from Herat performed rather too freely for Afghan public opinion. At the start of her final song she very obviously danced on stage. Furthermore, while her head was covered with a large headscarf at the beginning of this song, it slowly fell back as she sang, coming to rest on her shoulders, leaving her face and hair completely exposed to view.

Men interviewed in the bazaars of Herat described Setara as a 'loose woman' who had brought shame on the Herati people and deserved to be killed. She returned to Herat, to the consternation of her family, who feared for her life. It is claimed that eleven million Afghans, a third of the population, watched the final round of *Afghan Star*.

Nevertheless, despite incidents of this kind, music has gradually returned to Afghan civil society. This arises in part from the many independent radio and television stations that have been established after 2001. One should also mention the very important music schools that have been set up, such as the Music Department of Kabul University, the music schools in Kabul and Herat set up by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, and the remarkable co-educational vocational music school, The Afghanistan National Institute for Music (ANIM) established by Dr Ahmad Sarmast. Pupils from ANIM have given a number of concerts outside Afghanistan, most recently at the Davos Economic Forum, followed by concert tours in Switzerland and Germany.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

So what can we learn from the migrations of musicians during these decades of political struggle? Every migrating musician has had an individual experience and it is hard to generalise but it is clear that there is a close link between music and politics. Music is a sensitive indicator of broader socio-political processes; music making in Afghanistan varied widely in frequency and intensity according to the dominant ideology of the time, fluctuations that often involved the movements of musicians from one place to another.

Underlying these movements of musicians is a deeper conflict between ideologies of traditionalism and modernization in Afghanistan that started at the beginning of the twentieth century. That conflict came to a head in 1929, when the progressive and modernizing King Amanullah was deposed by a rebellion that had strong traditionalist Islamist elements that rejected Amanullah's

reforms, especially regarding the education of girls and the unveiling of women. The rebellion was suppressed and the monarchy restored; modernization proceeded at a more cautious pace, culminating in an unsuccessful attempt at parliamentary democracy under Zahir Shah in the 1960s. The Marxist coup of 1978 and the Soviet invasion of 1979 precipitated the traditionalist backlash, the rise of the *mujahideen*, 14 years of holy war, followed by the *mujahideen* Coalition, and then the Taliban, and finally the uneasy parliamentary democracy of today. At every stage in these processes musicians voted with their feet in ways that reflected the politics of the day.

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