

Music and refugee lives: Afghans in eastern Iran and California

by John Baily

Refugee communities are often deprived of their customary means of musical expression, either because they have become separated from their musicians or from their traditional musical instruments, or due to a lack of opportunity in the host country.

This matters because of the crucial role that music-making plays in human life, such as the way it brings people together in special relationships, its capacity for emotional expression, its importance in enculturation and its role in the articulation of identity. More broadly, music not only reflects wider social and cultural processes but can also provide a means for creating, interacting with and controlling them. Music is worth investigating for its beneficial potential in dealing with life as a refugee.¹

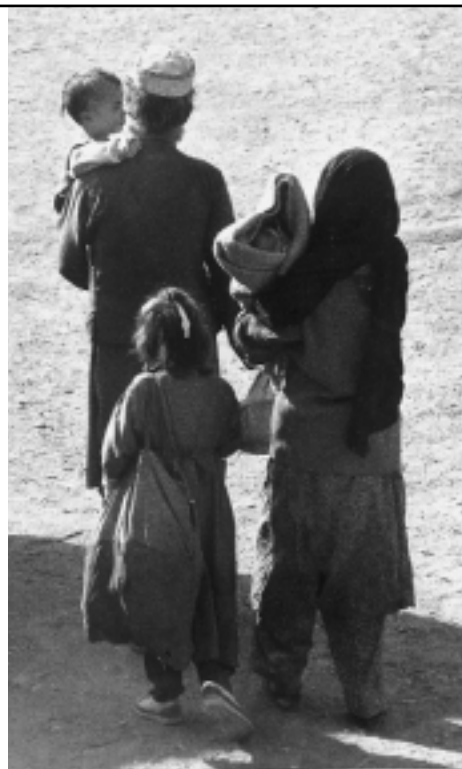
Music-making in the Afghan transnational community illustrates the principle very well. This article compares two refugee communities: in Mashad (eastern Iran) and Fremont (California). The comparison allows one to include a number of variables such as: geographical distance between countries of origin and refuge; language, religion and other kinds of cultural similarity; and prospects for the future in terms of security, employment and eventual integration. These factors are likely to have relevance for many refugee communities. In the case of Afghanistan there is an additional consideration – the banning of music by the Taliban.² This gives musical activity in the Afghan diaspora added importance, for there are no accessible archives, entertainment industry or body of expert knowledge (as used to exist at Radio Afghanistan). Afghanistan's considerable musical heritage is

now in the hands of expatriate Afghans.³

Mashad

Historical and cultural links between eastern Iran and western Afghanistan, especially between the cities of Herat and Mashad, are very close. The Afghan refugee population in Iran is predominantly Shia and Persian speaking. Geographical proximity has allowed Afghans to move back and forth over the last 20 years between the two adjacent areas. Most refugees live in rented private accommodation, not in refugee camps. However, their legal status is precarious and they are subject to periodic waves of arrests and forced repatriations. This gives the refugees a chronic feeling of instability and insecurity, with resulting depression and low morale.

Afghan professional musicians have certain advantages over many other refugees in that they have a skill to offer. In Pakistan in the 1980s, for example, when music was banned in the refugee camps run by mullahs, Afghan musicians operated from the musicians quarter of Peshawar and made a reasonable living playing for Pakistani patrons.⁴ Afghan urban music is closely related stylistically to the Pashtun music of NWFP (North-West Frontier Province) and most of the musicians from Afghanistan were Pashtun speakers from the south-east of



UNHCR/26263/11. 1996/R. LeMayne

the country, especially Jalalabad. They brought to NWFP a rather 'sophisticated' version of Pashtun music, influenced by classically trained musicians in Kabul, itself an outpost of North Indian classical music. Between 1979 and 1986 music was more or less banned in Iran but things had changed by the late 1990s. In 1998 many of the professional musicians who had lived in Herat in the 1970s were located in Mashad. A few had been there for 20 years; others had recently arrived to evade the Taliban and to be able to continue to make a living from music.

The Afghan musicians in Mashad were busy in their community. As working musicians they played mainly for Afghan weddings, live music for the men's gathering being an essential ingredient for a 'proper' wedding. Not only does good music confer prestige: a long concert of music is important for structuring the

wedding party as an event, and certain ritual songs should also be performed. Thus music is an important part of that most normative of human activities: getting married according to custom.

In 1998 the Afghan musicians and actors in Mashad were well organised. With the help of Nasruddin Saljuqi and other educated Afghans, they had formed an association called Afghan Refugee Artists in Iran - Mashad. Most of these musicians were members of three family bands, and the association also included a number of actors and playwrights formerly connected with the Herat Theatre. The musicians and actors were at the heart of Herati intellectual and artistic life in Mashad. The association had organised a number of public concerts that attracted an Iranian as well as an Afghan audience, and in December 1998 they put on a big comedy show in a cinema in Mashad that ran for eight nights. The song texts being in Dari rather than Pashto made them readily accessible to Persian speakers in Iran.

Stylistically, the music was virtually identical to how it had been in Herat. This is the Afghan urban style, which originated in Kabul and reached other cities largely by radio broadcasts. The typical group consisted of a singer with a small Indian hand-pumped harmonium, tabla drums, and rubab and dutar lutes. Although the style was unchanged, there was some change of repertoire, with fewer of the light romantic popular songs of the past



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Rahim Khushnawaz,
Mashad

and more emphasis on serious Persian *ghazals*, especially those on religious themes, and a new interest in *qawwali*, the Sufi music from India and Pakistan. And there were new songs about Afghanistan that articulated the Afghan refugees' own aspirations.

Talking with people from UNHCR and ICRI in Tehran, it was apparent that this musical activity could be utilised in several ways. There were possibilities for community work in areas with many refugees, including camps near the border. An attempt was made to establish a music school. And it was also realised this was a way of addressing Iranians, presenting a more positive image of the Afghan refugee as someone with something to offer in the way of artistic activity.

The presence of musicians active in the refugee community means that for Afghans there is a 'life of music' which can be readily understood in terms of the following:

...the primary effect of music is to give the listener a feeling of security, for it symbolizes the place where he was born, his earliest childhood satisfactions, his religious experience, his pleasure in community doings, his courtship and his work - any or all of these personality-shaping experiences.⁵

Music here can be seen as having a generalised therapeutic role, helping to maintain a sense of normality and stability. Outside support organisations like UNHCR need to recognise the important role musicians play in normalisation and should provide support for their activities. In addition, given the special circumstances within Afghanistan, such agencies need to see musicians as custodians of an important cultural heritage, and as people needing special protection from forced repatriation and retribution by the Taleban.

Fremont

Unlike Mashad which is very close to Afghanistan, Fremont is home to one of the most distant Afghan refugee communities. In the San Francisco Bay area there are an estimated 60,000 Afghans, with about 15,000 in Fremont. They are predominantly educated people from the cities of Kabul, Kandahar and Jalalabad, and many of those who came as refugees had formerly worked for Western diplomatic, educational, cultural or aid agencies before the Communist coup of 1978.

Afghans have found it hard to adapt to life in the USA.

Fremont stands in contrast to Mashad on all the points listed above: it is geographically distant, with a different language, religion, culture, customs and laws. The community does not live in fear of forcible repatriation; to the authorities the Afghans are perhaps just another group of immigrants to be eventually integrated into mainstream American society. They appear to be relatively successful economically; there are many Afghan-owned businesses, and the community recently built itself a large mosque.

However, Afghans have found it hard to adapt to life in the USA. There is a good deal of cultural misunderstanding, and Afghans find themselves dealing with officious social service agencies which promote a fear of transgressing unheard-of US laws, especially those regarding the welfare of children. There are inter-generational differences, with young Afghans becoming very Americanized, and problems with lack of respect for the older generation. There is an obsession with what is going on in Afghanistan and with trying to understand what went wrong when the Mujahideen coalition failed to secure peace after the fall of the Communists. The local Afghan radio station, Voice of Afghanistan Radio 24 Hours, has constant phone-ins from listeners who debate the latest news. International Immigrant Services in Fremont plays an important role in monitoring the state of the community and helping individuals. A medical survey⁶ revealed a community

with a lot of stress, mental problems, depression and a high death rate.

Among the refugees who went to the USA were a number of musicians, mostly singers, some of whom had been big stars in Afghanistan, such as Khyal, Zaland, Ferida Mahwash, Shah Wali Wali, Haidar Salim and his sister Salma. Typically, such singers were from an educated middle or even upper class urban background (in contrast to the musicians in Mashad, who were mainly from poorly educated hereditary musician families), and usually had had a strong link with Radio Afghanistan. In addition, in the USA there is a younger generation of musicians of amateur background, usually brought up in America and much influenced by American culture.

As in Mashad, the main venue for music-making is the wedding, a modernised version, like the weddings in Kabul

pre-1978, with women and men mixed together, and everyone wearing Western dress. There are also concerts in expensive function rooms like those of the Radisson Hotel in Fremont. Afghan bands in Fremont show a considerable degree of acculturation. Traditional Afghan instruments like rubab, dutar and tanbur are hard to find in the USA. The central performer remains the (solo) singer but now instruments like keyboards with their built-in drum machines, and electric pianos, are used. These can be regarded as modernized extensions of the Indian harmonium. Such bands continue to use tabla drums. The musical style has also undergone some degree of westernization, with the introduction of simple harmonic principles borrowed from Western music.

In recent years there has also developed the practice of bringing celebrated refugee musicians over from Pakistan to make protracted concert tours in the US. These tend to be master musicians from the old musicians quarter in Kabul, such as Amir Mohammad, Rahim Bakhsh and Haji Hamahang. Promoting concerts like this was an Afghan business activity in the 1970s, especially in the month of Ramadan, with concerts every night in hotels, cafes and teahouses in cities like Herat.

Music brings unity to the people

The positive benefits of such concerts for the local community of Fremont are recognised by Afghan community leaders, such as Sher Ahmad, Director of International Immigrant Services. He works not only with Afghans but with many different nationalities, and so has an interesting transcultural perspective. He sees music as an integrating force, bringing members of the community together and serving to maintain Afghan culture and identity. As he told me:

“Music brings unity to the people, old and young together, and helps us not to lose our identity. We Afghans have some differences but the concerts are the only times when we forget about everything. All people from different parts, different sects, we come and buy our tickets and go to the concerts”.

In his view, some immigrant communities that have invested in maintaining their cultures have benefitted greatly; the Afghans have not managed to do this very well,

to which he attributes some of their health problems. He believes that music could provide a therapeutic role for individuals and tells the following anecdote to make the point. Two years earlier the singers Naghma and Mangal were over from Pakistan. One night they were invited to Sher Ahmad's home. Among the guests was the distinguished elderly Afghan historian and journalist Gol Ahmad Karzai, a great music lover. After dinner the musicians asked to play for him, and they performed till two in the morning. Karzai was so weak when he arrived that he had to be supported by two people; when he left he was walking on his own feet. Anyone familiar with the use of music therapy in palliative care in the West will find this a familiar example of the restorative power of music.

In recognition of the important role of music, International Immigrant Services has done what it can to establish a traditional Afghan music course to teach tabla and harmonium. They have secured the services of Ustad Asif Mahmood, a master musician from Kabul, normally resident in London. He stays in Fremont for extended periods to run Afghan music classes. Sher Ahmad's view is that great musicians are dying every day and if new ones are not trained, Afghan music will disappear.

If only a few learn how to do it now, they can pass it on to others.

There may well be an element of wishful thinking here. Communities like Fremont which are far from Afghanistan need an expert assessment of their musical needs and how these are best served. The attempted preservation of 'traditional music' is unlikely to be effective in the long run. Musicians in Fremont need support and recognition for establishing a music that is both modernized and westernized, yet which remains distinctly Afghan. This should help them in forging a new Afghan-American identity.

Conclusions

Afghan music in Mashad and Fremont shows two rather different roles for music in refugee life. Spatially and culturally proximate, Iran provides a temporary safe haven for a refugee population that will in all likelihood return to Afghanistan, if albeit on a new basis of periodic sojourning to maximise benefits. Music here seems to be all about normalization, reassurance, ticking over, keeping things going through difficult times for a brighter future at home. In the USA, Afghan refugees have perhaps woken up to the probability that they are not going home and that they have got to make the most of what they have in America. Music provides one means through which to create a new identity as permanent citizens, as well as providing therapeutic experiences at individual and community levels.

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1 Reyes Adelaida *Songs of the Caged and Songs of the Free*, 1999, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

2 By music the Taleban mean the sounds of musical instruments, either alone or accompanying the human voice. Unaccompanied song is not classified as 'music'. The Taleban condone and broadcast on Radio Shariat (formerly Radio Afghanistan) recitation of The Holy Koran and various kinds of religious singing, including songs in Pashtu with religious texts and what can be identified as folksong-like melodies.

3 This musical heritage is a complex matter, bringing together elements of musical practice from several regional ethnic groups, with a strong input of North Indian classical music and music theory.

4 As shown in the film *Amir: An Afghan refugee musician's life in Peshawar, Pakistan* (Baily J, 1985, London: Royal Anthropological Institute).

5 Lomax A 'Folk song style', *American Anthropologist*, 1959, 61 (6):927-954.

6 Lipson, J G and Omidian P *A Afghan Community Health Assessment San Francisco Bay Area*, 1993, California: Dept of Health Services.

Music of the East Timorese in Lisbon

East Timorese refugees in Lisbon have for 25 years maintained their distinct music culture (itself a mixture of indigenous and western elements imported by Portuguese colonisation) as a way of articulating their social and cultural identities, expressing their solidarity with the struggle in East Timor, and addressing the Portuguese host community about the problems confronting the ex-colony. In the recent crisis, Goldsmiths graduate student Maria Manuel Silva reports a dramatic increase in musical activity in Lisbon, with several more musical ensembles established and an increase in the number of performances. These groups perform with traditional musical instruments and dance costumes, using both song texts in Tetun and poetry in Portuguese. These groups make great efforts to improve the standard of performance of the traditional repertoire, which they see as a powerful way to display their special identity as a people and a nation.

Music of Iraqi Jews in Israel

Although not forced migrants in the conventional sense, the Jewish population of Baghdad, and Iraq in general, suffered many of the experiences of refugees after their migration to Israel in 1950-51, following pogroms in Baghdad and Basra (1941) and increasing anti-Jewish measures in Iraq.

Goldsmiths graduate Dr Sara Manasseh reports a very high level of musical activity among the older generation in this community, with frequent concerts and trips to the Red Sea and other resorts, where they enjoy the Arab music of 50 years ago. The Iraqi community is fortunate in that many of the outstanding traditional musicians in Baghdad were Jewish, constituting an important source of musical expertise which the community can draw upon today. This musical activity is inward directed, helping to maintain a distinct Iraqi Jewish cultural heritage, and arguably providing continued therapy for the traumas of the past.