

The Role of Women and Children's Amateur Music-Making in Afghanistan and the Afghan Diaspora: Considering Continuity and Change

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The goal of this conference is to “recognise the vitality and diversity of the musical traditions in the world of Islam today”. I am grateful that we have several papers devoted to the roles of women and children as they are too often sidelined or forgotten.

In traditional Islamic societies like Afghanistan, women's domestic music is especially inaccessible and hidden, due to the constraints of “purdah”. But their music is important as a basic source of musical enculturation. Experts on children's musical development (such as Graham Welch) agree that children learn the first elements of rhythm and melody in their mother's womb and in early infancy; their experience of their mother's singing and music-making is crucially formative.

Afghan traditional female amateur music is based on singing, hand-clapping, dancing and the use of two instruments. Most important is the *daireh*, a frame drum often fitted with jingles, rings or bells. It is an essential instrument for marriage rituals. The second instrument is used only in northern Afghanistan: a mouth harp (or “jew's harp”) called *chang*. It was normally a solo instrument played by women and children, and was treated rather like a toy.

Before the tragic decades of war and disruption, amateur female performers were by far the most numerous type of musician. Normally only played by girls and women, the *daireh* was the commonest instrument. Little girls were allowed to spend hours performing together, and music was an important form of self-expression and entertainment.

How has amateur female music making been affected by decades of conflict and drastic social change? Today I will compare what I observed in the peaceful mid-1970s in Herat (western Afghanistan) with the situation today, based on various sources including a short fieldwork trip in 2004. I will discuss the music of women and girls, looking at three topics: marriage celebrations, domestic entertainment, and lullabies.

Background information

Since the 1978 coup d'état, internal conflict created an environment that was hostile to domestic music making. Mujaheddin resistance fighters asserted that music was inappropriate in times of war, when people were mourning the death of martyrs. Lawlessness was rife, and it was often not safe for women's voices or instruments to be heard. There was an atmosphere of suffering and fear, and women say they lost their desire to make music. From the mid-1990s, Taliban rulers enforced strict prohibitions, and they destroyed musical instruments, videos and music cassettes. A whole generation of children grew up without participating much – if at all – in the domestic musical culture their parents had known.

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Mass migrations transformed the fabric of Afghan society and dramatically extended the horizons of women. With the advent of new entertainment technology, videos of family weddings filmed in Europe and America were endlessly copied and circulated, bringing Westernised musical styles into Afghan homes. Also, in the Taliban years, when women were largely confined at home, they avidly watched Hindi films and epic Hollywood blockbusters such as *Titanic* (clandestinely, of course).

Musical tastes in Afghanistan have broadened and changed. With new radio stations and satellite television channels, fast Westernised music is popular in the cities. After the sufferings of women under the Taliban, liberal Afghans and foreign aid workers are eager to promote music projects for girls. In Kabul and Mazar-e Sharif special projects have been set up to teach a few girls to play instruments like the harmonium, tabla, or even the Afghan *rubab* (a prestigious plucked lute). Some are learning Western instruments like the saxophone, guitar and electronic keyboard. These projects are funded by outside humanitarian sources.

Marriage celebrations

As elsewhere in the Islamic world, marriage is a major life event, ritualised with women's singing, dancing and bridal processions. Afghan women had various preliminary parties with music, and the bridegroom's family performed to entertain the bride's family. For weddings, urban families hired professional musicians. But in poorer urban families, and among villagers and nomads, women enjoyed making music themselves.

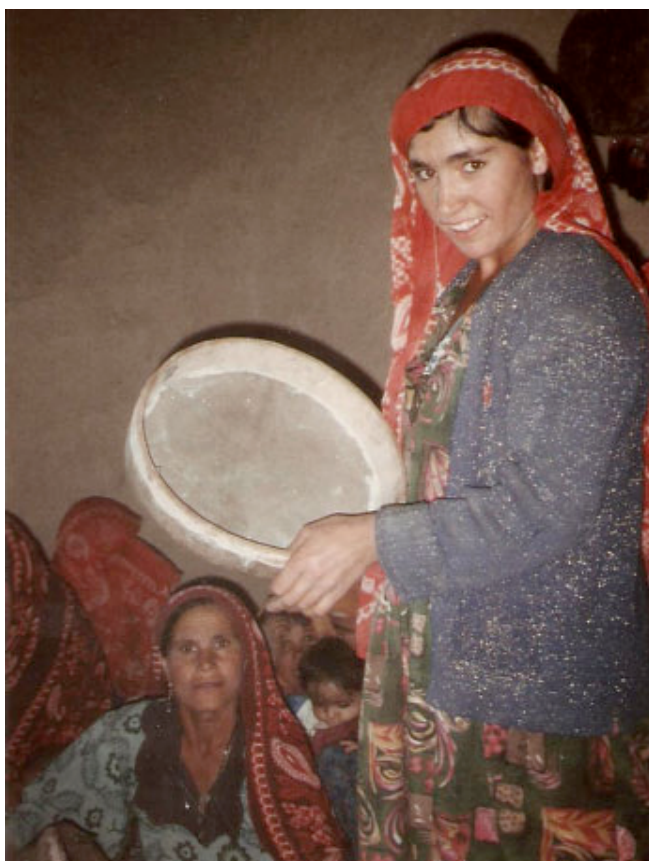


Photo 1: Takhar province, 2003, north-eastern Afghanistan (photo: E. Rubi, with permission). This photograph shows a woman playing a daireh at a wedding celebration in a remote village. The instrument looks to be locally made.

Recorded music has become fashionable in the cities. Julie Billaud, an anthropologist working on women's culture, is currently living in the female residential halls at Kabul University. The students there come from all parts of Afghanistan. They told her that when one of them gets engaged to be married, they hold a party together where they dance to cassettes of Iranian, Afghan and Tajik Westernised pop music. They don't play the *dairah* or sing themselves. She has never seen a *dairah* in this community of 500 girls. But the girls all said that the *dairah* is still essential at village weddings – what they call “traditional weddings” – and it is played “especially in the bridegroom's house”.



Photo 2: Herat in the mid-1970s (photo: V. Doubleday). This shows the women's side of a wedding in Herat city, held in the courtyard of a house. One of the bridegroom's women is dancing to celebrate the happy occasion. Another plays the drum and everyone is clapping in time, adding to the joyful atmosphere.

A key moment occurs when women ritually escort the bride with processional drumming. This is supported by a well known *hadith* testifying to a statement by the Prophet Muhammad: “Publish the wedding and beat the frame drum [Arabic: *ghirbal*]!” For Afghans the sound of the *daireh* advertises the wedding, and they also believe it wards off the evil eye, protecting the bride and groom. Women’s bridal processional drumming is a key ritual activity still practised in cities as well as in the countryside. Even during the years of strict censorship, the Taliban authorities sometimes allowed their own Pashtun village women to play the drum at weddings, accepting it as a part of Afghan tradition. I heard this from the anthropologist Patricia Omidian, who lived with an Afghan Pashtun family during the Taliban years.



Photo 3: Ghazni/Kabul highway 2007. This shows a nomad wedding procession (photographer unknown). This photograph was sent to me as an email New Year card. Upon enquiry I was told the photographer was an Afghan woman, probably a journalist. She saw the wedding from the highway between Ghazni and Kabul, in south-eastern Afghanistan and stopped to talk and take some photographs. The nomad women were escorting the bride. Their three drums look quite modern and new.

But performance standards have inevitably dropped and repertoires have shrunk. In the past, Herati village women knew some quite elaborate processional rhythms. For instance, one was called “*Larz-e del-e madar-e arus*” (“The fluttering of the bride’s mother’s heart”). Girls had a special genre of bridal song expressing their filial love. The role of these songs was to psychologically attune and adapt themselves to the emotional impact of marriage. It is unclear how much of this material has been passed on. Until detailed fieldwork has been undertaken we will not know the extent of cultural loss.

Domestic entertainment

In the past there was a significant overlap between domestic music played at weddings and the kind of entertainment music that was played when guests visited, or when girls felt like singing together. Women and girls drew on their basic repertoire of love songs, a few comic songs, and drumming to support dancing. The only difference was that music at bridal celebrations should be lively and celebratory, whereas on other occasions the mood could become more sombre.



Photo 4: Herat 1974 (photo: V. Doubleday).
A young woman plays the *daireh* as she dances with her children in a music session at home, for fun. They are performing a circle dance called the *atan*. The *daireh* is light and portable, so it is possible for performers to play and dance at the same time.



Photo 5: Hazarajat 1972, Central Afghanistan (photo: T. Sakata, with permission).
A young Hazara woman plays the jew's harp, the *chang*. I unfortunately have no specific information about the current state of this performance tradition. My guess is that it is probably alive, if instruments are still available. It is a small, unobtrusive, and very quiet instrument, ideally suited to solo playing for purely personal pleasure.

In the past, live music was really important in Afghan homes, but this has changed. There are several reasons for this. First, the advent of television and DVDs has had a negative impact, to some extent replacing live music as a form of entertainment. Second, traditionalist Islamist attitudes have hardened, condemning music and disparaging liberal attitudes towards girls' social behaviour. In south and eastern Afghanistan Taliban-style activists burn down girls' schools as a form of protest against foreign interference in their country, and in June 2007 six schoolgirls were shot at their school in Logar Province to intimidate the authorities into shutting down girls' schools (as reported in *The New York Times*). If there is danger of disapproval or violence, women discourage their girls from making music.

I recently heard a story from a British Afghan woman who was at a women's music party at a house in Kabul. They were singing very softly, afraid of being overheard, and when she asked them to sing more loudly, people outside shouted and threw stones at the window, breaking some panes of glass. With population movements, cities have become more densely populated, and homes are more crowded, and in some parts of Afghanistan the atmosphere has become hostile to domestic music-making.

A third factor is a lack of instruments in Afghan homes. This is a legacy of the Taliban regime when women hid or destroyed their drums and did not necessarily replace them. However, a lack of instruments does not necessarily deter women or girls from having a music session: it is quite common for people to use domestic utensils such as trays or washing bowls to make rhythms.



*Photo 6: Herat 1977 (photo: V. Doubleday). Two sisters are making music to entertain some visitors. One girl replicates the Indian tabla drums with an upturned plastic washbasin and bucket. It is interesting to see evidence of girls' interest in playing instruments other than the *daireh*.*

It is clear that Afghan women still love singing. On her interactive BBC radio programme, *Zamzama*, Ameneh Yousufi talks from London to women around Afghanistan. Some of them eagerly sing for her on their mobile phones. They told her they did not have instruments, but would like to have them – especially something like a guitar. No one played the *daireh* to her. It has fallen out of fashion. In the past almost every home had one – or could borrow one – but now drums are rather scarce. In fear of Taliban raids, people hid or destroyed them.

Lullabies

Afghanistan had a strong tradition of women singing lullabies to their babies and children, rocking them in a cradle. For women it was a lovely low-key form of self-expression, improvised almost as a meditation. We know from numerous studies that children have a significant experience of music from the earliest age, and hearing lullabies lays down the foundation of a child's knowledge of rhythms and modes.

A Norwegian sound recordist, Erik Hillestad, recently made a series of recordings of women singing lullabies in various parts of the Middle East for his CD project, *Lullabies from the Axis of Evil*. In Kabul in 2003 he asked a young woman if mothers had sung lullabies to their babies during the Taliban period. She said most of them did, and I imagine this important tradition is still more or less intact. So long as women can find a place where their voices cannot be overheard from the street, they would be safe to sing to their children in this useful and traditional way. The spiritual dimension of lullabies is also important. In essence they call upon God to lull the child, often using a kind of Sufi *dhikr* interspersed between verses. They are spontaneous and interactive, ceasing once the child has fallen asleep.

[I demonstrated lullaby singing, singing some verses. A constant refrain is the Sufi *dhikr* "Allah hu" ("This is God"). Hear my recording, track 5 of *The Light Garden Trilogy* (Metier 2003)]



Photo 7: Kabul 2004 (photo: V.Doubleday). This shows newly made *daireh* drums on sale in the old city of Kabul, in the bird and pottery section of the bazaar. While I was there I talked to a woman who was buying a drum. She said she needed it because their family had a wedding soon. But when I asked her to play, she had very little skill. This is hardly surprising. In the violent early 1990s and then under harsh Taliban repression, Kabul was very tense, and not a place for music-making.

Conclusions

The decades of violence, insecurity and music censorship have had a strongly negative impact on female amateur music-making in Afghanistan. Normal processes of musical transmission were disrupted, and inevitably musical standards have dropped. The ongoing Taliban insurgency is still affecting women's expressive culture in some areas of the country. Quite apart from this, new forms of entertainment are effectively killing off live music making in urban homes. In essence, the key issues affecting female domestic music making are: Islamist repression against music and female rights; the impact of modernity and modern technology; and the legacy of decades of war and disruption.

Influenced by the Afghan diaspora, some urban girls and women want to explore new musical territory, not being content with the restrictions of the past. Some want to learn Western instruments, or traditional Afghan instruments other than the *dairah* and *chang*. It remains to be seen what success they achieve. In my view, more could be done to honour, sustain and support female traditional performance in ways that are safe and not culturally artificial. The benefit of teaching girls to play guitars is ultimately somewhat questionable.



Photo 8: Kabul 2004 (photo: V. Doubleday). This is a music education programme for girls, with male musicians teaching harmonium, tabla, and *rubab*. It's quite revolutionary to see the *rubab* in the hands of a girl; it was very much an instrument for educated urban men, especially professional musicians. The male instructors are using North Indian notation to teach (as used by some educated or professional Afghan musicians). For music education projects male professional musicians come forward as teachers – not women – and their musical expertise obviously affects what may be taught in the class. It is quite controversial for men to teach adolescent girls.

Regardless of new fashions, the *daireh* seems secure as an essential ritual instrument. It is a strong symbol of continuity and tradition. Both men and women accept it as necessary for advertising the wedding and ritually escorting the bride. In this respect, the role of amateur female music-making is unchallenged, but it places limits on what is regarded as acceptable.



Photo 9: Kabul 2004 (photo: V. Doubleday). This shows a scene where female family members are making music for home entertainment. A grandmother leads the session, playing the *daireh* and singing. Her daughter-in-law is singing, but her granddaughters could barely join in: they were only clapping, not singing. They grew up in the Taliban period, and had no chance to learn songs or play the drum in a relaxed atmosphere.

In my 1995 joint publication with John Baily, “Patterns of Musical Development among Children in Afghanistan”, we found that women’s domestic music was the main enculturating experience for children. It was “the basic reservoir of music”. From it children learned local rhythms, dances, and the basic song repertoire. Children learned through exposure at a very young age, and through a process of imitation. We made the basic point: “Children do not learn music in isolation; their development is very much a response to stimulation and encouragement – or censure and discouragement.” Exposure and encouragement are key issues for the next generation of children.

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