

Afghanistan: Musical Construction and Reconstruction

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Bruno Nettl likes to tell the story of how we met when I was about fifteen and he was teaching at Wayne State University. My high school international club, a group of progressive teenagers wanting to understand the world of the late 1950s, invited Bruno to lecture on the fledgling field of ethnomusicology. Since then, we have seen eye to eye, been shoulder to shoulder at conferences, and had heart to hearts. He has always been fascinated by the history of our discipline, offering us his insights for some fifty years now, so I have crafted this talk to act as a kind of variation on his themes through my own pointed and poignant case study: Afghanistan. I hope the implications will resonate for the wider fields of what became of old-school American area studies. My talk will be in three parts: first, I will revisit the fieldwork of 1967-72, which allowed me to **construct** Afghanistan as a music culture. Second, I turn to how I **reconstructed** Afghan music last year to produce the website and a cd set. Finally, I look at some others' recent attempts to rebuild a sense of Afghanistan from their own personal perspectives.

This is auspicious timing for the topic, since it was on this date in 1967 that I first set foot in Afghanistan. Let me say that my "I" should actually be "we," since my new wife Greta came with me and helped enormously with my work. If I say that we felt like explorers arriving on the virgin soil of a terra incognita, it is not accidental. I was trained to think that way about ethnomusicology. In fact, only one person had been there before me to research music—Lorraine Sakata had just finished the fieldwork for her MA. In the pre-email world that even I can hardly imagine, Lorraine was inaccessible, so I had no map of the musical territory. All of us didn't know that we were stepping through a research window, one that had opened just a few years earlier when the Afghan government began granting access to foreign scholars, and which would close in 1978, when the country entered a twenty-six year cycle of invasion, resistance, and civil war that is not over even today. In fact, the news just gets worse after two years of American intervention.

Back in 1967, my job as an ethnomusicologist, more precisely as a PhD. candidate, was to learn the music culture of northern Afghanistan, my chosen zone. I had been taught that there *was* such a thing as a music culture, a cohesive and coherent blend of aesthetics, repertoires, styles, and material culture. Local inhabitants had it as a birthright, and they worked on it collectively as a social project. It was

theirs to know, ours to find out. We would add our modest interpretation, and package it for universal knowledge. In doing so, we would contribute to the collective work of mapping human music and finding the universals that would surely emerge from the patchwork of music cultures. Those generalizations would have little to do with what we call globalization today, our current version of music universals.

Part One: Constructing Afghanistan

Mine is a tale of the time. I had wanted to go to unsullied villages to get real peasant music, but the government preferred us to stay in towns. Slowly, I began to understand that towns were the place to be for public music-making, particularly on market days. Eventually it dawned on me that I was headed towards urban ethnomusicology, a term which did not yet exist—Bruno had not yet defined it in his anthology of 1978. In a light-bulb moment, I saw that the pattern of musical life seemed to map nicely onto each town's location and function in the local, regional, and national economic-administrative matrix. What's interesting from today's vantage point is both how little difference there was between urban and rural music, and how important those distinctions were in defining the musical life. given the very minor role of media in the country. Afghanistan had only one radio station, from the capital, and until shortly before my arrival, it did not blanket the country effectively. There were perhaps four competing stations, from neighboring Iran and the Soviet Union. that drew ethnic-minded listeners who didn't hear their own music coming from Radio Kabul. Indian music diffused in the form of scratchy loudspeakers outside a city's one moviehouse. It served as an advertisement for the current film in town. Cassettes did not yet exist and no one really had record players. Radio music and Indian film songs were not an overwhelming and stifling media presence, just easily identifiable sources of repertoire for flute-playing shepherds or teahouse musicians. Yet the presence of mediated and live music in the space of the bazaar streets made every town seem like a city, compared to the surrounding villages.

This being Afghanistan, there were not many large towns in the North, so my construction of an urban typology had to be based on a very small set of examples. But this was no different than anything else I had to deal with. My book is full of attempted generalizations based on extremely limited data, covered by the scholarly language of the day, with its passive constructions, neutral syntax, and scientific veneer. I sound like an old authority, not a freshly-minted scholar. Nowhere do I break into the reflexivity that we take for granted today

as a necessary part of ethnomusicological writing. Perhaps my current revisits of the work are a way of redressing that balance.

Another revelatory reality was the concept of a music culture of scarcity. I would arrive in a community of 20-50,000 people and be told there were no musicians. While in Afghanistan, I received a letter from my classmate Judith Becker, out in Java. She complained about how hard fieldwork is to do in a place where you can't hear the musicians you've brought to your house because of the constant street music and passing processions. On a sliding scale of musical scarcity and abundance, Java seemed to be at the other end of the continuum. In my towns, the twice-weekly market-day performance, and a single seasonal festival period, represented just about all the visible music-making. Otherwise, you had to be at private celebrations in the intimate interiors of walled mud-brick compounds. I had to coax, cajole, and pay people to play if I wanted to get around the only other method of solicitation, which I was eager to avoid: out of their sense of hospitality and wanting to keep me monitored, the local officials would bring musicians to their offices, sometimes even out of jail cells. While I could not turn down this honor, it violated my sense of ethics deeply.

This brings me to my sense of mission. I took it as my job to survey the landscape, trying for the big picture. No wonder my book on Afghanistan figures in Bruno's pink book only as an example of geographic ethnomusicology. Some years later, John Baily and Veronica Doubleday came to the city of Herat to do long-term fieldwork. Staying in one place and burrowing into the local life, they ended up gaining access to those private parties, I mostly missed. Veronica even joined a band of female performers, an experience she describes in her wonderful book "Three Women of Herat." In terms of my own bimusicality, I picked up modest expertise on the local instruments, but never was able to apprentice myself to an old master long enough to dig deeply into the subtleties of technique. That was on the list of things to do on future visits, as I fully expected to keep coming back to "my" people indefinitely. History proved me wrong.

My urge to map, chart, and typologize marks me as a true orientalist in a strong Saidian sense. The reigning model was called area studies, an interdisciplinary venture aimed at giving the world a western definition of its history and culture. And sometimes that also meant helping the west to dominate the rest. Fortunately, Afghanistan had not been colonized. The people felt more like free agents accepting the copious foreign aid pouring in from the cold war rivals and proxies than like subalterns in a dominated country. Once, I was approached by a US embassy staffer to describe Afghanistan's northern border with the Soviet Union, but I paid no price for

declining. Music was not important enough to figure in strategic planning, and it still isn't today.

The technical side of fieldwork offers such a dated picture of how we functioned that it's worth a mention. I wish we had a well-documented history of how fieldwork equipment has dictated and inflected our findings. When I was asked to propose an event for next year's 50th-anniversary convention of the Society for Ethnomusicology, I suggested we have demonstrations of each phase of the evolution of our gear. In 1967, for example, field video did not exist, and the 3-minute super-8 film I used was silent. Grad students could not afford professional 16-millimeter moviemaking. Since I could not buy film, develop it, or screen it in Afghanistan, I was pretty much shooting blind. So I rationed my footage, making every shot count. The film served mostly as an aide-memoire, a way of remembering details like the playing techniques on lutes and fiddlers that I might forget, rather than a long-duration document of performances. A couple of times I did manage to capture singular and valuable performance moments like the unforgettable and unrepeatable séance of a Central Asian shaman, a truly esoteric event in an Islamic landscape. We'll look at some of the the footage in a moment.

To summarize this section of the talk, let me just say that I arrived in Afghanistan as a green twenty-four-year-old fieldworker on a mission to do my part to map the world's music and to rake in as much data as I could so I could write a credible dissertation. Along the way, a few epiphanies allowed me to see patterns preconditioned by area studies assumptions, particularly the newly-emerging field of urban studies and the concept of ethnic boundaries, a very fruitful concept that was just being invented by anthropologist Frederik Barth. Those ideas made it possible for me to go from mere cartography to a more nuanced sense of how people, particularly musicians, strategize to succeed within desperate economic constraints. The musicians' perilous livelihood depended on negotiating a basically negative view of music as one of those human activities that threaten the social order if overdone. Their careers needed to navigate the complex and shifting microecologies of locale, family, clan, and ethnic group. In short, this is how I constructed the musical life of northern Afghanistan.

Part Two: My Reconstructed Afghanistan

In the mid-1970s, my work took a sharp turn. I felt burnt out by orientalism and the stream of publications I was coaxed into as the first person to write a dissertation on Afghan music. I decided to see what it would be like to study one's own tradition, in my case the

eastern european Jewish heritage I grew up with, including the Yiddish folksong. I became one of the early voyagers into the terrain of self-study, and this odyssey has borne fruit in seven authored and edited books.

Suddenly, in late 2001, Afghanistan resurfaced after drowning for twenty-three years. The culture was gasping for air, and I felt I had to lend a hand by offering my old project as a kind of musical raft. Unintentionally, my work had become classic. Coincidentally, it was now possible to digitize the field tapes, photographs, and film footage. The web seemed the way to go, and coincidentally, Wesleyan hired a first-rate website designer, Anne Loyer. She and I worked out a way of presenting my project, using the book *Music in the Culture of Northern Afghanistan* as a roadmap. At the same time, Harold Hagopian of the fine ethnomusicology label Traditional Crossroads offered me a chance to produce a two-cd set with extensive booklet. I was not alone; Lorraine Sakata has reissued her book on Afghanistan and has released a wonderful Folkways recording of the master musician who taught both her and John Baily, Ustad Mohamad Omar.

I would like to share a few of my thoughts and hesitations about my own project of reconstruction, illustrated by images and sounds. Immediately I worried about the ethical issues. Did I have a right to put up the images and recordings of people I had not talked to in thirty-five years? I knew some of them had been killed or died, but I had no idea what had happened to many of the people who had kindly shared their expressive culture in a society that was never very music-friendly. I couldn't possibly get waivers. My old friend Shukria Raad offered a cautionary tale from Voice of America, where they did a tribute to the presumably departed Baz Gul Badakhshi, a fine musician I had recorded, only to have him write in from the farthest reaches of northeast Afghanistan in indignation: he was 100 years old and still alive. But it seemed he didn't mind the public recognition. Some young Afghans and western scholars told me to go ahead. On their reading, it was important to offer a cultural payback, or simply to make available inaccessible materials for re-evaluation and recuperation by younger generations of Afghans. As you can tell, I accepted that advice, but I added a caveat on the website telling people to let me know if they wanted their image or music deleted. But for the cd, there was no such possibility, and I remain intrigued by the differences between the fluidity and interactivity of websites vs. hard-copy publication on disc or in print, with ramifications for ethnomusicology.

My website does not have a lot of music at present, since the cd set is available and I did not want to compete with it, but when the album has reached its potential, I intend to load the tracks and annotations onto the website rather than anticipate some future

reissue. I reasoned the same way with the book, which only went out of print in 2002, twenty-six years after publication. Once the University of Illinois Press backed out of republishing it with a new preface, I simply decided to put the whole book on the website in pdf format to anchor the presentation. So the site has capsule descriptions of topics, excerpts from the book for more detail, and the entire text as a third possible level of engagement.

For the audio portion, I found myself trying to reconstruct the original lp recordings I made just after returning from the field, though I am not sure why. In 1969, the Society for Ethnomusicology decided to put its logo on a series of field recordings. There were very few scholarly albums out and many fly-by-night ones appearing on the fledgling market for world music. The idea was to point the consumer to the real stuff. The society contracted a small-time ethnic record label producer, George Curtiss, for the job. Fred Lieberman, Kay Shelemay, and a couple of others put out some albums along with me; I actually did three, surveying four ethnic groups. I intended to add a fourth, on Turkmen music, when Curtiss's warehouse was hit by lightning and my master tape went up in smoke, along with all his stock and the whole project: SEM wondered why it was endorsing some members' albums and not others, and gave up the idea.

For my album reconstruction project, I decided I could finally add the Afghan Turkmens as no one had yet put out any music of that ethnic group. Trying to update all my material for the liner notes, I asked my friend Slawomira Zeranska-Kominek, the reigning authority on Turkmen music, what she thought of the Afghan performances. You have to understand that all the Central Asian peoples I worked with in the Afghan North –Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Turkmens—were considered as something like hillbillies by their more urban relatives across the border in today's Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. For the Afghan Turkmens, there were very few highly-regarded musicians, although I found the music beautiful and complex. My friend Slawa wrote back from Warsaw that my examples were weak, and that it would be a shame to distribute some of the pieces, the ones played on the dili-tuiduk, the small, rare reed pipe. This left me in a quandary. I love the instrument and those tunes, badly played as they might be. I ended up including one, but also duly noted Slawa's expert, negative opinion in the album's liner notes. [show instrument, play piece]

Another controversial case was a song I had heedlessly included on the old vinyl, sung by a Pashtoon caravaner in the Helmand Valley, a region where American forces and Afghan troops are currently being killed by the resurgent Taliban. I had originally included the song without the complete lyrics, since I never learned Pashto. For the reissue, I decided to consult a specialist, who had a

hard time deciphering the extremely local dialect. To my surprise, it turned out that the singer was not only being ribald, but explicitly homoerotic in some verses. Should I re-include the song in today's political and cultural climate? On balance, I decided not to, but let me play a little so you can see why I found it so attractive and characteristic. [track 21]

Dealing with the visual material offered other matters to ponder. I could go on and on about the history and cultural politics of how westerners have imaged Afghanistan over a 200-year period, which I might write about someday. On the website, I simply archived all of my 400 slides, with a search device so viewers can look up a geographic locale or topic. The moving pictures offered their own issues. They began as silent super8 film. Twenty years ago, I transferred them to three-quarter inch video with titles for continuity and a sound-track of non-synchronized music, creating a film called "Music in the Afghan North." Would this be the moment to correct the imperfections of the footage caused by my shooting blind in Afghanistan? A quick tour of Final Cut Pro left me bewildered by the thicket of choices, allowing fine-tuning of each and every parameter every second. People kindly pointed out that "correction" of photography through computer programs amounts to a total rebuild of the pixels, a form of reconstruction I was not eager to embrace. Streamed, shrunk, and compressed, people tell me that the little home movies retain both an aura of the original and a power of the imagery that comes across in even the website format. Let's look at a couple of examples of this strange translation from a reality of the late 1960s. [website clips: dancing boy and shaman]

A note on sound quality. I had serious Nagra envy in Afghanistan, but it seems that for recording small numbers of musicians—often only one, usually two or three,—in mud-brick rooms, a mono Uher managed reasonably well. I left the sound as is for the cd master. Like the images, if not expert, the original resonance retains a certain aura of the time and place, according to some reviewers.

Let me just say a word about the music and our methods. When I listened to these pieces, I was struck by how little I had done with them in the dissertation and book. Not surprisingly for that era, I was completely obsessed with pitch analysis. Most of you will never have heard of the weighted scale, a shorthand device for showing the important pitches of a performance, but I had learned how to strip down, essentialize, and tabulate very well for my dissertation. But now when I listen to the multiple variants of one melody that served as a centerpiece of my analysis of the Afghan Uzbek dance tune, I hear the rhythmic complexity and the many quirks and signatures of individual musicians more than the obvious fact that they all seem to be the

same piece. I notice how the women wedding singers use the swish of the jingles against the meter of the drum strokes on their tambourines. I sense just how complex the stroke accentuation can be on the several kinds of long-necked lutes I recorded. I could have dug more deeply, although the musicians were remarkably inarticulate on matters of technique. There was a real shortage of fine-tuned terminology and theorizing of performance practice outside the more general concepts that Lorraine Sakata and I elicited, or the well-articulated system of the urban, more learned musics that John Baily has studied. I would try to grasp the style more thoroughly now, if possible, but the musicians were more endangered than we could imagine, and the moment is irretrievable.

Part Three: Other People's Reconstructions

The last three years have only intensified a strong western drive to construct Afghanistan through documentary imaging. This impulse stirred when the Soviets invaded the country in 1979; brave journalists could make forays into picturesque occupied territory and bring back pictures of indomitable resistance fighters. Strong male figures and warlike songs dominated. Documentation declined with Afghanistan's lapse into civil war after the Soviet withdrawal; the country was no longer of particular interest to the general public. As the Taliban took power, photojournalists and network news in the US and Europe turned to the plight of Afghan women, zeroing in on their harrowing treatment at the hands of moral guardians. The suppression of music fueled countless feature stories as well.

During this era, ethnomusicology languished, except for the fine reporting of John Baily on music censorship and the support he and Veronica Doubleday extended to expatriate musicians, with whom they continue to concertize and record. As early as 1983, Baily turned to ethnographic film as a way of telling the story, creating "Amir: An Afghan Refugee Musician's Life in Pakistan," about the strategies of constructing a musical and personal life in the harsh conditions of exile. The American intervention and invasion at the end of 2001 allowed for a re-entry of the media to Afghanistan on better terms. Baily returned to the scene of devastation in 2002. The opening of his film *A Kabul Music Diary* starts reflexively. We see an ethnomusicologist return to the very center of his field experience, his teacher's home, where he shares with the viewer his personal, and palpable sense of mourning.[clip] After this acknowledgement of loss, Baily can document the revival of musical life in the city and show the early attempts at reconstruction. He makes us fully aware of the

limitations of well-meaning efforts by the west to make a musical intervention [clip of Kabul University] John himself is currently making more effective forays into the rebuild of Afghan musical life, for example funding a master-apprentice system to carry on the old styles and digitizing the surviving Radio Afghanistan tape archives.

Let me round out this talk with a very different, fledgeling set of construction and reconstruction projects that have caught my attention. Earlier this year, I convened a symposium of young Afghan American artists who are producing film and photography work as part of a deeply-felt engagement with their heritage. Brought to the US at an early age, or born here, they have been reshaping their own lives, which had been pretty mainstream until the Taliban period or after 9/11. They have traveled to their unknown homeland as part of a pilgrimage that is also a quest for their own artistic voice as young artists. Their work intrigues me as part of my larger interest in the imaging of Afghanistan. A spate of recent films, both documentary and fictional, carry on this two hundred-year old process of orientalism. One issue that draws my attention is the way music forms part of this overall image-building. For example, a Bollywood film, "Escape from Taliban," has a production number of singing, dancing fighters. On the other hand, an Afghan-directed Indian co-production called "Shekast," though tragically melodramatic, offers a nuanced range of music to suggest of the interior life of exiles. Time does not allow me to stray too far into this territory, which is part of my current large-scale project on the ethnomusicology of film music, globally considered. But I do want to close here with one example of the way the new Afghan-American artists introduce music as part of their personal reconstruction projects. They tend to interpolate music in more personal or vernacular ways than the usual photojournalism approach, which often uses Indian music or generic oriental sounds as backdrop to reportage. They have even used my own recordings, or the same artists I recorded, bringing them very close to my interests. I'll just show one example, a clip from the first film by Sedika Mojadidi, called "Kabul, Kabul," and suggest parallels with my own work, to close the loop of this talk.

Sedika was in her early twenties and had just finished film school when she went to Afghanistan under the Taliban, filming covertly, and her film is doubly reflexive: first, she documents her own logistical and psychological difficulties in doing the work, and second, she interviews Afghan women, including her own mother, who provide both live and recollected insights in the homeland and in diaspora. She uses no music when speaking with Afghan women, perhaps to present them unmediated. It's worth noting that Sedika uses two of the musicians who were my main sources, as well as John Baily and

Veronica Doubleday, so there's a great overlap in sources. I'll just play the end of the film. In the segment you'll see, Sedika uses vernacular music to play over images of violence and her reflection on it, making a sonic bridge across recent experience. Next, she shows herself filming, and muses on her inability to be more than an observer, accompanied by faint background music of current life. Earlier in the film, she tells the viewer how hard it is to shoot from a moving car, encumbered by a veil, the only way she could work. A silent interview with her mother follows; the lack of music is striking. She closes the film with on and off, disjunct landscape shots held together by a folk music sound. [clip]

Let me end by comparing this final sequence of "Kabul Kabul" with the opening of the film I strung together twenty years ago from my short silent super8 footage. To set the stage for my carefully-considered, brief scenes of musicians at work, I instinctively felt the need to start with the Afghan landscape. Everyone who goes to that country has to deal with the disjuncture between the exquisite beauty of the topography and the extreme difficulty of living in it. I Over aerial shots I took flying to fieldwork locations, like Sedika Mojadidi, I felt I needed to add music, even though there was no logical reason either to show the mountains or to accompany them with folk music. I chose a "high lonesome sound" sound, certainly an ethnocentric choice on my part. In fact, I selected one of those Turkmen dili-tuiduk pieces I talked about earlier, not even ethnographically suitable, since the Turkmen live in the steppes, not the mountains. But twenty years ago, as Afghanistan was under Soviet occupation and the Afghans were freedom fighters, the tune has an elegiac sound that somehow seemed to go with the majesty of the Hindu Kush. Like Sedika, I use this bare topographic footage as a framing device, and for both of us, one a foreigner, the other an Afghan to whom Afghanistan is a foreign country, music readily supplies a sentimental construction and reconstruction of our own experience with the place, no matter what our documentary goals might be.

To wrap up, I would like to say that I was very lucky to be a privileged guest of the Afghan people at what now looks like a golden moment in their long and troubled history. They were generous about an outsider's interests, and shared their expressive culture as freely as they could. I hope that by helping just a bit in the recuperation of their musical heritage I can at least modestly pay back their kindness as they go about their own task of reconstruction, which, unfortunately, looks increasingly more dicey as American policies have failed to match Afghan realities. Sharing some thoughts with you about these processes has helped me to think about ways that music shapes and

reshapes our personal paths and what ethnomusicology increasingly has to cope with in a haunted and hazardous world.