

Culture Shock for Afghans

Author: [Danish Karokhel](#)

War and vandalism may have irreparably damaged this ancient nation's heritage.

While the destruction to Afghanistan's economy and infrastructure after two decades of war is clear for anyone to see, many Afghans believe the damage to their national culture is just as serious, and some of it could be irreversible.

Some of the damage is visible, such as the looting of 70 per cent of the

contents of the Kabul Museum during fighting between rival Islamic

mujahedin groups in the early 1990s and the destruction of the huge Bamiyan Buddha statues by the puritanical Taleban regime that took over from them.

But some is less obvious, such as the current popularity of Indian films and

music, particularly among young people, which came in to fill the void left

after Afghan musicians and film-makers were either killed by one or other

party during the 23 years of Soviet occupation and war, or were forced to

flee abroad.

After the fall of the Taleban over a year ago, some two million Afghans,

including many artists and musicians, have returned home. While many of them are working hard to restore and preserve key aspects of their culture, many others, in the words of returning singer Azim Gul Logari "are coming back with new ideas and thoughts".

"Before 1978 (when Soviet-backed communists took power) we had a specific culture, that was natural and purely Afghan," Gulistan Ghaleb, head of television in Nengarhar province in eastern Afghanistan, told IWPR.

"However during the war people forgot this culture. At the moment, we have

forgotten our old culture and our new culture is not yet clear."

Throughout history, Afghanistan's geographic position straddling the trade

routes linking Europe and the Middle East with India and China has ensured

that its culture has been moulded by a huge variety of influences.

During the rule of the Moghul emperors in the 16th and 17th centuries, art and music flourished, strongly influenced by that of Persia. Under King Sher

Ali Khan who ruled Afghanistan in the early 19th century, there was a strong

Indian flavour as musicians and other artists were brought from India, and

many were put up in the royal palace.

Afghan music developed many of its unique characteristics during the reign

of King Ammanullah, in the 1920s, when two prominent Turkish musicians were invited to Afghanistan to teach. Music, and the arts in general, blossomed under King Zaher Shah, in the 1960s and 70s, when several ministries, including defence, education and information, had their own music

departments and women were allowed to sing in public for the first time.

Then came the Soviet invasion in 1979, and after that it was downhill all

the way until 2001. "During the Russian occupation and the civil wars our

music declined," Siddiq Qayam, a prominent Afghan singer, told IWPR. "Some of the artists died, and the others fled. These two decades have done

inestimable damage to Afghan culture."

Many Afghan musicians have returned since the fall of the Taleban and have

resumed playing their traditional music. Many say they still face hostility

from conservative elements who accepted the Taleban ruling that music was against Islam, others find their music is no longer in demand.

"When people see foreign songs on satellite television, they ask us to sing

them and we are obliged to learn these songs,” Rasool Zumaray, head of a

Kabul band, told IWPR. “People often ask us to sing Indian songs at parties.

Most people at these parties make fun of local music. They prefer rock music

and modern instruments.”

Dalil, a former head of the Union of Afghan Artists, said, “The real music

of Afghanistan comes from local folk music, but now everything has changed,

and the new generation is rejecting this music.” Part of the problem was the

music itself changed, he said, moving from gentle, romantic melodies popular

before 1978 to nationalistic and warlike songs.

Another problem area is film, and a lack of funds for local film-makers. “At

the moment people are watching Indian movies in the cinemas of Kabul, and

most Kabul residents prefer them to locally-made films,” Abdul Gheeyas

Wahedi, a producer on Afghan state radio and television, told IWPR.

Despite the general aura of gloom, there are signs of recovery in several

areas. Kabul University’s music and fine arts faculty, badly damaged during

the civil war and stripped of its musical instruments and equipment by the

Taleban, is operating again, though without instruments for playing music,

stone for sculpting and clay for potting.

“Before the Taleban we had 50 teachers and 300 students. During the Taleban there were just seven teachers and seven students. Now there are 17 teachers and 85 students,” the dean of the faculty, Farooq Faryad, told IWPR.

Taimor Shah Hukumyar, president of the Artists’ Association of Afghanistan, which has 3,000 members in Kabul and the provinces, said it was trying to help Afghan artists by providing courses and jobs for them.

“We started from zero, we had nothing. Our culture has been damaged due to the last two decades of war, but we have still kept it alive,” he said.

Moosa Ramansh, head of the association of cinematographers who like many artists fled abroad during the war, is working on new films since his return.

“In the past films were made according to government policy, but now we can be independent. In one of my new films I have drawn a picture of social grief and crisis,” he told IWPR. “We are trying to make films so that the Afghan cinema regains a national identity.”

One area that is flourishing is poetry, with weekly contests sponsored by the ministry of information and culture in both Dari and Pashtu, Afghanistan’s main languages.

In music too, efforts are being made to restore the popularity of traditional music. Internews, an international organisation working to support local media and culture, said it was involved in a project to collect music from all 32 provinces of Afghanistan, which will then be passed to local radio and television stations.

“As a result we hope the people of Afghanistan will get to know about the culture and music of their country,” Internews local director John West told

IWPR.

Danish Karokhel is an IWPR reporter/editor.

Location: Middle East
Palestine
Israel
China

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