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Researching Performing Arts in Badakhshan

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Fieldwork
BRUCE KOEPKE

Relatively few academic studies have commented on Badakhshan Province in northern Afghanistan. During the period of the political 'Great Game' between Tsarist Russian-Central Asia and British India in the 19th century, British and Russian adventure-style officers occasionally returned with reports. Last century, a number of German, Russian, Austrian, Swiss, as well as a few Danish, French, American and Afghan researchers discussed Badakhshan in terms of various academic fields ranging from history, anthropology, ethnomusicology, geography, and linguistics, to geology, botany, and mountaineering. All of these accounts refer to conditions prior to the Communist coup in April 1978. Recent fieldwork experiences in Badakhshan (1998 and 1999) have allowed an examination of the impact of Afghanistan's civil war upon cultural traditions, particularly those involving performance, notably music and dance.



PHOTO: BRUCE KOEPKE

Buzkashi tournament in Faizabad, Nowruz, 1998.

Afghanistan's mountainous Badakhshan Province is inhabited predominantly by ethnic Tajiks who are speakers of Dari, a Persian language, but also by other, bilingual, ethnic groups such as Uzbeks, Kirghiz, and Pashtuns. Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the subsequent ongoing civil war, very few researchers have travelled to Badakhshan. Only a small number of foreigners working as international aid workers and occasionally photo journalists and adventure seekers have recently visited Badakhshan. The latter visitors tend to publish their experiences in the commercial category of 'the most dangerous places in the world.'

With a noticeable rise in orthodox Islam throughout Afghanistan following the defeat of the Soviet-backed Communist government in 1992, and particularly since the rise of the Taliban in 1994, performance traditions have been relegated to the fringes of society. The Taliban are a fundamentalist Islamic militia comprised of Pakistani and Afghan religious students originating from Pakistani *madrasas* along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border as well as from disillusioned former *mujahideen* from predominantly Pashtun-inhabited regions in southern Afghanistan. Following the Taliban's interpretation of *shari'a* law, all 'non-religious' forms of cultural expression that include human actions – and this definition includes entertainment music and dance – are regarded as un-Islamic and sinful. As a result, expressive arts have been banned in areas

controlled by the Taliban and their strict policies are reinforced by the Department of Vice and Virtue. In contrast, in the non-Taliban northern regions an official decree against expressive traditions has not been issued. These areas, comprising almost 20% of Afghanistan's territory, are ruled by the former post-Communist government of President Burhanuddin Rabbani and loosely aligned commanders. At present, the provinces of Badakhshan, Takhar and most of the provinces of Kapisa, Parwan and Baghlan are under the control of the anti-Taliban alliance, as are several smaller districts in Kunar, Balkh, Samangan, Kunduz and Jowzjan.

Travel into Badakhshan

Considering Afghanistan's precarious political situation, the physical task of reaching Badakhshan was not only time-consuming, but, at times, quite challenging. The hospitality of the Badakhshi and Afghan people, however, more than compensated for these efforts. Other than the aeroplanes of the United Nations and International Red Cross, which irregularly enter Faizabad from Peshawar and Islamabad in northern Pakistan so as to transport international and Afghan aid workers as well as medical patients, there is currently no other air service available to Badakhshan. Issued with a visa valid for travel to Rabbani-governed territories, I arrived in 1998 at Faizabad's airport which consists of a Soviet-built runway composed of corrugated steel sheets. Although the air traffic control facilities were destroyed during the jihad against the Communist regime, this airport remains Badakhshan's only serviceable port for small aircraft.

Due to the unforeseen earthquake in the Shahr-e Bozurg region several months later, I was forced to abandon my fieldwork prematurely. After unsuccessfully attempting to re-enter Badakhshan by plane the following year, I eventually managed to return overland from Tajikistan. Whilst this route is primarily utilized to enable essential humanitarian aid to reach Afghanistan across the Amu Darya, it is not an official border-crossing and consequently requires many essential documents and permits which are obtainable only in Dushanbe.

First impressions

Within Badakhshan, hotels and guest-houses catering to international tourists or researchers no longer exist. The only remaining hotel in Faizabad, which once accommodated tourists in the 1960s and 1970s, has now become a residence for visiting commanders. Elsewhere, local teahouses, *chaykhanas*, and hostels, *serais*, are still an option, but are frequented by many traders for overnight stay and are therefore inappropriate for longer lodging. Fortunately, I was generously allowed to rent accommodation in some of the compounds of international aid organizations.

The centre of any activity in Badakhshan, and for that matter anywhere in Afghanistan, is the bazaar, no matter how small and limited the range of available goods. Faizabad's bazaar is in the old part of town in Shahr-e Kohna, along the main

street, Khiaban, and close to the Kokcha River. Many local hand-made items, such as traditional Badakhshi shoes, coats, caps, pottery, lapis lazuli jewellery, saddle goods, and urns are sold next to imported Pakistani and Iranian basic household wares.

In order to travel within Badakhshan and to pass frequent checkpoints, appropriate travel documents are essential and have to be issued by district governors or key commanders. Only limited motorized public transport is, however, available within the province. The few operative jeeps belong mainly to commanders and together with the only other irregular form of motorized public transport – travel on heavily laden trucks – reflect Badakhshan's poor economic state and fragile infrastructure. No roads are surfaced and are thus prone to frequent washouts and landslides. Closures can last for anything from five hours to two weeks. When the province's main trade arteries are impassable, especially the western road connecting Faizabad with neighbouring Takhar Province's capital Taloqan, the usually poorly stocked bazaars empty out quickly. I recall one occasion when wheat, an essential food item, was unavailable in Faizabad's bazaar and local bakers were forced to close their businesses for three days. These unpredictable conditions mean that walking with a loaded donkey or riding a horse remains the most reliable form of transport.

Agriculture, both as subsistence farming as well as for local export, provides the main form of economy. As a consequence of a lack of employment prospects and regular paid salaries, which are generally only available with aid organizations, bartering continues to be a common practice throughout the province. Traditionally, wheat, rice and millet were the main crops grown, but increasingly opium poppies, although labour intensive, have become the most common type of cash economy. As a result of Badakhshan's isolation, as well as the cost of limited and expensive imported fuel resources, deforestation has become rampant. This environmentally disastrous practice has led to Faizabad's once famed pistachio forests virtually having disappeared over the last two decades. Moreover, the Kokcha River's muddy brown water caused by eroding mountains and landslides is a direct attribute of uncontrolled deforestation.

Cultural life

Despite the economic hardship, Badakhshan has probably still one of the best education systems on offer in Afghanistan for both girls and boys. This is currently relatively well supported through the assistance of international aid organizations. Before the Taliban take-over of Mazar-e Sharif in northwestern Afghanistan in 1997, male and female secondary school students could, upon graduation, pursue tertiary education. But with all universities in Afghanistan now being controlled by the Taliban, and because of fears of reprisals against residents from opposition-held territories, students from Rabbani-governed territories are unable to enrol for higher education in Afghanistan. Moreover, women are barred from education in Taliban areas.

In spite of the serious economic and political instability, Badakhshi continue to revel in the few cultural events that are sanctioned by local authorities, such as, for example, the traditional and religious festivals of Nowruz, Jeshen, and Eid. Celebrations surrounding the Nowruz festival on 21 March 1998 were accompanied by a traditional *buzkashi* horse tournament and a fair. On another occasion, several weeks later, the Jeshen festival was also commemorated with a *buzkashi* tournament in Ishkashim in northeastern Badakhshan. Although Jeshen was once an independence day celebration in August, it is now held on April 28, the anniversary of the defeat of the former Soviet-backed government.

With the Taliban's continued attacks on opposition-held territories, a general trend towards conservative Islam is noticeable in Badakhshan among the local population and commanders alike. In direct response to this religious orthodoxy, expressive traditions, such as music performances, occur rarely and have been driven underground. Prior to the civil war, Badakhshan's leading musicians were able to travel freely throughout the main cities in Afghanistan. Some were even selected for appearances on Kabul television. Currently, entertainment, either private or public, occurs only if the local commander or community leader condones such non-religious performances. However, upon hearing of my research, local musicians in more remote regions of Badakhshan would not infrequently arrive unannounced at my residence and proudly display their instruments, being delighted to perform if the situation allowed. With the strict interpretation of *shari'a*, the profession of musician seems to have virtually disappeared. Every performer I interviewed is now primarily occupied as a subsistence farmer, working on either private or leased land.

Unfortunately, with the current situation of a politically non-unified nation, it seems unlikely that long-term academic research can be carried out in Afghanistan in the near future, especially in regions that are in relative proximity to current frontlines. Similarly, the survival of non-religious, performance traditions is questionable. Yet, if a popular government were to be soon formalized, and were to include a representation of Afghanistan's various ethnic groups and political factions, conditions could change quickly. The Badakhshi are certainly more than ready to embrace a peaceful period, to rebuild their economy and to consolidate fragile cultural traditions. ♦

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