Intangible cultural heritage in Afghanistan

Ongoing warfare over the last 20 years has exacted its toll on Afghanistan’s tangible and intangible cultural heritage. In 1992, the country’s Communist governance came to a climactic end when mujahideen, Islamic resistance fighters, successfully defeated the Soviet-backed regime. But, since then, internecine fighting between Islamic factions has led to a situation in which there is no central governance. Instead, 90 per cent of Afghanistan is currently ruled by the Taliban, an ultraconservative ethnic Pashtun religious militia that emerged in 1994 and by the end of September 1996 had taken Kabul. The remainder of the country is controlled by an anti-Taliban alliance under the helm of the first Islamic government of President Burhanuddin Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Massoud. With a few exceptions (in some regions that remain outside the control of the Taliban) most non-religious performances, including entertainment and sporting activities that do not conform to strict Islamic codes, have been banned. My research seeks to unravel the continued significance of such cultural practices in Badakhshan, northeastern Afghanistan.

The objective of this essay is to provide an insight into contemporary cultural performances and to allude to the social, political and religious dimensions of Afghanistan’s intangible cultural heritage. I shall draw attention to some existing traditions such as the recreational activities of equestrian games and wrestling as well as the artistic performances of music and dance, and will discuss the continued practice of these events in light of their current censorship.

Badakhshan’s ethnography

The ethnically heterogeneous province of Badakhshan is the main living area of the predominantly Persian-speaking Tajik people, but is also inhabited by other ethnic groups such as bilingual Uzbeks, Pashtuns and Kirghiz. In the north and northeast, Badakhshan adjoins Gorno-Badakhshan in Tajikistan by its natural border of the Amu Darya, or the Oxus River of antiquity. While most of eastern Badakhshan fringes Pakistan, at its eastern-most point, through a short stretch along the Wakhan Corridor, the province is also connected with China.

Badakhshan was integrated into the nation of Afghanistan just over one century ago. Today, it is once again relatively independent because it is the only province that remains completely beyond the control of the Taliban. In Badakhshan, all ethnic groups are deeply religious. The majority of the province’s population are Sunni Muslims with a small percentage of Sevenener Shiites Ismaili Muslims who, although ethnically related to the dominant Sunni Tajiks of Badakhshan, are a marginalised group in the province. The Ismailis of northeastern Badakhshan are speakers of Pami, archaic Persian languages, and like all Badakhshi, Dari, a modern Persian language.
Conducting cultural heritage research in a politically unstable territory

Most of my research was conducted in the Ismaili-inhabited, mountainous regions of Badakhshan in 1998 and 1999 and these people are therefore the primary focus of this essay. However, I shall also include some of my observations from the provincial capital Faizabad and other district centres of Badakhshan. Given Afghanistan’s precarious political situation, the physical task alone of reaching Badakhshan was not only time-consuming, but also extremely challenging. Indeed, the only legal means of entering the province was with the aeroplanes of the United Nations and International Red Cross that irregularly enter Faizabad from Peshawar and Islamabad in northern Pakistan. Consequently, I initially spent a lengthy period in northern Pakistan, liaising with staff of international non-government aid organisations that deal with the provision of assistance to Afghanistan. On finally arriving in Badakhshan in 1998, I was faced with yet another problem. Since the beginning of the civil war, with the exception of a few international humanitarian aid workers, the province has received few visitors and certainly no tourists. It was almost inevitable that a European researcher would be regarded with suspicion, particularly given the uninvited presence of Soviet soldiers less than 6 years earlier.

Fieldwork in Afghanistan necessitated considerable flexibility in terms of living conditions, transportation and the ability to conduct research within time constraints, especially in the light of frequent natural disasters such as earthquakes and droughts, in addition to the constant threat of an imminent take-over by the Taliban. In both 1998 and 1999, my fieldwork was interrupted. During both trips, I was evacuated from Badakhshan and with the current escalation of fighting between the Taliban and the anti-Taliban alliance at the borders of the province, the situation has deteriorated to such a degree that it is now impossible for non-essential humanitarian personnel to enter the province. However, in spite of these less than ‘ideal’ research circumstances, my somewhat limited observations and experiences bear testimony to the tenuous endurance of Afghanistan’s contemporary intangible cultural heritage.

Intangible cultural properties

Discussion of a society’s or ethnic group’s intangible heritage rests upon the recognition that all cultures are reflected in their tangible and intangible properties. As a ‘living culture’, members of local communities interact with one another and through blending, borrowing and reinventing, develop meaningful beliefs, practices and objects with which they then identify. Hence, cultural traditions are created through human actions, which arise from thought and imagination, and which due to their significance, are generally handed down as cultural property from one generation to the next in the form of oral traditions, events, and religious teachings. Like the tangible heritage of places and objects, intangible practices have aesthetic, historic, scientific and/or social value for past, present and future generations. They hold significant meaning for a community and are integral to its identity.
Intangible cultural practices are often expressed as linguistic traditions such as storytelling or the performance of songs, but are also evident in special recreational activities and rituals and the artistry and skills of performance traditions. Although such practices are transient experiences executed through human actions, nevertheless they embody social values and meanings. Based on a community’s creations, performances, for example, may represent traditional and/or popular culture and reflect and recreate that community’s cultural and social identity. Moreover, the bearers of intangible cultural practices, such as amateur or professional performers, communicate culturally significant traditions to other members of society and may be understood, therefore, as informants of embodied social values and cultural knowledge.

Patronage of intangible heritage in Afghanistan since the 1960s

During Afghanistan’s modernist period from the 1960s until the 1980s, and perhaps even later during parts of the Communist regime, attempts were made to foster a national cultural identity that included support for traditional sporting activities and the performing arts, but that neglected, if not suppressed, rural and tribal identities, as well as religious affiliations. This ultimately led to a conservative, almost puritanical Islamic backlash, best exemplified in the emergence of the Taliban and their strict censorship of non-Islamic practices.

In Islam, embodied artistic practices, in particular, have always been a sensitive issue and historically have been mired in controversy as to their legal status. Their ambiguity is most commonly linked to obscure judicial interpretations of Islam’s normative texts that tend to categorise artistic practices as profane. Yet in almost all Islamic societies, performance traditions represent vital features of their cultural heritage. Likewise, music, dance and sport performances were commonly practised publicly in Afghanistan from the 1960s to the 1980s. Celebrations were generally sought as a positive emotional outlet, for relaxation, and the enjoyment of aesthetics at festivities in private homes, urban theatres and outdoor public venues during cultural events such as Jeshen, Afghanistan’s Independence day, Nowruz, the Persian New Year, and the two Eid religious festivals.

During the Communist period, a shift in the interpretation of cultural properties took place. The performing arts, for example, began to be utilised as a tool of propaganda with an emphasis on developing a single national identity, and preferably a Communist one, rather than multi-ethnic and religious identities. The stress was on non-religious entertainment and the suppression of Islamic values. Since the collapse of the Communist regime in 1992, and with the introduction of Islamic governance, there has been an even larger shift, which this time has led to a dramatic decrease in all non-religious cultural expression. This lack of patronage of non-religious cultural heritage is embedded in the expansion of extremist Islamic values, as clearly manifested in the cultural policies of the Taliban who, within hours of taking the capital Kabul in 1996, introduced the strictest Islamic system of the contemporary world.
Given these marked and relatively recent shifts in interpretation of cultural heritage, it comes as no surprise that some confusion currently exists at a local level and that uncertainties have arisen about the appropriateness of the expression of local cultural practices within an Islamic society. When interviewed during my fieldwork in Badakhshan, many locals professed that their culture now consists only of strict Islamic cultural practices such as regular prayers. But when questioned further, the Badakhshi informants acknowledged the value of and their love for their local cultural heritage, such as the performance of music and dancing at weddings, picnics and social gatherings. It is critical to this analysis, therefore, to briefly explore why injunctions against performance traditions have been imposed by most Islamic groups currently in power in Afghanistan.

**Injunctions against performance traditions**

Members of the Taliban are predominantly Pakistani and Afghan religious students from Pakistani Deobandi- and Wahhabi-style madrasas, Islamic schools, as well as disillusioned former mujahideen from predominantly Pashtun-inhabited regions in southern Afghanistan. Many current leaders of the anti-Taliban alliance have also either formally trained at, or at least been influenced by these orthodox religious schools. Students and their teachers from the madrasas in the Subcontinent have strongly advocated for the establishment of a truly Islamic society, and base their views on their understanding of the teachings of the Prophet Mohammad 1400 years ago. In the process, they became strongly opposed to non-Sunni minorities, Islamic modernists and any expression of non-Islamic cultural traditions (Rashid 2000:23). In referring to the Muslims’ primary authoritative religious text – the Quran – one does not find any explicit mention of the illegality of performance traditions. Nor does any clear indication of censorship of performance traditions appear among the hadith. However, the collection of hadith does contain many references to immoral behaviour that have often been interpreted by ultra-conservative forces as pertaining to performance traditions.

When the Taliban assumed control over Kabul, they immediately made public their views of performance traditions and entertainment. Among other things, music, dancing, horse tournaments, television and cinemas were banned, as were all social institutions, including libraries and entertainment venues (Paik 1997). This censorship is enforced by special Taliban units under the Religious Police, specifically the Department of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Some comments made several months ago by Taliban senior officials substantiate their radical Islamic views. In an interview in the 22 May 2000 edition of *Time* magazine, the current Justice Minister, Mullah Nooruddin Turabi, when asked why it has been necessary to ban non-religious music and dancing, stated that these performance activities ‘can lead you astray. It is wrong to think the people want them’ (Fathers 2000a). The Taliban’s current Foreign Minister, Mullah Wakil Motawakil, was also interviewed for the same *Time* magazine edition. When asked about the Taliban’s concerns for human rights, Motawakil responded:
We do not believe we have denied anyone their rights. If there are some restrictions it is because of our culture. People accept this. It is not a Taliban issue, but something which people have always followed (Fathers 2000b).

The latter statement further indicates that Islamic fundamentalists within Afghanistan, and especially in Taliban-controlled areas, believe that there is only one culture, namely an Islamic culture that is based on the early Islamic cultural heritage as it was known during the Prophet Mohammad’s life. Moreover, the Taliban asserts that Afghanistan has always been an austere society based on these principles. These statements, however, have no foundation in the Quran and lack any definitive support in the hadith. It would seem, therefore, that the framework of interpretation of Islam by Taliban leaders and fundamentalist commanders elsewhere in Afghanistan is being appropriated primarily for the purpose of political domination and is based on ‘primitive Islamic injunctions which have no basis in Islamic law’ (Rashid 2000:33).

Performance of intangible cultural properties in contemporary Badakhshan

One type of intangible cultural heritage that continues to be performed publicly by men in Afghanistan is the genre of religious performances such as those conducted during the Eid-e Ramazan or Eid-e Ghurban festivals. These public performances are condoned by all authorities throughout the country. In contrast, and in direct

Figure 1 Buzkashi tournament, Nowruz festival, Badakhshan 1998 (B. Koepke, ANU)
response to the increasing influence of religious orthodoxy and strict interpretation of Sharia, non-religious traditions and artistic performances are now rarely practised in Badakhshan. Currently, entertainment, either private or public, occurs only if the local commander or community leader condones non-religious performances. During my fieldwork in 1998 and 1999, however, I was fortunate to experience some rare and spontaneous male performance events. The defiance of prohibitions as evident in these mostly clandestine performances signifies the importance that these special events continue to hold for individuals and communities in Badakhshan.

In 1998 in Faizabad, I witnessed a horse tournament, buzkashi, during Nowruz, the New Year’s celebrations, celebrating the appearance of the vernal equinox and the arrival of spring around March 21 (Figures 1 & 2). Nowruz is a popular festival in Afghanistan that, until the rise of the Taliban, was celebrated throughout all Persian-speaking regions, including the capital Kabul. During this particular celebration in 1998, buzkashi was sanctioned by both the former Islamic government of President Rabbani, as well as by Badakhshan’s provincial government.

In buzkashi, groups of male riders aim to score points by grabbing a decapitated calf, which serves as a ball, riding around a flagpole and then with great skill, placing the calf in a specially designated circle before it is again snatched by another competitor. This cultural practice is confined to the northern regions of
Afghanistan. Due to the Taliban’s occupation of all provinces except Badakhshan, the performance of *buzkashi* is now extremely rare. Another highlight of the 1998 *Nowruz* celebration was the staging of wrestling matches after the day’s *buzkashi* had come to an end. In contrast to the *buzkashi* that so vividly dramatises masculinity, traditional wrestling matches do so in a narrowly stylised manner. Although wrestling is not explicitly banned by the Taliban, in order for it to take place, the athletes must adhere to austere Islamic deportment, that is, all limbs have to be covered, a hat worn and the players must have a beard that is at least three finger-widths long. In Faizabad in 1998, these conditions of deportment during wrestling and also *buzkashi* were much less stringently enforced.

A month later, I witnessed a second *buzkashi* tournament that was accompanied by a public music performance. During the 1998 *Jeshen* celebration in a remote northeastern town, an outdoor festival was organised by local authorities to commemorate the defeat of the Communist regime and the beginning of Islamic governance on 28 April 1992 (see Figure 3). Prior to the collapse of central governance, *Jeshen* was celebrated as Independence Day throughout Afghanistan and marked by days of public music and dance performances as well as *buzkashi*. According to local informants, music had not been sanctioned during this tournament since 1992. Hence, the public music performance on this occasion needs to be recognised as an exceptional incident in contemporary Afghanistan. The genre of the music on this occasion was mostly local folk songs, but *ghazals* and *rubais* from both the local area and other Afghan provinces were also...
performed by the local musician who played a *dambura*, a two-stringed unfretted plucked lute.

On the same day as the outdoor *Jeshen* celebrations, a dinner was organised by a local Ismaili leader. The same musician as during the *buzkashi* tournament plus two other local musicians, a *ghichak* and a *daf* player, were present. The *ghichak* is a two-stringed bowed spiked fiddle, and the *daf* is a type of tambourine. After the meal, the musicians performed for almost 3 hours, playing mainly local songs but also those from other Afghan provinces. Towards the end of this performance event, the community leader exchanged glances with the musicians, and the space in front of them was cleared. Tea cups and the kerosene lamp in the centre of the room were put aside, so as to create a tiny dance space. While the audience enthusiastically clapped to the accompaniment of the ensemble, the tambourine player started to perform a solo dance in the middle of the room. Directly after this dance, the lute player and singer performed a series of solo dances. Such indoor dances are by far the most controversial form of intangible cultural property in Afghanistan and this performance genre is greatly threatened by encroaching extremist Islam.

On my most recent field trip in 1999, I was fortunate to record some religious music of the Ismailis in Badakhshan (see Figure 4). The Ismailis differentiate between sacred and profane music and, until very recently, have kept their religious music secret from outsiders. As a consequence, no formal recordings or studies have been
made of this rare music genre. Mainly performed during special ceremonies in winter to accompany the teachings of religious leaders, this music includes in its lyrics the poetry of local and well-known medieval classical Persian poets such as Shams-e Tabriz, Hafez and Nasir Khusraw. This form of cultural heritage is also endangered as the dominant Sunni extremists in Badakhshan, as well as the Taliban, consider Ismaili religious music to be an impure and immoral practice.

**Characteristics of performances in Badakhshan**

With respect to religious and non-religious performance events, there are a number of particularly unique characteristics that necessitate some further discussion. The categories of sacred and profane, for example, are useful concepts to appreciate the variety of intangible expression inherent in these practices. Unlike orthodox Sunni religious practices – such as the *Eid* prayers that are purely sacred, formal, serious and tend to lack any form of extrovert emotion – Afghan popular culture is a syncretic, hybrid amalgam of Islamic and local cultural practices which expresses an element of ‘fun’. This form of cultural heritage is celebrated through the body during performative cultural practices such as music, dance, *buzkashi* or even wrestling. Popular Afghan culture, therefore, may be seen as transgressive as it challenges orthodox Islamic culture which is ‘controlled, rule-bound and cerebral’ (Werbner 1996:91) and based on normative, exoteric sources.

In the contemporary political context, cultural performances cannot be fully understood without appreciating their relations of power. The outdoor events were sanctioned by dominant Sunni military commanders who demonstrated their authority by publicly condoning performances during national celebrations. In the remote Ismaili-inhabited region, the evening indoor event was organised by the local Ismaili leader in his residence and was presented as a traditional entertainment event showcasing local performance traditions. Hence, the Ismaili host exercised his authority by entertaining friends and guests, proving himself to be a leader who could afford to defy bans imposed by higher religio-political authorities. The performers were engaged to re-enact an aspect of historical cultural heritage, as well as to provide entertainment. Moreover, it is quite possible that through this event, the local Ismaili leader may have been attempting to consolidate loyalties with individuals and groups in his community on whom he may need to rely in the future. In the absence of Sunni commanders, the Ismaili leader thus dared to stage a performance that would not normally be condoned under current political circumstances.

In Afghanistan, the role of performer, be it as a professional or an amateur, has become stigmatised, controversial and even potentially dangerous. Any aesthetic performance may be interpreted as politically or morally negative and the performers could be held accountable for ‘subversive’ or ‘immoral’ and therefore ‘politically provocative’ performances. The effects of such performances are undoubtedly socially real and significantly powerful because they may be
interpreted as a political action rather than as entertainment. If the musician decides to sing a song that is not politically 'correct' or that contains messages that may be perceived as 'unIslamic', or if the dancer's expression becomes 'too' provocative or sensual, these performative actions could easily endanger his life. Many of Badakhshan's performers, especially musicians, have been targeted by ultra-conservative religious authorities for engaging in 'unIslamic' practices but also for their past engagement in performances for the Communist regime. In the current political context, therefore, it is no longer possible to talk about an artist making a living from performing. In fact, every performer I interviewed in Badakhshan is now virtually completely occupied with work as a subsistence farmer on private or leased land.

At the same time, performative practices in Badakhshan may serve to represent the pride of local people who, in the face of ongoing civil war and an immanent takeover by the Taliban, are struggling to preserve cultural traditions. Through performance, the past is re-awakened in the present, and the effect of the performance is that it has meaning and significance for the participants, remaining as an unarticulated concept that they carry with them. It would seem that this form of intangible cultural heritage ideally requires not only a performer but a witnessing audience for it to continue as a truly 'lived' cultural experience.

Given the risks that non-Islamic performances may pose to one's reputation and possibly life, why then do men in positions of authority condone it? In the case of music and dance performances, the answer has possibly to do with the exercise of power by local leaders. Control of an artistic performance may represent control of a social resource and another's physicality and consequently signify a leader's authority. The Ismaili leader, for example, in standing beyond the official censorship imposed by non-Ismaili commanders and governors, was thus granted a measure of autonomy and possibly the licence to permit and/or engage in other non-conformist practices. Hence, performance events may demonstrate the political potential of cultural events and their strategic manipulation by influential, authoritative figures to various ends.

**Conclusion**

I hope to have drawn attention to the complex relationship between intangible cultural heritage and political and religious agendas. It seems that in contemporary Afghanistan, both tangible and intangible cultural heritage are at the mercy of those religio-political authorities that have the means to control the population. Cultural practices that include recreational and artistic extra-daily activities may contribute to local Afghan efforts to assert and recreate their culture, their identity and history, in a context of so many years of violence, uncertainty and internecine war. The various intangible practices that have been discussed in this essay exhibit an important interchange of human values, they bear exceptional testimony to a rich yet tenuous cultural tradition and are directly associated with harsh living conditions, as well as artistic works of outstanding unique significance.
It is important to appreciate that intangible heritage may be interwoven with regional phenomena that incorporate spiritual values such as the religious Eid festival or the religious music of the Ismailis. ICOMOS Vice President Dawson Munjeri profoundly remarked at the Australia ICOMOS 2000 conference in Canberra that an ‘absence of evidence [does not represent]...evidence of absence’. This line of thought is particularly pertinent to Afghanistan’s intangible properties, where leading Sunni authorities have banned any form of non-religious heritage. The fact that I initially did not find any signs of artistic performances in Badakhshan during my field research did not mean that there was a complete absence of such traditions. It was only when the community came to know and trust me, both as an individual and as a committed and interested researcher of cultural heritage, that I was invited to more restricted events that included music and dance.

In a society in which signs and symbols of conflict are very much in evidence, extra-daily performances have particular significance, embodying vital forms of social knowledge that are integral to local identity. In accordance with the demands of each situation, the Badakhshi have learned to assume different identities. The conservatism demanded by many mullahs and commanders is met mostly with public conformity. In the absence of direct surveillance, the local population then has some latitude to engage in cultural practices, although usually in a restricted, concealed and private domain.

References