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Afghan music in London and its ongoing communications with Kabul and the Afghan Transnational Community

Summary

It is proposed to research into the dynamics of music practice (composing, performing, listening) amongst Afghans in London, and to examine how their cultural performances communicate with Afghanistan and other parts of the Afghan diaspora. Building on work already carried out in Pakistan, Iran and the USA, the project will focus on musical innovation, the feedback of new music from the periphery (the transnational community) to the centre (Kabul), and the connection between the creation of new music and transformations in the construction of cultural identity. It thereby addresses some fundamental questions about the relationships between music and migration.

Fit with the priorities of the Programme

The proposed research conforms to many of the priorities mentioned in the Programme Specification April 2005. It explores new approaches and develops new theoretical insights into the study of diasporas, migration and identities. By focusing on music it takes an arts and humanities approach to current UK-based issues concerning migration and identity, and it gives some priority to research collaboration with the cultural sector, notably the BBC World Service.

Research questions or problems

By looking at specific processes amongst Afghans within exile in London, the proposed research addresses fundamental issues concerning music, migration, and transformations in the construction of cultural identity. Building on work already carried out the following questions may be posed:

What kinds of music performance practice are taking place in the Afghan community in exile in London? What is the repertoire? What is the instrumentarium? In what ways has music become westernised and/or modernised? Is London a locus for the creation of new Afghan music?

What is the role of London in the media network which connects Afghanistan with the Afghan transnational community? How does the BBC World Service Afghanistan Section, which places a strong emphasis on music in its programming, function in this respect?

What attitudes do Afghans in London hold about the value of music in human experience, and about tradition and modernity in their music? What is the role of music in maintaining old identities and creating new ones? How does music serve in the "communication of affect" in the Afghan transnational community?

Aims and objectives

To examine the dynamics of music practice (composing, performing, listening) amongst Afghans in London, and London's musical communications with Afghanistan and the Afghan diaspora. This would be the final part of an informal research programme that began in 1998 designed to look at music in places of Afghan settlement near to and far from Afghanistan itself. The applicant (John Baily) has already conducted research on Afghan music in Pakistan, Iran and the USA, and now needs data from a second "distant site", London, to complete the research and publish the outcomes. It is an opportunity to update the research,

for many things have changed since 1998, such as the political situation in Afghanistan itself and the increasing ease of global communication, which is transforming diasporic culture.

Research context

Music and migration is emerging as a key issue within ethnomusicology. The pioneer in this field is Adeleida Reyes and her work on Vietnamese refugees. Her monograph *Songs of the caged, songs of the free* (1999) traces the performance of music in the typical Vietnamese refugee's journey: from the camp of first arrival on to the Processing Center (both in Philippines), to initial re-settlement in New Jersey, and eventually to "Little Saigon" in California. This was a well-organised and carefully devised process for turning Vietnamese refugees into American citizens. At each stage Reyes considers, amongst other matters, the incidence and significance of music making amongst the migrants and shows ways in which musical performance is "inner directed" in some contexts, and "outer directed" in others. The research proposed here is part of a programme equally broad in scope to that of Reyes, but rather than looking at different stages in the migration process the focus is on Afghan music culture in four destinations.

Baily began working on the music of Afghanistan in the 1970s, with two years' fieldwork in the city of Herat, and has maintained close contact with Afghans in exile in the UK and USA, and through visits to Pakistan in 1985, 1991 and 1992, and Herat in 1994. The Taliban came to power in 1996 and imposed a draconian

ban on musical instruments and music. In response, Baily began a long-term research project on music in the Afghan transnational community, in sites of Afghan settlement spatially and culturally near to and far from Afghanistan. The comparison allows one to factor in a number of variables which affect what happens to music culture and its performance in the migration situation, such as: geographical distance between countries of origin and settlement; cultural similarity in terms of language, religion and other attributes; prospects for the future in terms of security, employment, and eventual integration in the host society. To this end Baily carried out fieldwork in Mashad (Iran) in 1998 and 2002, Peshawar (Pakistan) in 2000, and Fremont (California) in 2000. Since the defeat of the Taliban in 2001 he has also visited Kabul four times to document the return of musical life in Afghanistan's capital and to establish a Tradition Bearers Music Programme for the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. The comparison between Peshawar and Fremont (Baily, in press) is producing some very interesting and innovative results in terms of the creation of new music, the feedback of new music from California to Kabul, and the connection between new music and a new Afghan-American identity in the USA. Research in London will serve to interrogate these findings further.

The outcomes of the research will be of importance to (a) modernisers in Afghanistan, where music continues to be a contested area, and in the Afghan diaspora, (b) academics working in migration studies, anthropology, and ethnomusicology, (c) policy makers dealing with migration. Because of its emotional appeal, music is a potent way of expressing identity; it is also an important medium for conveying positive messages regarding migration to the UK.

Research Methods

The methodology will utilise the participant-observation with associated audio-visual data collection techniques that Baily has employed in working with Afghan musicians since 1973, with an increased emphasis on digital video as a research tool. He enjoys close connections with the Afghan community in London and his standing as a performer of Afghan music gives him privileged access as an active participant in the expressive life of the community.

The data collection in London will focus on the following:

- Attend and document (with audio and/or video recording) performance events such as weddings, public concerts, New Year's celebrations, Sufi gatherings, private parties, and studio recordings, to determine what kinds of music-making occur amongst Afghans in London.
- Identify Afghan musicians, both amateur and professional, in London, the groupings in which they work, and their performative collaborations with non-Afghan musicians.

- Hold extensive (recorded) informal interviews and discussions with musicians and non-musicians about their musical activities, attitudes, practices, and experiences.
- Collect and study commercial Afghan music CDs, DVDs, and VHS videos produced and/or distributed in London, to assess musical and song-text change in the last 20 years, and the extent of composition of new songs and instrumental music.
- Look at the operation of radio and television stations that broadcast Afghan music. The Afghanistan Section of BBC World Service, which broadcasts in Dari and Pashto, the two main languages of Afghanistan, is of special interest. Websites and internet are also important means of communication within this community.
- Investigate musical contacts between Afghan communities in different parts of the world, the exchange of audio and video materials (including domestic recordings dedicated to known individuals), and the organisation of concert tours.
- Short visits to Dublin and Hamburg to discuss with Afghan musicologists Nasruddin Saljuqi and Abdul Wahab Madadi, both authors of books about Afghan music recently published in Iran, how London compares with these two other European sites of Afghan settlement.
- A visit to Kabul to assess how musical innovations made by Afghans exiled in USA and Europe impact on contemporary musical life in Afghanistan.