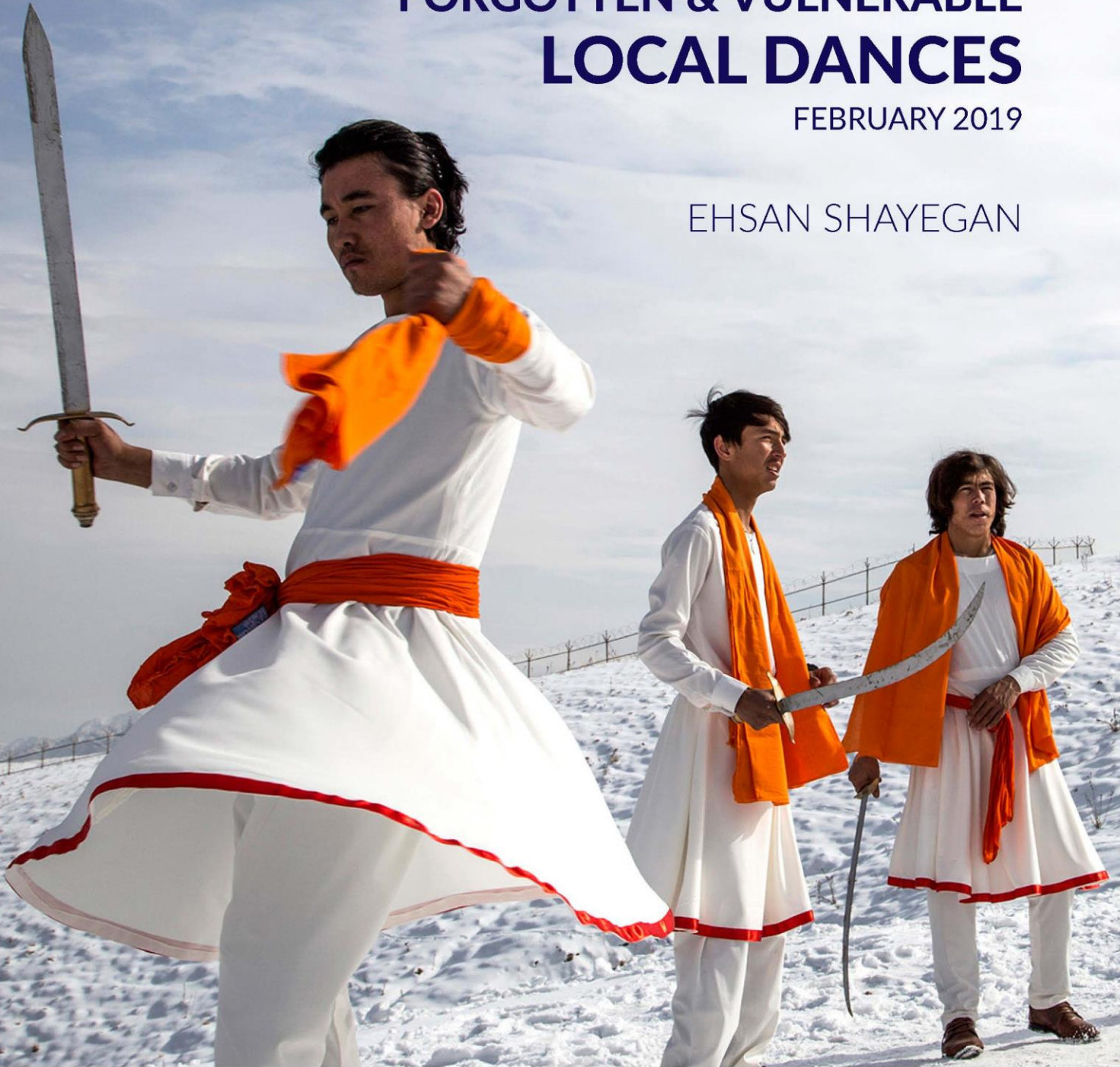


# EXPLORING AFGHANISTAN'S FORGOTTEN & VULNERABLE LOCAL DANCES

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# Exploring Afghanistan's Forgotten & Vulnerable Local Dances

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## BACKGROUND

In the past half a century, the loss of Afghanistan cultural heritage has been one of the most severe repercussions of the war for the country. The vulnerable nation state repeatedly fell prey to war, which has been detrimental to the country's cultural heritage. At a time when people's memory of their culture was fading, museums were being looted and destroyed. In this puzzling state of uncertainties, people never had the chance to live normally, and celebrate social events and cultural performances, as they had to deal with the harsh realities of war and migration. However, after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, optimism returned for many Afghans who have started envisioning peace for the country, Although, this was not palpable for people living in a state of cultural "anomie"<sup>1</sup>, where they were experiencing a collective breakdown of standards and values.

Afghanistan was a regional, cultural corridor in the past, and was also home to a rich history of art, music, and dance, which have now altered due to increased suicide bombings, internal instability, migration and displacement. All these factors have negatively impacted the ability to preserve the cultural memory of the country, and have resulted in growing vulnerability towards folk traditions, rituals, events, arts, music and dance. In particular, some major local dances which form part of Afghan culture are diminishing, due to a plethora of reasons, as mentioned earlier. Hence, these art forms require further exploration and documentation, in order to preserve them for future generations.

Through studying Afghan arts, one should examine it within the broader relationship the country has with the region, because the arts of Afghanistan are linked to neighboring countries including, for instance: India, Iran and Uzbekistan. Additionally, Hindustani music (North Indian music) is well known in Afghanistan, is frequently performed in the country, thus linking domestic art music to Hindustani music<sup>2</sup>because domestic arts were greatly influenced by Hindustani music when some India's influential artists were called in brought up to Afghanistan by Afghan kings to perform at the court music. Particularly, the great influence of Hindustani arts and music in Afghanistan connects to the rule of Shir Ali Khan (from 1863-66 and again in 1868-1879), as classical musicians were invited to become court musicians in Kabul. From that time on a strong link formed between Afghanistan and Hindustani musical tradition.<sup>3</sup> Subsequent Amirs including Abdul Rahman Khan, Amir Habibullah and Amir Amanullah Khan also supported the growth of this tradition. Historically, it dates back to the time when India and Pakistan partition did not happen and during this study we did not come across any specific research to reveal the influence

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<sup>1</sup> Christina, B. (2016). Durkheim's theory of anomie and crime: A clarification and elaboration. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 49(3), 311-331. *Anomie is stated as the state of normlessness where the expectations of behavior are unclear, and the system has broken down.*

<sup>2</sup> Baily, J. (1981). A system of modes used in the urban music of Afghanistan. *Ethnomusicology*, 25(1), xiv & xv..

<sup>3</sup> Sakata, H. L. (1983). *Music in the mind: The concepts of music and musician in Afghanistan* (Vol. 1). Kent State Univ Pr.



of recent artists of Pakistan over Afghanistan art. It does not necessarily ignore relationship or influence between Afghanistan and Pakistan arts since that seems to be inevitable due to some culturally close association between the dwellers living both side of the borders also the immigration of Afghan artists to Pakistan during the civil war and the Taliban period. Precisely, clear understanding of the post partition influence or relationship of Afghanistan and Pakistan art requires further studies.

Musiqi-ye klasik refers to Hindustani vocal music of the khayal and tarana genres, which are widely known in Afghanistan and are performed by some Afghan musicians. In Afghanistan this genre is regarded as Musiqi-ye Hunari (art music). The word *klasik* translates as 'classical' in English, which possibly derived from India, where Hindustani music is often referred to as 'Indian classical music'.<sup>4</sup> Except for the Kesturi and Kausie modes, the remaining common modes (such as Bairami, Pari, Yemen, Kumdj and Pilu) are part of the Hindustani rag system, and they have a close association among themselves.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Afghan Uzbeki culture has a connection with the culture and music of Uzbekistan, because there are many cultural similarities in their art forms, such as comparable music and dance across the border, which can be seen in the feminine rituals of both countries, such as singing and storytelling, as well as through legends associated with the universe, gods, and goddesses <sup>6</sup> (as many Uzbeks migrated to Afghanistan during Soviet rule). Moreover, the ancient Bukhara maqam system of six modes (*shashmaqam*) has influenced the Uzbek population of Afghanistan, as much of their music appears to take on aspects of catchy 4/4 tunes played on the *Dambura* (a fretless two string lute), the *qaichak* (a two string, bowed instrument) and the *zerbaghali* (an hourglass drum).<sup>7</sup>

The relationship between Iranian and Afghan arts is identifiable in the vocal music of Herat, particularly up to the 1920s, because ghazal singing was accompanied by the Iranian tar. Later, this linkage weakened as Afghanistan's vocal music had gone through a major change, which was the influence by Hindustani music. <sup>8</sup> When it comes to dances, there is another Herati variation, known as chopbazi or stick playing. It is similar to an Iranian stick dance, *Torbat-e Jam*, performed near the Iran-Afghanistan border. It involves a special sequence, whereby each dancer holds a stick in each hand and first hits his sticks together, after which the first dancer turns to face the second dancer and repeats these actions, continually with other dancers. This is succeeding with each dancer striking his sticks against those of his neighbor. The dancers then also turn towards

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<sup>4</sup> Baily, J. (1981). Cross-cultural perspective in popular music: the case of Afghanistan/by John Baily. *Afghan Digital Libraries*. P. 107.

<sup>5</sup> Baily, J. (1981). A system of modes used in the urban music of Afghanistan. *Ethnomusicology*, 25(1), 1-39. Accessed through <https://www.jstor.org/stable/850973>.

<sup>6</sup> "Sultanova, R. (2008). Female celebrations in Uzbekistan and Afghanistan: The power of cosmology in musical rites. *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, p. 8 &18.

<sup>7</sup> Easternartists.com. (2018). [online] Available at: <http://www.easternartists.com/DANCE%20%20Afghan.html> [Accessed 3 Sep. 2018].

<sup>8</sup> Baily, J. (1980). A Description of the Naqqarakhana of Herat, Afghanistan. *Asian Music*, 11(2), 1-10. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/834063>, Accessed: 09-09-2018 06:28 UTC

a neighboring dancer to strike one stick, then turning to another neighbor, while doing the same back and forth motion, as the circle moves forward. This leads to the two remaining dancers taking positions at the center of the circle and striking their sticks on the ground, and against each other's sticks. The lastly, a final round involves one dancer quickly travelling around the inside of the circle, striking the sticks of each of the other dancers in rapid succession.<sup>9</sup> *Chob bazi* was commonly performed by women and men on joyous occasions, such as wedding parties, local festivals and Independence Day events, across numerous provinces in Afghanistan. By 1961 it had become famous at Afghan schools, and was performed by students, who wore traditional Afghan clothes. It was also frequently performed by Afghan Hindus and Sikhs, accompanied by the *Dohl* (a drum) and the *Surna* (a flute).<sup>10</sup>

Afghan local dances are distinctly classified, sometimes on the basis of ethnic identity and geographical divisions (region and province), such as Southern dances of Pashtuns, Uzbeki dance, Hazaragi dance, Tajiki dance, Herati dance<sup>11</sup>, Balochi dance, Gharsak Panjshiri dance, Logari dance, and so forth. However, there is another classification system of sorting dances into gender categories. For instance, the dance form 'Shalangi' is purely performed by females, as two women start dancing from two opposite corner of the room, approaching each other slowly, until they meet. While at the same time they clap "on the first and third beat with arms stretched to the right, above the head, to the left and back or right, up, left and downward. As the dance progresses, the claps can augment to two in each position then three, always on the first and third beat. The feet shuffle, shifting weight from one foot to the other" <sup>12</sup>. The dancers step lightly on one foot while the other is raised in front, and they usually imitate each other's' movements while sometimes doing the opposite, to confuse one another. Every so often dancers try to be more creative, as they use gestures of naz (coyness), eshwa (coquetry), and use facial expressions, involving the eyes and eyebrows, looking down and up while smiling.

In addition to Chob bazi, there are several other local Afghan dances such as the Atan, Logari Dance, Hazaragi dance, Ghomborak, Akhochay, Dastamal dance, Charkhak dance and Livan dance, as well as Uzbeki and Tajiki dances.

'Charkhak dance', on the other hand, is choreographically is similar to Attan (and was previously performed in Jaghori district of Ghazni province). It is performed by a group of men in a circle formation, accompanied by rhythmic music. In accordance with the music, performers step outside and inside of the circle, while moving their hands up and down. <sup>13</sup> Additionally, there are

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<sup>9</sup> Easternartists.com. (2018). [online] Available at: <http://www.easternartists.com/DANCE%20%20Afghan.html> [Accessed 10 Sep. 2018].

<sup>10</sup> "Chob Bazi va Atan Raqs Milli Afghanistan, Nasruddin Saljoqi.2014, Retrieved from: <http://www.24sahat.com/1393/06/14/37319/> Accessed date: 21 March 2018

<sup>11</sup> "Middle Eastern Dance & Music Information: Afghan Dance." (n.d). Eastern Arts Home. Retrieved from <http://www.easternartists.com/DANCE%20%20Afghan.html> accessed date: 6<sup>th</sup> March 2018

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Atayee, Sami, Ayeenhaie Numayeshie Hazaraha Dar Afghanistan (Persian, Thesis), p. 91.

dances which performed by both women and men, like Ghberg Attan, involving an interactional movement where men sing love songs, to which women reply during the performance<sup>14</sup> Almost all of the country's traditional dances are prone to being forgotten, as during field research and review of a recently study we realized that many of these dances are no longer practiced<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, the respective cultural institutions such as universities, research organizations and media outlets have rarely worked towards documenting these local dances. Through reviewing the literature on these dances it becomes apparent the extent to which information on this aspect of Afghan culture is scarce. In particular, the period between 1980-2002 indicates a huge gap in the information gathered, research undertaken and literature produced on the country's various dance forms.

However, there have been some recent efforts by local researchers who have examined local traditions and dances. *Da Attan Da Nari Hendara* by Ali Mohammad Mangal provides general explanations about the Attan, its history and the types of Attan, as well as on the songs of the Attan. Broadly the songs can be classified into the following: songs for special social occasions, love songs and songs of epics. This study, particularly in its elaboration of the Attan, relies on the information retrieved from the *Mujala-e-Hunar* (Arts Magazine), published by the Ministry of Information and Culture (MIC) during the 1960s. Moreover, types of the Attan including Khattak are described by Waseem Khattak in his study titled "Role of Pashto Theater and other performing arts in inculcating the spirit of cultural Renaissance and promoting nationalistic & ethical values among Pashtuns: An Analytical overview"<sup>16</sup>. Comparatively, this study provides greater insights and we found it quite useful.

Other studies have traced the traditional and oral culture of other Afghan tribes and ethnicities, such as the popular culture of Panjshir (*Farhge Amiyana-e Panjshir*) by Fazl Ahadi, which discusses the customs, dances and social events undertaken in Panjshir.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, the study of the rituals of Hazaras (*Ayeenhayee Numayeshie Hazaraha*) conducted by Sami Atayee<sup>18</sup> elaborates on the Hazaras' traditional culture, specifically about their local dances. This work led him to produce a film (*Yadgare Sarzamine Azar*), recalling the lost traditions of Hazaras, comprising of their art and dances. Additionally, 'The oral culture of the Hazara people' (*Farhang Shefahiye Mardome Hazara*) is a study by Hafiz Shariati, which comprises of sections on local Hazara dances<sup>19</sup>. This

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<sup>14</sup> "Middle Eastern Dance & Music Information: Afghan Dance." (n.d). Eastern Arts Home. Retrieved from <http://www.easternartists.com/DANCE%20%20Afghan.html>, accessed date: 6<sup>th</sup> March 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Atayee, Sami, *Ayeenhayee Numayeshie Hazaraha Dar Afghanistan* (Persian, Thesis), p. 91.

<sup>16</sup> KHAN, S. U., & Khattak, A. (2014). Role of Pashto Theatre and Other Performing Arts in Inculcating the Spirit of Cultural Renaissance and Promoting Nationalistic & Ethical Values Among Pashtuns: An Analytical Overview. *Sarhad University International Journal of Basic and Applied Sciences*, 2(1).

<sup>17</sup> Ahadi, Fazl Ahad, (2011), *Farhang Amiyane Panjshir*, Khyam, Kabul.

<sup>18</sup> Atayee, Sami, *Ayeenhayee Numayeshie Hazaraha Dar Afghanistan* (Persian, Thesis) p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> Shariati Sahar, Hafiz, (2014), *Farhan Shefahie Mardom Hazara: Jistari Dar Farhang Amaie Hazarahaie Afghanistan*. Amiri, Kabul. Pp 289-290.

study is followed by the very recent work of Ustad Vaheed Kaacemy, titled “The Authentic Hazara Music”, which explains Hazara music and rituals, as well as about some songs and dances that accompany ceremonies, such as the Akhuchay, Peshpoo and Ghomborak dances in particular. All of the aforementioned studies are sources which have assisted in gaining background knowledge on Afghan dances for this research, as well as assisting in identifying key informants.

Evidently, these cited works are general in their content but inform innovative research into the country’s folklore, which will allow for greater insights in the field. During our interviews with experts they had all highlighted the risk of local dances diminishing, which requires the particular attention of the respective governmental institutions, as well as local and international stakeholders. However, this study is only aims to describe four local dances that are prone to being lost. Thus in turn, this research discusses the historical origin of these dances and describes details of these performances, as well as major factors contributing to their endangered status.



## METHODOLOGY

To undertake this qualitative study, Porsesh Research and Studies Organization (PRSO) has utilized a diverse strategy of gathering both primary and secondary data, through a combination of a literature review and interviews with experts and local people familiar with traditional dances. The Initial literature review and interviews with five experts were undertaken during the first phase of the research, in order to learn the names of the four most vulnerable local dances. This was followed by a thorough literature review of the four identified dances, as well as with nine in-depth interviews with another group of experts, to bring further insight about what the dances entailed. However, to allow for accurate representation the four dances were selected to cover some of the country's diverse ethnic groups (Pashtun, Uzbek and Hazara), and dances are further stratified into the categories of male and female performers, as well as dances performed by both sexes. The research participants were selected by employing the snow ball sampling method and utilizing respondent group triangulation. Thus, the study engaged with folklore researchers, artists, university professors and researchers of the arts. However, it is important to highlight that this study has some limitations, due to restrictive, prior literature in the field, and constraints on geographical exposure, as studies which emphasize traditional culture can be greatly assisted by visits to remote areas and interviews with local people who can elaborate and provide useful insights into traditional dances of rural areas.

## KHATAK ATTAN

The history of the Attan can be traced back to the Greeks, as they had similar dances. This performance was relayed in a famous Greek drama, which was performed for the Greek god Dionysus. This was a form of Greek dance that was performed collectively, with a similar rhythm and movement to the Attan. Archeological explorations<sup>20</sup> help to validate the influence of Greek art in Central Asia and Afghanistan, even before Alexander the Great's conquests. It is difficult to specify the exact historical era for the transfer of the Attan from Greek culture to Afghan culture. It is said that the term "Attan" is derived from the word Athena (the Greek goddess of reason and wisdom),<sup>21</sup> but in Afghanistan the origin of the Attan stretches back to the time of the Aryans, as they performed the Attan at their gatherings<sup>22</sup>. It is separated into distinctive types, mainly on the basis of geographical location, such as Kabuli Attan, Wardaki Attan, Logari Attan, Paktia or Khosti Attan, Kuchi Attan, Khattak, Nuristani, Laila and Pashayi Attan. These regional variations are due to a slight difference and uniqueness in performance, relating to rhythm, movement and

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<sup>20</sup> Greek Art in Afghanistan, *The Science News-Letter*, Vol. 16, No. 448 (Nov. 9, 1929), p. 290, retrieved from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3905017>.

<sup>21</sup> KHAN, S. U., & Khattak, A. (2014). Role of Pashto Theatre and Other Performing Arts in Inculcating the Spirit of Cultural Renaissance and Promoting Nationalistic & Ethical Values Among Pashtuns: An Analytical Overview. *Sarhad University International Journal of Basic and Applied Sciences*, 2(1).

<sup>22</sup> Mangal, Ali Mohammad, (2004), *Da Atan Da Naro Hendara*, Danish, Kabul. p. 7.

pace. The distinctions are easily traceable through the following descriptions of variations of the Attan:

- In Kabuli Attan, a group of dancers make a circle and start moving when the drummer starts the beat. It is performed by both men and women, with two to five rounds of the dance. Dancers make fast movements, quick turns and clap their hands together. It involves two-five steps.
- In Wardaki Attan, dancers wear different types of cloth around their waistline. Most will have long, flowing hair and they flow to the tune of drums (which are larger in size than in other provinces).
- In Paktia Attan, dancers move for five to seven rounds. They shake their heads, following the drummer's beats. They make the circle smaller by the end of the first round. It is typically a five-seven step dance, but can be longer.
- In Logari Attan, dancers move faster and complete the rounds quicker, than in other variation of the Attan. They usually wear a turban during the first round and they take them off when the dance gains momentum, because of the forcefulness in the motions.
- In Kochi Attan, a small circle is made and dancers perform with a red handkerchief in their hand. They sit on the ground and move their heads and hair, following the beats of the drum. The accompanying music or drums are fully dependent on the Attan leader's guidance.<sup>23</sup>

There is no limit to the number of people that can form the circle, and the length of the dance can vary. It can be a small or big circle, and the dance can go on for hours. Groups of performers start to form a circle and move around with same beat and rhythm, during the dance. Generally, the performers start slowly and then gain pace and energy as they move around in circles. One person leads the group and the others follow his moves, and subsequent spinning is performed after the leader gives the signal to do so, by either placing his hand on the floor or raising it in the air. The performers often wear traditional clothes when participating in the Attan, and instruments such as drums, Rubab and Sornai (flute) accompany the performance.

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<sup>23</sup> "Attan-The Traditional and National Dance of Afghanistan." (n.d). Virtual Afghans. Retrieved from: <http://www.virtualafghans.com/attan/> Accessed date: 21 March 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Anon, (2018). [online] Available at: <http://www.afghanzariza.com/2015/04/25/attan--the-fascinating-national-dance-of-Afghanistan> [Accessed 15 Sep. 2018].



*Traditional Attan Painting<sup>1</sup>*

Sometimes during the Attan there are two circles of dancers, proceeding in an interactional arrangement where one of them sings a song, followed by a response from the other group members, also in the form of a song.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, the Attan can be classified as female performed Attan, male performed Attan or Attan performed jointly, based on the composition of the performers. Attan undertaken by females is a comparatively slow Attan, performed with the accompaniment of a Daria (a local Afghan instrument). Performers spin left in the female Attan, whereas in male Attan, the pace is faster and is accompanied by a Dohl (a drum) and dancers spin to their right. The third variation performed by a mix group of male and female dancers, is slower in motion, with dancers turning towards their right hand. This form of the Attan is rarely practiced in Afghanistan, but was previously very common among young Aryans in the Vedic period.<sup>26</sup>

An Attan performance is usually accompanied by songs '*Attan Nari*'. These songs illustrate different messages, which can be grouped into love songs common in wedding parties – songs relating to significant social events and songs of epics. The songs performed alongside the Attan depend on the occasion the performance is for,<sup>27</sup> as the Attan is performed at various occasions such as wedding parties, social gatherings, new year celebrations, independence day events and local festivals. Traditionally, it had an additional function, as it was performed before war to give

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<sup>25</sup> Habibullah Rafi, KII, Kabul. 9 April 2018, 10 am.

<sup>26</sup> Da Afghanistan Da Milli Radio Talviziyyun, Khabarnai Urgan, Penzama Gana (2016). RTA Publication (Awaz Magazine).

<sup>27</sup> Mangal, Ali Mohammad, (2004), Da Atan Da Naro Hendara, Danish, Kabul. pp.17-103.

confidence to the warriors<sup>28</sup>, to give the warriors mental support before the war began. It was even performed after a victory in battle.<sup>29</sup>

The Attan was once a Pashtun specific dance, but is now performed by Afghans of different ethnicities on a variety of occasions. Some regard the Attan as a national dance, but Ahmad Naser Sarmas, the Director of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music states that

“[i]t is difficult to claim it as national dance, because its structure, rhythm, accompaniments and symbols used in[the] dance are representing Pashtun tribal values rather than a broader national identity. The idea of Attan as a national dance is, in fact, a politicized claim, referring to the past historical suppressions in Afghanistan”<sup>30</sup>.

I also perceive it as a more appropriate and academic understanding of national identity. Khattak Attan is a type of the Attan which is a traditional Afghan dance. Its origin lies with the Afghan Pashtun tribes, and usually involved men performing a ritual dance. It is unique only amongst Pashtuns living in Afghanistan, and the Pashtun regions of Pakistan (the Peshawar and Khyber areas). It is claimed that the historical origins of the Attan reaches back in time to 2200 B.C<sup>31</sup>, but we could not find any credible sources stating the exact historical era when the Khattak form of Attan was performed for the first time. It is considered an old type of the Attan that is no longer practiced in Afghanistan. Khattak Attan is also called the Warrior Dance, which evolved in Afghanistan, and was preserved in one of its earliest forms by members of the Khattak and other Pashtun tribes, including the Ghilzais. There are two etymological derivatives of the word Khattak; the first is from the Sanskrit word *khadga*, used to mean sword, while the other interpretation is from *kathak*, which is a form of dance of performed by Hindus to recount tales of the gods, through dance, music and song. It is also claimed that the Khattak style of the Attan is deeply rooted to the time of the Moghuls, where men performed this dance with their weapons in their hands.<sup>32</sup>A Khattak dancer performs with the zeal of a hero, displaying his physical fitness through movements of the body, while holding one, two or even three swords at the same time. (Each sword weighs about 1.5 kilograms.)

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. P. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Vaheed Kaacemy, KII, Kabul. 29 Sep, 2018. 2:30 Pm.

<sup>30</sup> Ahmad.Sarmast, KII, Kabul. 12 Sep, 2018. 2:00 pm.

<sup>31</sup> Mangal, Ali Mohammad (1383); *Da Atan Da Narou Hendara*, Danish, Kabul. P. 8.

<sup>32</sup> KHAN, S. U., & Khattak, A. (2014). Role of Pashto Theatre and Other Performing Arts in Inculcating the Spirit of Cultural Renaissance and Promoting Nationalistic & Ethical Values Among Pashtuns: An Analytical Overview. *Sarhad University International Journal of Basic and Applied Sciences*, 2(1).



*Khattak Attan, 1890<sup>1</sup>*

The Khattak Attan “is a 5-step routine involving spins, with the swords crossed over their backs and elbows outward, or it can be performed with the swords out to the sides and typically attain half spin in place leading to a full spin”.<sup>33</sup> Depending on the beat’s rhythm, this spin can be completely reversed in full synchronization (clock wise to counter-clock wise). It is performed with the musician adjusting the beat to the technique of the performers. It is executed very quickly, accompanied by the 18-stringed Rubab, Sornai or a wooden flute known as a Toola, as well as double-headed barrel drums (Dohl), which are beaten with sticks. It is a circular dance, ranging from two to over one-hundred participants, allowing performers to go round and round in a circle, as the rhythm and beats fasten. <sup>34</sup> Up to 100 men dance together wielding swords or handkerchiefs, and perform acrobatic feats. The fast tempo of Khattak distinguishes it from other forms of the Attan, which start slowly and pick up speed as the dance progresses.

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<sup>33</sup> KHAN, S. U., & Khattak, A. (2014). Role of Pashto Theatre and Other Performing Arts in Inculcating the Spirit of Cultural Renaissance and Promoting Nationalistic & Ethical Values Among Pashtuns: An Analytical Overview. *Sarhad University International Journal of Basic and Applied Sciences*, 2(1).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.





*Interview with Habibullah Rafi, Pashto Folklore Researcher*

Even Khattak dance itself has many forms, such as Shahdola, Bangra, Balballah, Qamar Balbala, chatrali, braghda'ona, tamseeli dana, charri dana and individual performance. All these dances are performed in circle Bangra is derived from word Bangrai or Bhangrai (Bangle). A birds' eye view of the performance shows that it looks like the shape of a bangle, hence the name Bangra (or Bhangra). This acts as an exercise to warm up body muscles, as it is slow in rhythm and has pauses for swords to be held. In the Bangra, every member swirls while carrying swords. The dance consists of one-three circles with a number of elders, youngsters, and children, each carrying a sword and a handkerchief, and they start dancing in a circle with the drummer and piper in the center. "At the beginning of Bhangra, few performers turn by turn sing love songs or quotations which is called "Takkay" (5-7 Takkay by each, Takkay is commonly popular in sheep herders, they sit on the hills and sing on the top of hill with high pitch, if someone there on other hill he will reply the Takkay in return and some play it with their flutes), at a high pitch, which is meant to convey to the audience that they would like to be tipped for their performance".<sup>35</sup> While "Balbala is performed immediately by the same group stage with fast rhythm to sweat up the body. Balballa is staged without swords while Qamar balbala is exercise to get control on stepping and stable the body balance at the top of hill and it is performed with swords. Sword is used to keep balance while moving quickly on uneven surface of the hill".<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

There is an Individual performance of Khattak dance which comprises of twelve steps, requiring great skills on the part of the dancers. The dancer alternates between solo performances and synchronizing with the rest of the troupe. Groups of two or four performers carry a sword and a handkerchief, and perform turn by turn, while the rest of the troupe members wait for their turns.



*Khattak dance in the camp of the 72nd Highlanders, Kohat, Second Anglo-Afghan War, illustration from the magazine The Graphic, volume XIX, no 475, January 4, 1879.<sup>37</sup>*

In the Laila (form of Khattak Attan), a group of four performers holding two swords each execute stunts while moving in a circle. Braghoni is the fastest and the most adventurous of all the steps. A single dancer performs with three swords. He swings two swords in the air while holding the third in his mouth<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> Getty Images. (2018). *Khattak dance in the camp of the 72nd Highlanders, Kohat, Second...* [online] Available at: <https://www.gettyimages.ca/detail/news-photo/khattak-dance-in-the-camp-of-the-72nd-highlanders-kohat-news-photo/932829900> [Accessed 21 Sep. 2018].

<sup>38</sup> KHAN, S. U., & Khattak, A. (2014). Role of Pashto Theatre and Other Performing Arts in Inculcating the Spirit of Cultural Renaissance and Promoting Nationalistic & Ethical Values Among Pashtuns: An Analytical Overview. *Sarhad University International Journal of Basic and Applied Sciences*, 2(1).



*Khattak Dance suit, painted by Mariam Mughal* <sup>39</sup>

The rhythm is an important element in Khattak dance, with the dancers making a circle formation. They wear special clothing called *gand afghani* with tight sleeves, as well as a tight *woskat* (waistcoat). They hit the swords while dancing, and the dancers tighten their girdle (*Kamarband*) such as to make ready for a fight. <sup>40</sup>

## AKHUCHAY

On the basis of some archeological evidence (paintings) from Bamyān (Zahak City), the history of Hazaragi dances can be traced back to 2000 BC. In Hazaragi dances, movements of the hands, face and the body as a whole are regarded as the central means of expression.

Words like *Poykobi*, *Raqs*, *Bazi*, *Zikr*, *Tawajod* and *Sama* are some common terms used for dance in Hazaragi. Like many Asian dances such as *Bon Odori* dance in Japan and *Dragon and Lion* dance in China,<sup>41</sup> Hazaragi dances are not limited to simply being means of entertainment, but are also performed at times of hunting, war, during labor, cultivation and at marriages. These dances are depicted in some paintings of Bamyān.<sup>42</sup> Hazaragi dances and songs are associated

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<sup>39</sup> Artciti.com. (2018). *Mariam Mughal, Khattak Dance, 48 x 48, Oil on Canvas, Figurative Painting, AC-MRM-001*. [online] Available at: [https://www.artciti.com/index.php?route=product/product&product\\_id=4519](https://www.artciti.com/index.php?route=product/product&product_id=4519) [Accessed 3 Oct. 2018].

<sup>40</sup> Mohammada Jan Haqpal, KII, Kabul, 21 April 2018. 10:30am

<sup>41</sup> Crawford, B. *Asian Folk Dance*. Retrieved from [https://dance.lovetoknow.com/Asian\\_Folk\\_Dance](https://dance.lovetoknow.com/Asian_Folk_Dance) [Accessed 27 Jan. 2019].

<sup>42</sup> Shariati Sahar, Hafiz, (2014), *Farhan Shefahie Mardom Hazara: Jistari Dar Farhang Amaie Hazarahaie Afghanistan*. Amiri, Kabul. Pp 280-287.





another.<sup>45</sup> There are different regional variations of Akhuchay, for instance in Jekhato, Malistan and Ghazni, Akhuchay is performed in a standing position, while in central highlands it is performed in a seated position.<sup>46</sup> Akhuchay is a dance performed through an argumentative, interactive way, between the bride's and groom's families, usually between their mothers; praising their son and daughter through rhythmic poetry.<sup>47</sup> This dance is performed by both women and girls at different festivities, while performers sit in two opposite spaces and put their hands on their knees, and then begin to move towards each other, while making sounds like "Akhwa, Akhutu, Akhuma, Akhuyee, Akhuchay, Chambulchay, Yak Khana, Du Darga, Tu Dar Ma, Ma Dar Tu" to the performers opposing them.<sup>48</sup>

### GHOMBORAK

Ghomborak is another Hazaragi dance that is prone to becoming extinct. Ghomborak (or Ghombor) is linked to nature, as the name of this dance is derived from the sounds a pigeon makes called 'Ghombor' in Hazaragi. Hazara girls and brides (at their wedding party), get together at such occasions and make the sound of pigeons, through their throat while dancing.<sup>49</sup>



*Performance during Afghanistan's Local Dance Festival, Bagh-e- Babur*

<sup>45</sup> Sami Attaee, KII, Kabul.29 April 2018.3.00 pm.

<sup>46</sup> ibid

<sup>47</sup> ibid

<sup>48</sup> ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Shariati Sahar, Hafiz, (2014), Farhan Shefahie Mardom Hazara: Jistari Dar Farhang Amaie Hazarahaie Afghanistan. Amiri, Kabul. Pp 289-290.



This is a dance performed by women and girls at wedding parties where the first two individuals stand up, opposite each other, and then hold two sides of their scarf (shawl) and then move their hands, which imitate a pigeon flying. Simultaneously, the performers make the Ghombor sound. The performance gathers momentum as everyone in the room joins in, one by one. It generates a very pleasant ambience in the room, which is both emotional and exciting, due to the Ghombor sound echoing around the room.<sup>50</sup> However, Hafiz Shariati in his book, 'Farhang Shefahiye Mardom Hazara' (*Oral Culture of Hazara People*) states that the origins of the Ghomborak dance was in the seated position. He explains that the performers used to kneel, while moving their bodies forward, and moving their heads closer to one another, after which they stood up once the performance got faster. In doing so they disperse, and gradually move to the corner of the room. While eventually coming back together as a group, the performers turn around and regain their position, in turn. These movements are continually repeated during the dance. This entire dance routine is accompanied by the Ghombor sound. Sometimes the performance is accompanied by verbal appreciation from the audience.<sup>51</sup> The difference in descriptions and steps of the dances above are probably due to the fact that Atayee and Shariati are referring to two variations of the dance, that are performed differently in various parts of Hazarajat.

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<sup>50</sup> Sami Attaee, KII, Kabul. Sunday, 29 April 2018. 3:00 pm.

<sup>51</sup> Shariati Sahar, Hafiz, (2014), Farhan Shefahie Mardom Hazara: Jistari Dar Farhang Amaie Hazarahaie Afghanistan. Amiri, Kabul. Pp 289-290.

## PESHPO (PESHPOK)

Peshpo, Charkhak, Gomborak, Akhochay, Livan, Piyala and Dastmal dance, are renowned Hazaragi dances, which are declining as they are no longer performed at social gatherings. It is extremely difficult to even locate a simple piece of script on any of the aforementioned dances. It is claimed that the foundation of Hazaragi dances including Peshpo date back to before the prevalence of Islam in Afghanistan, originating from a fusion of Buddhist, Turkish and Mughal traditions.<sup>52</sup> The word Peshpo is derived from two sounds, “Pesh” and “Po”, which is in fact the sounds produced by the performers through their mouth and lips, while dancing. It does not carry any specific meaning. Peshpo is also referred to as “Puffi” among the Hazaras of Ghazni.<sup>53</sup> However, there is still confusion as to whether Puffi and Peshpo are the same dance, because although there are some similarities between the two, such as performing with scarf (shawl) is used in both, but there are also differences between them, such as the sounds produced in the two dances are slightly different. Generally, the performance consists of two woman or a group of women, wearing a big scarf over their heads, so as to hide their faces. They then hold two sides of their shawls, moving their hands around their head and spinning in a circle. While performing, dancers make the “Pishpo” and “Puffi” sounds, in a rhythmic way. The dance has a steady pace and the performers sometime move their shawls towards each other or clap their hands.<sup>54</sup>



*Interview with Ustad Vaheed Kaacemy, Artist and Ethnomusicologist*

## LAZGY

Lazgy and Lapa well-known dances<sup>55</sup> compared to Qashoq (Qashoq Qoyle), Atash (Choraq Qoyle) and knife dancing (Pichakh Qoyle).<sup>56</sup> Historically, Lazgy was connected to the Kharazm region, as the ancient home of the dance (which is now part of Uzbekistan). This dance transcends borders

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<sup>52</sup> [ibid.](#)

<sup>53</sup> [ibid.](#)

<sup>54</sup> [ibid.](#)

<sup>55</sup> [Azizullah Ural, KII, Kabul, Saturday: 14 April 2018, 3:00pm.](#)

<sup>56</sup> [Khair Mohammad Chavoosh, KII, Virginia, 22 May 2018.11:00 am.](#)

as it links to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan.<sup>57</sup> Its history can be traced back to 3000<sup>58</sup> years and the dance is performed in different ways. Sornay Lazgy and Qyraq/Gyrat Lazgy, Dotar Lazgy are the renowned forms of the dance. Lazgy used to be performed with modest music that was very simple such as two lengthy pieces of stone, but almost a century ago an Uzbek artist known as Athaniazov brought about some innovations to the dance's music, and added poems and songs to it. Thus, songs and music are now part of Lazgy performances.<sup>59</sup> These performance comprise of many symbolic movements , including some complex moves such as imitating the acts of farming, hunting and needlework.<sup>60</sup> It is performed by both male and female dancers, and consists of a solo dancer or a group of dancers. And in Afghanistan it is commonly performed by women and young girls.



*Interview with Azizullah Oral, Professor of Fine Arts, Kabul University*

Traditionally in Afghanistan, the music of this dance was played by the use of two lengthy pieces of stone (of 6cm width and 20 cm length). The performers kept stones in their hand, beat them against one another to make a sound, but this changed with the introduction of modern musical instruments, such as the Daf and Daria, which were brought in to accompany the performance. Lazgy performance follows a special sequence, as first the music starts slowly and the dancer stands, putting one foot forward and the other one back, holding the right hand up and the left hand up too (but lower than the right hand). He then moves his fingers towards his hand, shoulder, neck, back, feet and gradually the movement takes over the entire body. Slowly these

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<sup>57</sup> Azizullah Ural, KII, Kabul. Saturday: 14 April 2018, 3:00pm

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Khair Mohammad Chavoosh, KII. Virginia, 22 May 2018.11:00 am.

<sup>60</sup> Azizullah Ural,KII. Kabul. 14 April 2018, 3:00 pm

movements gain pace and are accordingly performed in a 6/8 (Kishek) rhythm. This dance comprises emotive and regular movements, including putting both hands up, having both hands touch to produce a sound by beating the fingers on the palm of the other hand.

A lazgy performer has to wear a special dress, and women wear jewelry and a distinct hat crafted for the dance. The hat is covered by a scarf that moves above and around the performer's head while they dance. Lazgy was frequently performed in different variations by the people of Faryab, Jozjan, Sare Pul, Balkh and Samangan, but it has now declined.<sup>61</sup> For women, the lazgy dress is very attractive and charming, as small stones are attached to the bottom of the dress. Men also have special clothes for the dance, they wear a special Chapan and white trousers. Men use a Dastmal around their neck and wear a distinct hat. However, such outfits are not a prerequisite to perform lazgy, as plain clothes are also fine for one to perform lazgy. Furthermore, the Lazgy performed by men is different to that which is performed by women. The men's dance has an athletic form involving strong gestures and strokes in moving their hands, legs and entire body, while the women performance has a cheerful and rhythmic form, acting very smoothly. In part, lazgy has a comic form as well, as the performer has to act in a comedic way by keeping his legs and hands apart. Lazgy is performed on joyous occasions, such as wedding parties.<sup>62</sup>

## FACTORS INFLUENCING LOCAL DANCES

The aforementioned dances are vulnerable to being lost, and no longer performed in Afghanistan. Many factors have influenced the deteriorating situation for local dances, which include the fact that: the country has constantly been engaged in war since the late 1970s which has significantly impacted the country's cultural legacy, in art<sup>63</sup> and traditional dances. Institutions which had the capacity to preserve this culture, such as universities, theaters and art houses were ruined, which resulted in the disruption in maintaining cultural heritage. The war also triggered an enormous societal change, as it created millions of internally displaced people and refugees. This, undoubtedly, adversely impacted on cultural practices, festivals and the preservation of cultural legacy in Afghanistan, as culture and social events are celebrated only when there is normality in society. Consequently, the war produced a loss of cultural memory due to the decline of cultural practices<sup>64</sup>. And as a result, since the Communist revolution in 1978 and up to today, very little ethnomusicological research and studies on local dance were carried out.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Azizullah Ural, KII, Kabul. 14 April 2018, 3:00 pm.

<sup>62</sup> Khair Mohammad Chavoosh, KII, Virginia. 22 May 2018. 11:00 am.

<sup>63</sup> Baily, J. (2005, November). So near, so far: Kabul's music in exile. In *Ethnomusicology Forum* (Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 213-233). Taylor & Francis Group.p. 214.

<sup>64</sup> Haidi Miran, KII, Kabul. 5 April 2018. 11:50am.

<sup>65</sup> Baily, J. (2010, June). Two Different Worlds: Afghan Music for Afghanistanis and Kharejis. In *Ethnomusicology Forum* (Vol. 19, No. 1). Taylor & Francis Group. P. 83.



For instance, Khattak Attan is now a vulnerable dance of the country, as it is not practiced and no proper documentation exists to describe it fully. Sadly, people do not even have basic knowledge about the dance, such as its name.<sup>66</sup>



*Interview with Dr. Sarmast, the Director of National Institute Music of Afghanistan*

On the other hand, Afghanistan has experienced two major cultural changes which had huge implications decimating indigenous culture and undermining art, including dance. The first being the prevalence of Islam in Afghanistan, which mainly affected the conservation of local dances.<sup>67</sup> This negative religious attitude towards music and dance is somewhat applicable to large areas of the Middle East, but in Afghanistan its suppression is supported by traditional local hierarchies of Afghan village and town chiefs.<sup>68</sup> And during Mujahidin and Taliban regimes dances including the Attan<sup>69</sup> was banned.<sup>70</sup> The Taliban sought to draw a line between good and bad practices, therefore all forms of art which were accompanied by musical instruments were banned<sup>71</sup>.

After the fall of Taliban, Afghanistan entered into a new cultural episode, as the term ‘freedom of speech’ flourished, and gained Constitutional support. It paved the way for the establishment of multiple media and theater institutions, which made that time period a culturally and historically significant decade. The influx of media outlets allowed for cultural exchanges between Afghanistan and the rest of the world. Markets, homes and shops, as well as residents

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<sup>66</sup> Gulzar Alam, KII, Kabul. 22 April 2018. 11:00 am.

<sup>67</sup> Samea Attaee, KII, Kabul. 29 April 2018. 3:00 pm.

<sup>68</sup> Slobin, M. (1974). Music in contemporary Afghanistan. *Division III Faculty Publications*, p.239.240

<sup>69</sup> Habibullah Rafie, KII, Kabul. 9 April 2018. 10:00am

<sup>70</sup> MohammadaJan Haqpal, KII, Kabul. 21 April 2018. 10:30am

<sup>71</sup> Sakata, H. L. (1983). *Music in the mind: The concepts of music and musician in Afghanistan* (Vol. 1). Kent State Univ Pr. P. xiv.



in remote villages started to have access to different types of media, including Bollywood and Hollywood films. On the other hand, this resulted in the mass prevalence of modern culture over traditional culture. Hence, when Afghanistan's cinemas were being dominated by Bollywood films a new domestic culture flourished, as John Baily states in relation to Afghan music:

Indian films rely heavily on music and dance. Film (filmi) song texts are usually in Hindi or Urdu (very occasionally a song in Persian is found) and are not really comprehensible to most Afghans. This does not seem to detract from the audience's appreciation of them. This music has had an important influence in Kabul and other cities. In some cases, radio singers have adopted such songs, making up a new text in Persian, or fitting a pre-existing text to the tune. Filmi songs are sometimes sung with nonsense words that approximate the sounds of the original. Again, some Kabuli song-writers copy the style of Indian film songs in their new work.<sup>72</sup>

Consequently, the music and art productions in the recent years have been quite stereotypical, if we scrutinize them from a perspective of reviving the traditional culture.

Currently, there is still a great risk towards local dances of Afghanistan, as there is little cultural conservation taking place in Afghan universities and research centers. The limited academic research on traditional culture and dances clearly signifies this risk to the preservation of these art forms in Afghanistan,<sup>73</sup> which is in part exacerbated by the lack of support from the government toward preserving the country's cultural heritage.<sup>74</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This study is designed to identify and describe four vulnerable local dances through employing a diverse strategy of gathering both primary and secondary data, which was done so attaining relevant documents and conducting interviews with experts and local people familiar with these dance forms. Khattak Attan as a traditional local dance, which was also a warrior dance with historical links to the Greeks, evolved in Afghanistan. It has a rich and diverse style of performance, consisting of wearing special dresses and clothes, as well as the holding of a sword or handkerchief during the dance. It is performed on joyous occasions, and its style differs from one province to another.

Akhoochay, Peshpo and Ghomborak are three other local dances, performed differently in various part of the country. Akhoochay has a communicative format, and all three dances are performed by women, specifically at wedding parties. Peshpo is a very old Hazaragi dance, and the number of performers in all these Hazaragi dances ranges from two–ten individuals.

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<sup>72</sup> Cross-Cultural Perspectives in Popular Music: The Case of Afghanistan  
Author(s): John Baily, Source: Popular Music, Vol. 1, Folk or Popular? Distinctions, Influences, Continuities (1981), pp P. 113. Published by: Cambridge University Press  
Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/853246>, Accessed: 10-09-2018 00:03 UTC

<sup>73</sup> Khair Mohammad Chavoosh. KII. Virginia, 22 May 2018.11:00 am.

<sup>74</sup> Azizullah Ural, KII. Kabul. 14 April 2018. 3:00 pm.

Ghomborak specifically is linked to mimicking the sound of a pigeon, and overall, there are strong links between Hazaragi dances and nature.

Lazgy is among the country's ancient, traditional dances, which is historically connected to Kharazm. Initially, it had very a basic format, but as a result of some innovations, modern music and songs were added to this performance to make it more extravagant. It is performed by both men and women. Uzbek dances such as lazgy are characterized by foot movement, which consist of stepping and shifting one's weight from left to right, and vice versa.

It should also be noted that in addition to local dances, there are some Ayeeni (ritual) dances that are frequently performed in Afghanistan. Yet, people refuse to refer to them as dances, as some of these rituals are also observed as religious practices, such as Seena Zani, which is performed during Muharram by Shi'ites mourning the loss a revered Saint. Thus, the term 'dance' within an Islamic context and in Afghanistan would be deemed disrespectful in reference to ritual practices.<sup>75</sup>

The local dances described in this study are vulnerable to becoming forgotten and lost, and thus negatively impacting Afghan cultural heritage conservation. War and migration have meant that individual and collective linkages to traditional culture are significantly fading. Likewise, in the outburst of the modern art through mass media the traditional culture is excessively undermined including the reflection on the local dances and effort to revive it. Hence, the need for the government and cultural institutions to urgently work towards preserving the country's endangered culture.

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<sup>75</sup> Sami Attaee, KII, Kabul. 8 April 2018. 3:00 pm.

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