

ed extensive research.<sup>3</sup> When I arrived that August, the situation in the Rushan/Shughnan area was much the same, so I decided to cross the border in Eshkashim and to start research in the southern part of the province (see map), travelling from Eshkashim to Baharak and to Jorm, Hazrat Sayeed, and different villages in the Yumgan, Zibak, and Shughnan districts.

The situation of the musicians was even worse than I had imagined. Our Western concept of a professional musician was irrelevant in such a setting. Due to the low status of musicians in traditional muslim countries, practically all of the singers of the madâh performance genre were living in poor conditions. Most of them worked as farmers, while some were lucky enough to find jobs. Most of them hadn't touched their instruments for a long time, being concerned only with their survival and that of their families. Many villages depended entirely on the FOCUS food supplies, mainly wheat and vegetable oil. Moreover, the warlords imposed bans on music under pressure from the Taliban. This is based on an interpretation of the Sharia (Islamic law) that considers music to be against public morals and arousing the lower passions, as I was informed by several warlords who stopped our jeep.

However, a transformation took place once musicians were gathered together, often joined by others from neighbouring villages, and after some rehearsal. In spite of their hopeless situation, they played their folk music (musiqi watani) with incredible enthusiasm and dedication. This got the audience involved, who reacted with dancing, clapping, whistling and shouts, and proved that music still is an integral part of their lives.

As my research focused both on religious as well as folk music, it soon appeared that, as regards religious music, the performance practice on the Afghan side was no different from that from the Tajik side. The musicians of the former played typical instruments like the Pamir rubâb (an unfretted long-necked, six-stringed plucked lute with protruding spurs), the tanbûr (a larger, unfretted, seven-stringed lute with an oval soundboard), and the daf (a circular frame drum). Likewise, they used the same performance-genre (madâh) and poetical genres like ghazals, qasida's, muxam-

Musicians in Bahar



Osmond Boparachi, 1999.

## Sources

### Some Sources on Ethnomusicological Research on Afghanistan:

#### Publications

**Doubleday, Veronica, John Baily, Jan van Belle, Nabi Misdaq**, "Afghanistan" chapter in Alison Arnold (ed.), *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, Vol. V*, New York: Garland/ Routledge (2000); 803-841.

**Baily, John**, "Can You Stop the Birds Singing?: The Censorship of Music in Afghanistan", *Freemuse*: Copenhagen (2001) (see: [www.freemuse.org](http://www.freemuse.org))

**Van Belle, J.**, "Dafsaz in Tajik Badakhshan: Musical Genre and Rhythmic Pattern" in *Oideion*, 2 (1998) (see: [www.iias.nl/oideion/front.html-3k](http://www.iias.nl/oideion/front.html-3k)).

**Koepke, Bruce**, "Mehri Maftum: Bearer of Badakhshan's Musical Heritage" in "The Prince Claus Awards 2001"; 64-67. (see: [www.princeclausfund.nl](http://www.princeclausfund.nl))

#### Video Interview

Jan van Belle interviewed by Dr John Baily at WOMEX, Rotterdam, 25/10/2001: "Music life in Northern Afghanistan as opposed to the total ban on music in the Taliban areas", web: [www.freemuse.org](http://www.freemuse.org)

#### Discography

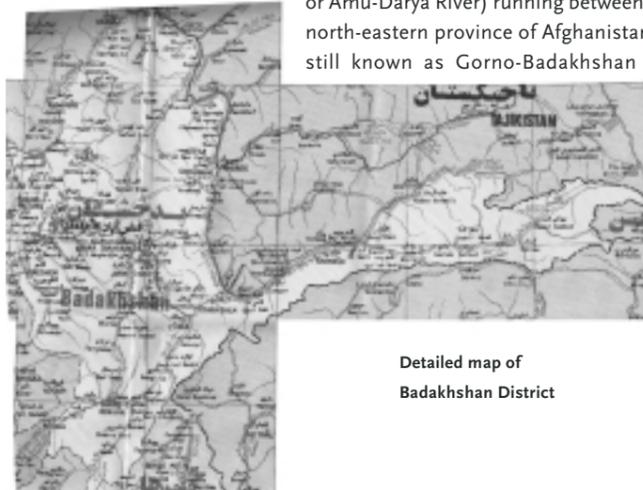
**Van Belle, J and G. van den Berg**, "Badakhshan, Mystical Poetry and Songs", PAN Records, 2024 CD, Leiden (1994)

**Van Belle, J. and G. van den Berg**, "Madakhani, Ghazalkhani, Dafsaz, Religious Music from Badakhshan", PAN Records, 2036 CD, Leiden (1997)

**Van Belle, J.**, "Shirin Dahani, Music of North Afghanistan", PAN Records, 2089 CD, Leiden (2001)

## Afghan Badakhshan and the Nizari Ismailis

In 1895, during the so-called "Great Game" between Victorian England and Czarist Russia, the mountainous area called Badakhshan was divided in two parts with the Panj River (the source of the magical Oxus or Amu-Darya River) running between them as the border. These days, the left bank region is the north-eastern province of Afghanistan, while the right bank region belongs to Tajikistan and is still known as Gorno-Badakhshan Oblast (GBO), the Autonomous Region of Gorno-



Detailed map of Badakhshan District

Badakhshan. The high mountains of the Pamirs are mainly situated in Tajik Badakhshan. Only small parts of the river valleys there are inhabited.

The inhabitants are ethnic Tajiks and can best be described as mountain-Tajiks. They belong mainly to the Nizari Ismailis, Shi'i Muslims who recognize the fourth Agha Khan and forty-ninth Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni as their spiritual leader. In Afghan Badakhshan, settlements of Ismailis are situated along the left bank of the Panj river and in the Wakhan corridor in the eastern part of the province. - JvB <

mas, munâjats, and du'âs, and revered the same classical poets, especially Nasir-i Khusraw (1004-approx. 1077), a major Ismaili scholar, writer, and poet, whose shrine (mazar) I visited in Hazrat Sayeed in the Yumgan district.

The only difference between the performance practices of each side was the fact that twenty-two years of civil war and censorship of music had made a deep mark. Due to the lack of regular performances, texts often had to be sung from notebooks and musicians were not able to rehearse properly, or seemed to have forgotten parts of the performance genre. On the other hand, the khalifas, local religious representatives of the Agha Khan, and often musicians themselves, did their best to safeguard the traditions. In Eshkashim, I recorded children singing and learning madâh, guided by one of the fathers and the local khalifa.<sup>4</sup>

Folk music on the Afghan side of Badakhshan is, in some ways, different from the Tajik part, mainly in the use of instruments. Most typical for this area, and for the whole of Northern Afghanistan and the Hazarajat, is the dambura (a two-stringed, unfretted, longnecked, plucked lute), an instrument seldomly found in Tajik Badakhshan, where the Pamir rubâb is mostly used. The harmonium (a portable reed organ with keyboard) is also quite common in Afghanistan, although seen less frequently in Badakhshan and imported from India, while, on the Tajik side, the accordion is very popular, having been introduced by the Russian army. Other instruments, like the ghijak (a spike-fiddle), daf, and tablak (a goblet drum) are widespread throughout both sides and typical for Badakhshan. Most folk music ensembles I recorded consisted of dambura, ghijak, and daf or tablak. One genre common to both sides is the falak, literally meaning "heaven" and, metaphorically, "fate"; the texts often deal with melancholy, yearning, alienation, separation, or unattainable love.

Unfortunately, the position of folk musicians was even more vulnerable than the performers of the more intimate religious music. This was because they used to play both at domestic festivities and in public places, like teahouses, or during local or national festivals. I was lucky enough to record some good amateur folk musicians in remote Ismaili villages, inaccessible to the jeeps of the warlords. One of them was the gorgholi singer and dambura player Rajab Moh., better known as Gorgholi Khan. I was surprised to find a performer of this epic genre, which originates in Turkmenistan, in Badakhshan. When I first met him, he refused to play. The reason he gave was that, due to the bad situation, he was not able to arrange dinner or lodging for us, things essential under his rules of hospitality. Fortunately, after some talking and a bundle of afghanis, he changed his mind and played the whole evening. That night I slept on the rooftop of his house under the magnificent star spangled Badakhshan sky.

Only a few professional folk musicians and singers, like Dawlat Moh. Jawshan (Afghan rubâb), Dur Moh. Keshmi (ghijak) and, especially, Mehri Maftum (dambura) resisted the censorship of the authorities and endured the poor economic circumstances. They continued to perform in Badakhshan as much as possible. Recently, Mehri Maftum obtained (inter)national recognition as one of the winners of the 2001 Prince Claus Awards (ff 20,000). Unfortunately, he was in Pakistan during my trip, but steps have been taken to invite him for a concert tour through France and the Netherlands.

### Recommendations

When I visited Afghan Badakhshan in August 2001, the tragic events of September 11 (the day I flew back to the Netherlands) were the last things I expected. Despite that it

did accelerate the defeat of the fundamentalist Taliban government, for several reasons I was, and I still am, strongly opposed to the American attack on Afghanistan.

Furthermore, practically no attention was given by the international media to the hopeless situation of the performing arts in Afghanistan. After twenty-three years of civil war and censorship of music, BBC Radio 3 made a live recording on New Year's Day of a concert in Kabul given by the singer Aziz Ghaznawi and his ensemble, whom I recorded in Kabul in 1996, but in secret and in very poor conditions. Unfortunately, given the attitude of Afghan rulers towards music during the last twenty-three years, there is no reason for too much optimism, especially because one of the first steps of the new interim government was to maintain the Sharia. In this situation, what power do musicologists have in representing the music and in empowering the musicians they study? What does ethnomusicology have to offer?

There is a need to emphasize the critical situation of Afghan performing arts, especially music. What follows are some proposals concerning Afghanistan's living musical heritage:

- We must support the musicians economically, inside and outside Afghanistan.
- An effort should be made to document the past and set up archives in order to safeguard something for the future.
- Support should be provided for instrument makers.
- There should be programmes for music education in Afghanistan, and Radio Kabul, Kabul TV, and other local stations should be re-instated.
- Steps should be taken towards creating a free musical climate.

The above proposals could be achieved with the support and help of the rich Western countries, all of whom were involved in the twenty-three years of the Afghan civil war. <

**Dr Jan van Belle** is a clarinet and saxophone teacher, and a musicologist. His current research concerns the music of the Ismaili communities in Tajik and Afghan Badakhshan, and in addition to this he is working on a project for the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) in London, UK.

E-mail: [van.Belle@planet.nl](mailto:van.Belle@planet.nl)

### Notes >

- 1 This research trip was together with Dr Gabrielle van den Berg, a specialist in Persian poetry and Pamir languages.
- 2 supported by WOTRO and the IIS (Institute of Ismaili Studies)
- 3 I had planned to go to Afghan Badakhshan in 1998, but I found that the civil war and the fighting between warlords made crossing the border impossible. However, during a run of food supplies in rubber boats across the river by FOCUS, I bribed the Russian border police to allow Afghan musicians to cross over. On that occasion, I managed only two recording sessions of Afghan musicians at the Tajik side of the Panj river in the Rushan/Shughnan area, so I did additional research in Tajik Badakhshan.
- 4 In general, education has always been an important part of Ismaili life and, in spite of all problems, I saw many children out on the roads and dressed in their typical school uniforms. In some villages, due to the absence of a building, open-air schools were organized, although teachers complained that the village couldn't pay them for their work.