

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Medium of the Oppressed: Folk Music, Forced Migration, and Tactical Media

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This article examines the mediatization of folk music among the Hazara people. It demonstrates how the Hazara community, a religious and ethnic minority from Afghanistan, uses folk music as an alternative media form to resist official and exclusionary narratives. It argues that folk music among socially excluded minority groups serves as something more than mere entertainment—it functions as a tactical medium. Drawing on the song texts of Hazara folk music, particularly the works of the Sarkhosh brothers, this article explores how the experience of persecution and forced migration transformed the way this community makes music. The article also shows how the mediatization of their folk songs helped the Hazara people overcome the Islamic stigmatization of instrumental music.

Keywords: Tactical Media, Dambura, Hazara People, Folk Music, Audiocassette, Forced Migration.

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In 1966, an American anthropologist, Hiromi Lorraine Sakata, landed in Afghanistan to study folk music among the Hazaras, an isolated ethnic minority who lived in the country's central highlands. Sakata found that oral poetry and folk singing were common among the Hazaras, but they maintained a negative view of instrumental music, considering it un-Islamic. Hazara folk music is traditionally performed with a single instrument called *dambura*, but Sakata (1968) found they were rare in the Hazara region at the time. She eventually discovered a number of instrumentalists who performed for her—despite the heavy socio-religious stigma that was attached to *dambura* and *dambura* players in the community. Half a century later, today, *dambura* music is not only socially acceptable among the Hazaras, but it has also become a popular symbol of Hazara identity. The journey of *dambura* music from a stigmatised un-Islamic practice to a proud symbol of ethnic identity was long and rough. It was, in a certain way, similar to the journey of the Hazaras themselves from a voiceless, invisible, excluded community to one that, despite continuous persecution by state

[Correction made on 10/25/2017, after first online publication: A reference to 'Royesh, 2010' was made in the body of the paper but not present on the reference list. The reference is now reflected in the reference list.]

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and nonstate groups, has been increasingly visible in Afghan politics and culture. The purpose of this article is to explain this cultural shift by focusing on two primary reasons for the transformation of dambura music among the Hazaras: the tactical mediatisation of dambura and the immigration of the Hazaras abroad.

The dambura is an unfretted flunked lute carved out of one single block of mulberry wood and has two gut strings (Figure 1). It is commonly found among Turkic peoples of Central Asia (Post, 2007). In Afghanistan, it is often referred to as a “Hazara instrument” — though other ethnic groups in the north of the country play it too. Unlike the Hazaras who traditionally play dambura as a solo instrument, the Tajiks and Uzbeks of the north usually use it in accompaniment with other instruments. The sound and structure of the Hazara dambura lack the sophistication of Afghan urban instruments such as the *rubab*. Dambura has a raucous and dry sound that, in a way, carries the spirit of the barren mountainous region in central Afghanistan where the Hazaras predominately live.¹

The Hazaras have long been migrating to escape institutionalized discrimination. The migration experience, which increased after the 1979 Soviet invasion, offered the Hazaras an opportunity to meet with new cultures and adopt new values — including a more liberal attitude toward music. During the war years between the early 1980s and 2001, they discovered the tacticality of folk music: dambura cassettes, recorded with simple audiocassette players, was used as a primary medium to reach a wide audience. Such a medium helped them overcome their lack of access to mainstream media of communication. The city of Quetta in neighboring Pakistan was the primary hub for Hazara refugees who supported, politically and culturally, the resistance forces inside Afghanistan who were fighting, first, the communist regime then the *mujahedeen* rivals and finally the Taliban. The music of exiled Hazara performers was an effective tool to counter the narratives of communist, Islamist, or Taliban regimes. During this time, the music of the Hazaras transformed from a collection of love songs and lullabies, as Sakata (1968) categorized them, to provocative political manifestos.

Many diasporic communities maintain a strong sense of attachment to their music in exile. The Afghan diaspora too have the same emotional connection to their music (Baily, 2005, 2015). In fact, Aamnulla Khan, the first modern Afghan monarch to visit Europe, was probably one of the first Afghans abroad to use music as an emotional refuge. On 29 November 1927, the King left Kabul for a royal visit to several Asian and European countries. On 3 May 1928, he was on a train from Warsaw to Moscow and become homesick. He decided to write a letter to Ustad Qasim, his favorite singer back in Kabul: “When I remember your beautiful songs on Independence Day celebrations, my heart aches,” wrote the king. “My only comfort is your chronophone [sic, gramophone] records that I brought with me and I listen to them while weeping in memory of homeland” (Popalzai, 1985, pp. 409–410). In later decades, the war and violence in Afghanistan forced millions of Afghans to leave their country with nothing but what they could carry on their backs. In fact, a few months after returning to Kabul, the King himself was forced out of the country, as a result of a religious riot, and spent the rest of his life as a refugee in Europe.



Figure 1 A Hazara Dambura.

Forced emigrants of minority backgrounds, who usually lose their properties and material possessions, endure not only geographical displacement but a deep sense of cultural loss as well. Such forced emigrants develop a close relationship with their intangible heritage, those things which cannot be taken away from them. One of the central forms of intangible heritage that reconnects forced migrants with a lost home is music, an asset that could be kept and carried wherever one goes. In predominately oral traditions, as Seeger (1991) has shown, music has even a greater significance.

The Hazaras are a Persian-speaking religious and ethnic minority who have traditionally been under various forms of persecution in Afghanistan. In 2013, *The Atlantic* magazine called them “one of most persecuted ethnic groups on the planet” (Stern, 2013). The Hazaras are Shia Muslims while the majority of the country are Sunni. In addition, they are a visible minority of Eastern Turkic origin with strong Asian features that easily distinguish them from the majority of Afghans who look Caucasian. Considered Afghanistan’s “heretics and *Untermenschen*” (Maley, 2001, p. 357), the Hazaras have been on the run for more than a century, seeking refuge mainly in the neighboring countries of Iran and Pakistan and, in recent years, Europe and Australia.

In this article, I do not offer an ethnomusicological study on dambura music, despite drawing on that scholarship. Instead, I discuss the mediatisation of dambura as a communication phenomenon to show how the process of music-making among the Hazara community has changed over time. I particularly examine the way war and persecution politicized Hazara folk music, transforming it into a tactical medium that functions as something more than mere entertainment. The Hazaras, I will show, practice dambura to preserve a collective cultural identity and counter exclusionary narratives. Therefore, the dambura music, in addition to serving as a crucial tool in political mobilization among this community, is a great source of historical knowledge as well. The dambura songs provide us with the suppressed voices that we rarely hear in official Afghan history or mainstream media. This article draws from dambura song texts produced by the Hazaras, in particular the brothers Sarwar Sarkhosh and Dawood Sarkhosh, and interviews with people with firsthand knowledge of the historical context. This work contributes to debates on mediatisation of folk music, tactical media, and the cultures of resistance in diasporic music-making.

Tactical media and the oppressed

Tactical media is the media of states of emergency. When certain social groups, for whatever reasons, are excluded from mainstream narratives, they employ alternative media to get their message across without falling prey to state censorship or the power-laden gatekeeping practices of establishment media. The concept of Tactical Media emerged in the late 1990s. It refers to a do-it-yourself media activism that was made possible thanks to the rise of digital technology and the Internet. According to David Garcia and Geert Lovink (1997), who coined the term, the typical heroes of tactical media are activists, hackers, street rappers, and other groups who have untold stories to share such as “migrants, the refugees, the gasarbeiters, the asylum seekers, the urban homeless” — all who largely remain invisible in media landscape.

Tactical media activism is a product of the post industrial age in the United States and Europe when information economy paved the way for the rise of a “technical intelligentsia” (Raley, 2009, p. 3). The civil protest in this new era is mostly expressed in digital artistic practices and media campaigns, such as hashtag activism and hacktivism, which serve as tactical tools to challenge power and disrupt dominant narratives. The story for non-Western and nonliterate communities, however, is different. Nonliterate

and isolated ethnic communities traditionally have used oral media such as folk music to communicate (Dorson, 1973; Slobin, 2010). Folk music served as a tactical medium that helped them fight back against state interventions. In classical media theory, oral traditions, such as folk songs, were categorized as time-based media forms that last centuries and, for much of human history, remained the primary medium to store knowledge (Innis, 2008).

Folk music still remains a significant medium today in many places in the world for its ability to evade institutional control and censorship. Even in the United States, folk musicians such as Pete Seeger (1919–2014), a prominent musical activist, knew the power of his music and was keen to use it as a tactical medium. He is, in fact, considered a significant figure in development of tactical media (Svec, 2015). In protest against institutional racism in the United States, Seeger co-wrote a song called “The Ballade of Old Monroe” (1962), which chronicles the persecution of Robert F. Williams, an African American civil rights leader in Monroe, North Carolina. At the beginning of the song, however, he first provides a sharp critique of mainstream media: “The papers and the TV never told a story straight/So listen now, I will tell you the honest facts relate” (quoted in Svec, 2015, p. 163). Much like Seeger, who was frustrated by the bias of mainstream media and systematic racism, Hazara refugees, living in makeshift camps as a stateless population in Pakistan, turned their dambura into a tactical medium.

Hazara diasporic music has not yet been studied. Even Hazara folk music in general has been largely unexamined (only some brief notes could be found in Ferdinand 1959; Mousavi 1997; Slobin 1976), with the significant exception of works done by Sakata, who wrote her master’s thesis (1968) and part of her PhD project (1976, turned into book, 1983) on Hazara music. Her pioneering works not only provide a rich ethnographic analysis of the concept of music and musicians among the Hazaras, but also the place of music in the conservative Afghan society at large. Scholarly studies on Hazara music are limited to Sakata (1968, 1983) and some collections of audio recordings produced by German (1935) and Danish (1953–1955) “expedition” missions to Afghanistan (Irgens-Møller, 2007). In Persian, however, a number of books have been published on the Hazara folk poetry that focus more on its linguistic rather than musical aspects (Khavari, 2003; Shour, 2002).

Sakata’s works on Hazara dambura are extremely valuable. But since her fieldwork, half a century ago, much has changed and both the Hazara people and their folk music have been considerably transformed. Sakata’s work, furthermore, is limited to ethnographic and formal analysis and simply categorizes the content of Hazara music into romantic, religious, love songs, and lullaby. She makes few attempts to see whether or not the social and political experiences of the Hazara community had any implications in their music. Her work is part of a tradition in ethnomusicological studies that is disproportionately tune-oriented with little, or no, attention to texts. In these ethnomusicological studies, non-Western music is considered as “musical sounds” with no reference to “the human behavior out of which the sound system arises” (Merriam, 1963, pp. 211–212). This type of approach, which is no longer as popular as it used

to be, simply reduces the music of non-Western societies to apolitical entertainment. This omission is particularly unfortunate for those marginalized communities whose main instrument of communication is their oral music culture.

Sarwar Sarkhosh: The emergence of political dambura

There was always a media function in Hazara music as we see in *makhta* (an elegy in the form of oral poetry) that is produced to preserve and communicate significant historical events that otherwise would be forgotten. These oral repertoires have traces of almost all the Hazara history, from wars and slavery, to forced migrations and other events that are absent in official Afghan history books. The ideas of “home” (*khana*) and “separation” (*judayee*), in particular, are common themes in their folk songs that are sometimes used as romantic metaphors but sometimes in a direct reference to the lived experience. The following two *dubaitis* (couplets) are about separation with references to slavery:

Cry, my wounded dambura!
Cry, my torn off heart!
Cry, so God would give us mercy!
And Sakhi would break our chains!

O black cloud in the sky
Take my message to the Hazara country
If my beloved asked you about me
Tell her he is a slave, he doesn't get any days off

(Khavari, 2003, p. 301)

It was the 1978 communist coup, however, that changed everything in the country—including the Hazara folk music. The coup politicized Afghan culture and music on an unprecedented scale. The imposed communist state suppressed religiosity, on one hand, and encouraged art on the other—“revolutionary art” to be precise. Initially, the rise of the new regime was a cause for celebration for many Afghans, as it marked the end of the Musahiban Dynasty (1929–1978), a family of dictators who ruled the country for more than half a century. In the Hazara province of Daikundi (then Urozgan), a local singer/songwriter named Sarwar Sarkhosh joined the euphoria by singing several dambura songs in celebration of the “revolution.” In one of his songs, “Finally It’s the Turn for Laughter” (Sarkhosh, 2015) taped on an audiocassette on 24 December 1978, he sings about the oppression of the “the family,” referring to Musahiban rulers, and uses Afghan communists’ favorite pejorative label, “reactionary,” to tell the clergy they no longer can persecute him for practicing his art:

We swear on the blood of innocent children
We will not sleep until we get the rid of the reactionary

*O Sarkhosh, now live happily until you are alive
Because there is no insulting anymore in spaces of art-making*

Referring to the persecutions of the Hazaras under “Yahya’s sons” (Musahiban Dynasty), and demonstrating optimism for the new regime, he says:

*For our pains from Yahya’s sons’ beatings
Now we have a healing remedy for all of them
They didn’t consider the Hazara as human
Now the Hazara is a human once again*

In another song in this era, “O Malek Sahib, Think Something,” Sarwar Sarkhosh (2016a) sings against the local *maleks* (landlords) and government employees who lived off of bribery and exploitation of peasants.

*O Mr. Malek! Bribery is gone, take care of yourself
This new system works for all the people now
How longer could you take people’s cows and calves by force?
The poor commissar (“naazer”) has died for lack of bribery.*

He signs off the song, recorded on an audiocassette in a room of cheerful audience, by saying “Long Live the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan,” referring to the Communist Party. Sarkhosh later moved to Kabul and there, too, he recorded some of his original dambura songs in celebration of the communist coup, known back then as “The Great April Revolution.” Sarwar Sarkhosh’s excitement for the new regime was short-lived. He soon realized, despite all the propaganda for the unity and equality of ethnic groups by the new rulers, the place of Hazaras had hardly changed. The regime soon embarked on mass arrest of Hazara intellectuals and prominent figures of both right and left variety: the right, who were mostly composed of the clergy, for being “reactionaries” and the left for being Maoists. The regime’s crackdown quickly expanded to include the intelligentsia of all ethnic groups in every part of the country. Things worsened on Christmas Eve 1979 when the Soviet army invaded the country. The sporadic insurgency in some villages turned into a nationwide jihad and, as a result, mass migration accelerated among the Afghan people. Among many others, Sarwar Sarkhosh, too, fled the country.

In spring 1982, Sarkhosh arrived in Quetta (Figure 2), a Pakistani border town, where a large Hazara community was living since the end of 19th century when they escaped the genocidal massacre of 1893–1895 by Amir Abdul Rahman’s government (Katib Hazarah, 2013; Mousavi, 1997). In Quetta, Sarkhosh was welcomed by a secular Hazara group, Tanzim-e Nasl-e Naw-e Hazara-e Mughul (“The Mongol Hazara New Generation Organisation”). This group promoted Hazara nationalism and had Maoist tendencies—something that put it on the same side with the mujahedeen in their fight against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul. In Quetta, as a result of the migration, Hazara dambura music was popular. Partly because of the encounter with



Figure 2 A Map of the Region That Shows the Locations of Daikundi, Quetta, and Kabul.

South Asian culture that did not stigmatize music, but mainly because the folk music remained one of the last remnants of their identity, the Quetta refugees embraced the Hazara folk music and took it to new directions. They organized dambura concerts where Sarkhosh, and other singers, performed songs about Hazara awaking, unity, and their fight against the communist regime in Kabul. They also owned Radio Hazaragi, a small community radio station, which often broadcast politically charged folk music (Yakmanesh, 2012).

Sarwar Sarkhosh, born on 1 June 1942, belonged to a powerful family in Daikundi. His father, Ghulam Haidar “Wakil,” was a member of the Afghan parliament and enjoyed a great degree of influence in the local community. His uncle, Zaman Atrafi, was a Maoist who voluntarily distributed his lands among his landless farmers.² If not actively a Maoist, Sarkhosh was at least familiar with the political views of the group. As a young man, he did his national military service in Lal-Sarjangan in Ghor province where he met with Hiromi Sakata and played dambura for her (Sakata, 2013). At the time, mainly because of his dambura performances, he was widely regarded as an immoral man who spread indecency in the community through his love songs. He was tolerated only because of his influential family ties.³ After military service, he became a school teacher and then moved to Trinkot, the capital of Urozgan province, where he worked at the government’s tax office. In this capacity, he traveled extensively in the Hazara region and, as a result, he gained intimate knowledge of the oppressive machinery of the government and the extent of poverty and marginalization among

his people (Sarkhosh, 2016b). That experience inspired his later political songs that eventually transformed him into a serious figure in Afghan political music.

In Quetta, Sarwar Sarkhosh became a spokesman for the Hazara resistance against the Soviet occupation. All of his musical activities as an anti-Soviet voice, however, was not enough to earn him a favorable place among the mujahedeen in Daikundi, his home province. After the communist coup, his father was no longer a “wakil” (Member of Parliament) and it was the anti-Soviet mujahedeen, led by the clergy, who controlled the Hazara regions. They regarded Sarkhosh’s father as a remnant of the monarchy, his uncle as a communist, and Sarkhosh himself as a degenerate because of his musical profession.⁴ Mohammad Hussain Sadiqi Nili, a hardliner mullah with connections to the Iranian regime, was one of the most powerful local mujahedeen commanders in Daikundi. In 1983, when Sarwar Sarkhosh returned from Quetta to Afghanistan, he found himself in a difficult position. The mujahedeen viewed him as a communist, the communists considered him a Maoist and both considered him as the son of a feudal lord. He was an enemy for both sides.

On 29 August 1983, gunmen loyal to Sadiqi Nili raided the compound where Sarwar Sarkhosh and his large family lived. After a 1-hour gunfight, Sarkhosh, along with several of his family members were killed outside their home in Ghujur Bash, a village in Sangtakht district, Daikundi province. The killing of Sarkhosh shocked the Hazaras, sending a clear message on the position of mullahs regarding music. Sadiqi Nili continued his persecution until he killed, in total, 23 members of Sarkhosh family and forced the rest to flee the country.⁵

“In a country as devastated as Afghanistan, music is a gift in a dull and desperate struggle for survival,” notes Jean-Pierre Guinhut, former French Ambassador to Kabul. “The death of musicians from war should be commemorated in history as one of the worst crimes against humanity” (quoted in Baily 2015, p. 1). The violent death of Sarwar Sarkhosh was a huge loss to the emerging Hazara resistance movement. In his short but significant musical career, he turned political dambura into a cultural form and a prominent musical genre. He was a hero of tactical media who politicized the Hazara folk music to tell stories that others refused to tell, using only the recording function of an audiocassette player. His younger brother, Dawood, followed his path.

Dawood Sarkhosh: Dambura audiocassettes and Kalashnikov

If Sarwar Sarkhosh’s move to Pakistan was a turning point in mediatisation of dambura music, the forced migration of his surviving family from Afghanistan was as important in helping that genre of music to reach new levels of popularity. On 18 September 1983, the Sarkhosh family members who survived the August massacre, fled Daikundi for Quetta. Among them was Sarwar’s 12-year old brother, Dawood. He did not sing or play any instruments, but his hidden musical talent was discovered by Tanzim-e Hazara activists who encouraged him to follow his brother’s

path by pursuing a musical career. Dawood dedicated his years in Quetta to music and the Hazara diaspora groomed him to become a popular singer whose music hugely influenced the generation of Hazaras who grew up, or fought, in the long years of war in the 1990s (Yakmanesh, 2012). In songs such as the one that follows, Dawood Sarkhosh recorded the sprite of the Hazaras during the atrocities of those wars:

*I wish our enemies were infidels
I wish we hadn't shared meals with them
The things that an infidel would never do
Our Muslim friends did to us*

He continues in a defiant tone:

*You can plant daggers on our way
You can tie our hands and legs with ropes
We have broken iron chains
These things are our children's toys*
(Hazaralife.net, 2013)

After the fall of the communist regime in April 1992, anti-Soviet mujahedeen failed to share power and a civil war broke out in the country that put different ethnic groups against each other. The Hazaras, finding themselves under fire from several sides, fought a bloody war of survival in Kabul between 1992 and 1995 and then, in the provinces, against the Taliban regime until 2001. Hazara resistance was led by a revolutionary anti-Soviet mullah named Abdul Ali Mazari (1946–1995) who was the leader of the main Hazara political party, Hezb-e Wahdat-e Islami (Islamic Unity Party). Realizing the significance of dambura in mobilizing Hazaras, he actively encouraged political dambura music—contrary to views of fellow mullahs who considered instrumental music to be un-Islamic. Some other Hazara clergymen also abandoned their previous views on instrumental music and embraced dambura as a symbol of ethnic identity among the Hazaras. Abu-Talib Muzaffari, an exiled Hazara mullah in Mashad, Iran, wrote a lengthy ballad praising this instrument. It took a while, however, before dambura became an acceptable medium of propaganda by the Hazara clergy during the war.

In spring 1992, in the early days of civil war in Kabul, dambura was not common among the Hazara fighters. In their checkpoints all over West Kabul, the territory they controlled, boomboxes would play, instead, religious-themed songs like “Shahidam Man, Shahidam Man” (I’m a Martyr, I’m a Martyr), an Iranian song used during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) by Iranian soldiers. People, however, could not relate to such songs. As a result, the party realized that it needed better tools, effective enough, to motivate the Hazaras of Kabul to join the war and stay there. In dambura music they found an answer. Young members of the Wahdat party came together

and created the Audio-Visual Unit inside the party's headquarters at the Institute of Social Sciences. West Kabul was under economic sanction by the government and electricity and fuel were hard to access. Still, they managed to find a generator and some fuel to set up a guerilla recording studio: two audiocassette players facing each other that one played and the other recorded. The efforts were carried out by Nasrullah Paik and his colleagues who reproduced hundreds of Dawood Sarkhosh's dambura songs and distributed them among Hazara fighters in Kabul.⁶

It was a great cultural transformation. Just a few years before, Hazara mujahedeen would persecute dambura players and had banned dambura music even at weddings. Once in Behsud, Wardak province, they seized a boombox for playing dambura during a wedding. They then turned it into a shooting target in front of all the guests.⁷ Now, things had changed as dambura became the official battle cry of the Hazaras during the war. In 1992, Abdul Ali Mazari invited Safdar Tawakkuli, a famous Kabul-based dambura player, to a meeting in the Institute of Social Sciences. The dambura players who feared mullahs for decades now were recognized by them as legitimate cultural figures. In the fall of 1993, during a cultural festival held at Kabul University, Safdar Tawakkuli and Aman Yusufi, another dambura player, performed for a large audience that included Mazari and other top Wahdat leaders. Many Hazaras who were involved in the civil war in Kabul, credit Abdul Ali Mazari for giving dambura an official status and transforming it into a socially acceptable cultural practice.⁸

In the 1990s, Dawood Sarkhosh, as the star dambura player of the era, produced provocative political songs that were more effective in inspiring Hazara guerilla fighters than any other tools (Royesh, 2010). His cassettes would blast loudly in boomboxes wherever Hazara guerrillas were fighting. In a way, Dawood Sarkhosh's dambura was more effective than an AK-47. Dambura was the perfect tactical medium to fight the government's propaganda campaigns. During the civil war, Afghanistan's only television and radio stations were in the hands of the government led by Burhanuddin Rabbani, Ahmad Shah Massoud, and Rasul Sayyaf. They would use these official, mainstream media against the Hazaras in any way they could. In summer of 1993, they launched a media campaign accusing the Hazaras of hiring children to inject poison in people's food. The accusation was then discredited, but still the government jailed and tortured several Hazaras, including children, over a fabricated news story.⁹ In such an environment, dambura was the only tool the Hazaras had to challenge the television and radio propaganda published by rival groups.

The Hazara guerillas in West Kabul, devised another tactical medium too for propaganda purposes: they mounted a loudspeaker on a car and drove around announcing news, reports, and recruitment notices to the public. They would play dambura to attract attention and then read the announcements. It was a highly effective technique at the time. In 1994, for instance, when Nasrullah Paik and his colleagues drove around town to announce the return of Sadiq Mudabbir, a Hazara politician who had joined the rival groups, crowds would gather around the car and cheer. People would get particularly animated when they heard the following Dawood Sarkhosh song that

would be played after the announcement. In Doghabad neighborhood, the Hazara porters on the street broke into dance upon hearing it:¹⁰

O brother, come, and let's sit face to face

One thing I say, and two you say

(Private collection of Nasrullah Paik, Finland.)

Today as a result of the works of Sarkhosh brothers, and several other dambura players who rose during the years of war and migration, instrumental dambura music is the most popular cultural form among the Hazaras—both inside and outside Afghanistan. The new status of Hazara people and their music is best evident in how major non-Hazara singers in Afghanistan produce Hazara songs, using Hazaragi accents. This trend includes Farhad Darya (a Pashtun) and Aryana Sayeed (a Tajik-Pashtun), two major Afghan pop stars. Before the 1990s, no non-Hazara artist was interested in associating with the Hazaras by performing their folk songs. The Kabul war changed that. The war cost the Hazaras a great deal, but it also earned them a seat at the table of power and improved their image in the Afghan cultural sphere.¹¹

Diasporic dambura in the age of digital media

“You have to understand,” the Somali-British poet Warsan Shire writes about the refugee crisis, “no one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land” (quoted in Friedman, 2015). Today, the Hazaras are one of the main communities of refugees who use small fishing boats to get to Australia (Martin, 2015). The problem of Hazara asylum-seekers in Australia has become so significant that the Australian government placed ads on Afghan television stations warning them not to come. In one of the advertisements (ABF TV, 2014), an Australian army officer warns possible asylum seekers of coming to Australia, while in his background, we see a picture of a small boat swinging helplessly in a scary, stormy sea.

The experience of riding small boats in unpredictable seas has left a lasting impact on the cultural memory of the Hazara diaspora. This experience is best depicted in a folk song by Mohammad Hamdam, a young Hazara refugee who himself went to Australia on a boat (Ali Akbar, 2012). The song, titled “Australia,” is an elegy for a young Hazara asylum seeker from Quetta, Pakistan, who goes to Australia on a boat and drowns in the sea. Following the tradition of Hazara mediatized folk, the song and its music video are produced by amateur equipment and uploaded on YouTube. Part of the text says:

Save me from the color of the sea, from the cruel heart of the sea

I'm going empty-handed, to the fight of the sea

You sea, did you get full or not?

You sea, you drove me mad out of pain and sorrow

You sea, why you don't get a rest?

You sea, why you have no mercy on youth?

The poetic imagery of the song as well as the music video of “Australia” portrays the figure of the sea as a hungry villain that is never satisfied no matter how many Hazaras he eats. This is particularly remarkable as traditionally in Afghanistan, a landlocked country, poets write about the sea as a magical paradise that is beautiful, life-giving, and generous. The experience of riding boats in dangerous seas has transformed the way Hazaras imagine sea, an otherwise symbol of life in Persian poetry.

Dambura performers in diaspora are influenced by the different places where they ended up settling. Most of the young Hazara folk singers in the West, including Mohammad Hamdam, perform folkloric dambura songs either without using a dambura or mixing it with Western instruments like guitar, keyboard, or auto-tune. Older generation of performers, however, still prefer to play dambura in old-fashioned way. Dawood Sarkhosh, who now lives in Vienna, Austria, mixes dambura with Western instruments, but also plays it solo occasionally. However, he no longer uses tactical methods, such as boomboxes, to record and distribute his music and instead works in professional studios.

There is a strong geographical component in Hazara music. In absence of a genre system, Hazara singers use geography to categorize their music. This is why the Hazaras, while valuing the texts, have a stronger emotional attachment to the familiar melodies of their music. As Ferdinand (1959) had observed, a Hazara can always tell you which region a particular tune comes from. Therefore most of the melodies used in dambura music are associated with a region, a valley, or a province. This strong emotional attachment of melodies to geographical imagination of the Hazaras and to their idea of the lost “home” is the main reason they remain popular among diasporic musicians.

Digital technologies have helped migrant communities to stay connected with their origins. Among the Hazaras, new media have offered them a new way to produce and consume music. Musical performances in Hazarajat used to take place exclusively in the context of a private and informal setting (Sakata, 1983), but in the diasporic communities, music is instantly available online — a distinct advantage for tactical folk musicians. The dominant form of dambura performance is still private and informal, but websites such as YouTube have lifted barriers of time and space and has given opportunities for informal private dambura performances to be shared widely within minutes. In the past, it was the audiocassette that served as the main tactical medium for dambura singers. Today, YouTube is the global tactical medium for all the marginal music makers who have stories to share.

Conclusion

In a way, to practice tactical media is like bringing a knife to a gunfight — not out of naiveté, however, but out of necessity. A tactical media activist is not afraid to use an

audiocassette of folk songs to challenge a state that operates a television station. Mediatizing the conventionally nonmedia instruments is what makes the tactical media powerful. This flexibility also means that each era, and each country, produces its own tactical media. The oppressed and marginalized groups employ whatever tool possible as a tactical medium of communication. The Hazaras in Afghanistan used folk songs as media of communication and as a repository of their history. The practice of music-making among the Hazaras is a political exercise that maintains strong connections to the experiences of persecution this group has gone through for decades. In Afghanistan where only a 31.7 of the population is literate (United Nations Development Program, 2014) and oral traditions are strong, folk music plays a significant role. The role of folk songs is more important for an excluded minority such as the Hazaras whose literacy rate is even lower than national average (Emadi, 1997).

In July 2017, Hazara mullahs in Bamiyan province issued a statement calling on an upcoming Dambura Festival to be cancelled. The Hazaras of Bamiyan, however, defied the mullahs by gathering as planned and enjoying the festivity (Ahmadi, 2017). The whole episode was a reminder of how much the Hazaras have changed over the past few decades. A change that is best exemplified in their folk music. War and migration transformed dambura from a stigmatized un-Islamic practice to a powerful tactical medium of communication and community mobilization. This article attempted to shed light on this neglected aspect of cultural resistance as practiced by a long-suffering minority.

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Notes

- 1 In Afghanistan, most of dambura instruments were traditionally produced by artisans in Aybak, Samangan province. Today there are dambura makers in Daikundi, Kabul, and elsewhere too. Khadim Hussain Shafae, better known as Khadim Beg, from Dahan-e Deval, Daikundi, is a notable Hazara dambura maker who has long been living in Iran as a refugee.
- 2 Interview with Zakaria Sarkhosh and Zaman Atrafi in May 2017.
- 3 Interview with an informant in April 2016. Some of Sarkhosh's songs touched upon issues that even today might be considered too sensitive. He has a song, for instance, called "Tu Ra Lay Lay Namukadi Ayeh Tu" (Sarkhosh, 2016c) where he describes his love affair with a married woman. "News came that my beloved was beaten up by her husband / he has done wrong and may his face be cursed/People! Go tell to that

- fatherless one/not a string of her hair must be missing.” The woman is also older than him but he does not care: “I pray to God and I beg Him/to cut from my life and add to yours.”
- 4 Interview with an informant in April 2016.
 - 5 Interview with an informant on 16 March 2017. Another dambura player, Mir Chaman Sultani, was luckier than Sarkhosh. On his brief visit to Hazarajat in the 1980s, when his pro-mujahedeen song “Tufang ay yar qalb-e na saburam” (lyrics by Salman Ranjbar) was quite popular, the mujahedeen caught him and beat him up. He fled back to Quetta where he stayed there until the fall of Taliban. Interview with Nasrullah Paik on 22 April 2017.
 - 6 To avoid a backlash from the conservative mullahs, they would use the word *surud* (group singing) to refer to those songs instead of *ahang* (song with an instrument). It was only a defensive word play, as the clergy had no problem with un-accompanied group singing. Interview with Nasrullah Paik on 22 April 2017.
 - 7 Interview with Nasrullah Paik on 22 April 2017.
 - 8 Interview with an informant on 25 and Nasrullah Paik on 28 April 2017.
 - 9 A detailed account of the incident can be found in an interview given by Dr. Mohammad Fahim Gholami, a Hazara physician, one of the 6 or 7 prisoners (Namay-e Khabari Wahdat, 1994).
 - 10 Interview with Nasrullah Paik on 22 April 2017.
 - 11 Also, Afghan Star, a mega television event in Afghanistan (similar to American Idol), has greatly helped the popularity of Hazara dambura music. Since 2005, when the show begun, five Hazara contestants have won the top title so far.

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