

The Afghanistan National Radio and Television Archives: Past and Future

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(Introduction from Dr. H. Lorraine Sakata, Principal Investigator, NEH Digitization Project for the Afghanistan National Radio and Television Archives: It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you Mr. Taj Mohammad Ahmadzada, the General Manager of the Archives of Radio-Television Afghanistan. I want to thank the organizers of this conference, in particular, Dorothy Noyes and Margaret Mills for not only inviting Mr. Ahmadzada, but for going to great lengths to help him obtain a U.S. visa and make his travel arrangements. I'd like to acknowledge the help of the American Institute of Afghanistan Studies Center in Kabul, its Director, Dr. Whitney Azoy, and Assistant Rohullah Amin, who were instrumental in helping Mr. Ahmadzada obtain his visa and travel arrangements, and also the American Institute of Afghanistan Studies office in Boston, especially Michael Carroll, the Executive Assistant there, who also helped facilitate his travel from Kabul to Columbus. But most of all, I want to thank Mr. Ahmadzada for accepting the invitation, and enduring the endless red tape and sometimes irrational security measures at airports to be here with us today.)

On behalf of Radio Television Afghanistan, I am very happy to be here today. I would like to thank the organizers of this international conference on archiving for inviting me to participate and learn from the discussions with other participants in this distinguished international conference. I bring you the warm greetings of all the staff of Radio Television Afghanistan.

Afghanistan has 5,000 years of known cultural heritage including archeological remains, pre-Islamic and modern historical knowledge. All periods have contributed greatly to our national cultural patrimony. It is important for all of us to recognize the importance of past contributions as well as current ones, to understand the place and meaning of Afghan culture in the contemporary world today. Media in Afghanistan have an important role in conveying this knowledge of the full scope of national history, heritage and culture to the general public, which is still predominantly non-literate.

A rudimentary radio station was established in Kabul during the reign of Amanullah Khan in the early 1920s. King Amanullah envisioned a modernizing project in education, publication, and media designed to parallel the modernizing efforts of Mustapha Kamal Ataturk in Turkey and Reza Shah in Iran. Live radio programs were broadcast through loud speakers located in parts of Kabul city and in some cases, 78 rpm discs, cut in Afghanistan and produced in India, were broadcast by the station. But without the availability of individual radio sets, the station did not last beyond the reign of Amanullah Khan, who was deposed in 1929. The station now known as Radio Afghanistan, formerly known as Radio Kabul, was established in 1941.

The Radio Archives were established in 1961 by Anwar Shaheen, Radio Afghanistan administrator and musician, in order to protect the studio recordings produced in their studios. It now houses more than 60,000 reels of their own radio broadcast recording tapes and large collections of commercial audio recordings, including the original 78 rpm recordings made in the 1920s, cassettes and CDs. It not only serves to preserve cultural information for posterity, but is also available as a resource for new broadcasts, for informing the public about the different cultural regions of the country, and to help Afghans, particularly the youth of the country, who

have suffered greatly from displacement and the interruption of their education, to discover or re-discover their own national identity. The institution is also seen as a bridge between the various ethnic groups of Afghanistan and between the government and its people. This cultural connection between government and nation brings new life, spirit and soul to an ancient body. The institution also serves as a bridge to other cultures of the world. From the beginning, archival holdings included commercial recordings of foreign music, often a result of international exchanges between governments, organizations and individuals. It also has translations and interpretations of speeches of world leaders. In short, the Radio Archives contribute to international understanding between world cultures.

The Archives of Radio Television Afghanistan are under the directorship of the Department of Broadcasting. In the beginning, as mentioned before, Afghanistan Radio broadcast live programs. It was not until they had the ability to make tape recordings in their studios that the need for archives became apparent. After they started preserving the recorded materials, they realized the need to make categories of organization. These categories included recordings of historical discourse and speeches on political and religious topics, of presentations on Afghan arts and literature, of Afghan and foreign music, of Islamic and Taliban chants as well as informational programming. In fact, these categories reflected the interests of society.

Once the Archives were established, little attention was paid to the Archives by the government, which in retrospect can be seen as benign neglect. Except for occasional orders to move the Archives from place to place for security reasons during the civil wars of the 1980's and 1990's, there were no efforts made or extra resources provided to update or modernize the facilities or develop new projects. The need was so great that at one point, the archivists, with the support of several departmental directors, wrote an official appeal and declaration of the need

for resources to support the storage of the nation's treasure house of recordings. They approached individuals and businesses to contribute funds so they could purchase shelving, heaters and other equipment and supplies for maintaining a safer environment for their holdings.

It must be mentioned here that particularly in the last two decades, there have been direct attempts to destroy the cultural materials and end preservation efforts, by various groups. After the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, Taliban functionaries moved to destroy the Radio Archives on two separate occasions. First, in the course of four days, they managed to erase 1,500 reels of Indian and Iranian music tapes. They erased tapes, one by one, rather than simply destroying them physically, because they had begun to record their own materials and intended to keep the tapes for reuse. The archivists, who could secure no intervention from either national or international organizations to help protect the collection, approached Professor Mahmud Habibi, a famous author and literary scholar, for help. Sympathetic to our cause, he succeeded in contacting certain members of the Taliban leadership personally and persuading them to order a halt to destructive activities in the Archives for a while.

After a few months, the Taliban once again formed a committee to make an inventory of the tapes in the Archives, looking for music tapes and other tapes with music on them to erase. During the time that the committee began reviewing tapes, we secretly moved our most valuable recordings to a storage facility outside the Archives and outside the radio station. We hid other music tapes in a poorly-lit storage room full of empty boxes and scattered dust over whatever was in sight. When the committee arrived at the Archives, they headed straight to the music archives where they found the previously erased Indian and Iranian tapes, arrayed on the central work table for the committee to inspect. They assumed that other tapes remaining in view on adjacent wall shelves had also been erased, declared their work completed, and left. We had

already been warned that any attempt to conceal materials or interfere with the commission's work would be cause for arrest and worse. We put ourselves in danger for the sake of our national heritage. We could not stand by and see the destruction of this unique historical treasure house.

Having saved this institution from destruction from the Taliban, we are now trying to save its holdings from the ravages of time. With the help of a grant funded by the United States National Endowment of Humanities, we have started a project to digitize and create a database of the original music tapes in the Archives. The goal is to digitize 2,600 hours of music by the end of the two-year project. If other resources can be found, we will continue to digitize the complete reel-to-reel holdings of the Archives. Aside from digitization of the recordings, our greatest need is for equipment to control the temperature and humidity of the storage facilities.

The Archives are at the heart of Radio Television Afghanistan because the collection pumps the "blood" necessary to run all the departments of the station. Thus, the nation needs to look after the health of the institution in order to preserve and promote its national legacy.