“ONLY THE NAME IS NEW:”
IDENTITY, MODERNITY, AND CONTINUITY
IN AFGHAN STAR

A MASTER’S THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

BY
TIMOTHY OLSON

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS IN ETHNOMUSICOLOGY

May 15, 2017
Copyright © 2017 by Timothy Olson
In the name of God,
the merciful and compassionate,
creator of sound, silence,
beauty, and culture.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my incredibly patient and kind wife, Rowena, for her support from the very beginning of this project. Not only did she sit with me through hundreds of hours of *Afghan Star*, but she served as a sounding board for ideas, contributed her own thoughts, read through my first draft, and gave me space to spend long hours in front of the computer. No one could ask for a better partner.

I am grateful to my language teachers and colleagues at the International Assistance Mission for teaching me Dari and Afghan culture. Without them, this work would have been impossible. I am also thankful to those who assisted me with data collection and analysis, especially my mother Ruth, and sister Karen. My mother also read an early draft and provided valuable insights.

From the outset of this project, I have been extremely grateful for the groundwork laid by other researchers, particularly Dr. John Baily and Dr. Lorraine Sakata, both of whom I have cited extensively throughout this paper. Not only have I benefited from their scholarship, but both have promptly answered my e-mails over the last few years and willingly met with me in person when the opportunity arose. These interactions have challenged me to keep studying and growing in my understanding of Afghan culture. Dr. Sakata kindly read through a draft of this work and rescued me from a few intellectual blunders. I am also thankful to staff members from Moby Group and Tolo TV for their willingness to talk with me and share their thoughts. I found them very approachable and friendly.

My thanks to the faculty of Liberty’s ethnomusicology department, who have taught me much about music and scholarship. Thanks to Dr. Benham for founding this MA program and guiding me through my first years of study. Dr. Paul Rumrill and Dr. George McDow were
helpful in the early stages of designing this project and writing a literature review. My advisor, 
Dr. Katherine Morehouse, gave me freedom to pursue this research and provided big picture 
insights that forced me to organize my ideas more effectively. Finally, Dr. Jeffrey Meyer served 
as my second reader. His insights resulted in a more polished final product.

I hope that I have presented a positive and hopeful picture of Afghanistan. I have gained 
much from my experiences in this nation, and I love it dearly. I particularly treasure the 
friendships I have made with my Afghan teachers, colleagues, and students. If there are any 
errors in this work, or if I have inadvertently misrepresented anyone’s thought, the responsibility 
is solely mine, and I offer my apology.
Abstract

In 2005 a televised singing competition took Afghanistan by storm. In a nation previously known for censorship of music and violations of women’s rights, a new precedent began to take shape. People of all ages and ethnic groups followed Afghan Star and cast their votes by mobile phone—a technology that had only recently become available. Though followed by a sea of controversy, Afghan Star has persisted for more than a decade and remains one of the most popular television programs in Afghanistan. Prior to the Taliban, Afghanistan already had a vibrant musical culture, but most people felt that playing music was not an acceptable activity for someone from an honorable family. Such perceptions persist even today, but Afghan Star has begun the process of normalizing musicianship in society.

This thesis explores the ways in which Afghan Star models national identity in the twenty-first century and seeks to assess its impact on Afghan culture. The study relies on data from the show itself, a quantitative survey of Afghan viewers, and ethnographic interviews with Afghan musicians. Western media coverage has focused on the role of the show in promoting democracy and women’s rights, but this study shows that the significance of Afghan Star goes beyond these issues. Afghan Star has precedent in history, a strong voice in promoting national unity, and a vision for social change. Afghan Star is a place where people of different ethnicities compete as equals, where ancient and modern genres of music comfortably coexist, and where young people feel free to develop their talents. As such, it models a vision of what Afghanistan could be in the future.
Contents

Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................................................... iii

Abstract ......................................................................................................................................................... v

Contents ........................................................................................................................................................ vi

Chapter 1: Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 1

Statement of the Problem .............................................................................................................................. 3

Need for the Study ......................................................................................................................................... 4

Thesis Statement .......................................................................................................................................... 6

Research Questions ...................................................................................................................................... 9

Glossary of Terms .......................................................................................................................................... 10

Limitations of the Study ............................................................................................................................... 12

Assumptions .................................................................................................................................................. 14

Chapter 2: Literature Review ....................................................................................................................... 16

Demographic Information ............................................................................................................................ 16

Key Researchers ........................................................................................................................................... 18

Historical Precedent for Afghan Star ........................................................................................................ 20

Historical Context for Afghan Star ............................................................................................................ 26

Implications .................................................................................................................................................... 31

Chapter 3: Methodology .............................................................................................................................. 34
Research Tools ........................................................................................................................................ 35
Fieldwork Procedures ................................................................................................................................ 36
Participants in the Study ............................................................................................................................ 38
Data Collection Methods .......................................................................................................................... 39
Timeline ..................................................................................................................................................... 40

**Chapter 4: Survey Results** .................................................................................................................. 42

Mazar-e-Sharif ........................................................................................................................................... 42
Lal wa Sarjangal .......................................................................................................................................... 68
Faizabad, Badakhshan ............................................................................................................................... 70
Concluding Remarks ............................................................................................................................... 73

**Chapter 5: Interview Results** ............................................................................................................. 74

Youth Development .................................................................................................................................. 75
Distinct Afghan Character ......................................................................................................................... 81
Economic Effects .......................................................................................................................................... 86
Educational Aspects ................................................................................................................................. 88
A Voice for Women .................................................................................................................................... 92
Political Aspects .......................................................................................................................................... 96
A Voice for Minorities ............................................................................................................................... 99
Concluding Remarks ............................................................................................................................... 103
Chapter 6: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations ........................................ 104

Sources Consulted ............................................................................................................ 109

Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval ............................................................. 115

Appendix B: Informed Consent Documents .................................................................... 116

Appendix C: Questionnaire ............................................................................................. 123
Chapter 1: Introduction

My connection to Afghanistan goes back nearly as far as I can remember. My parents were involved in community development and health education in different regions of the country. Because of this I grew up interacting with Afghan people, eating Afghan food, and hearing Afghan music. Through my childhood, I spent a total of eight years in Mazar-e-Sharif and Kabul (between 1993 and 2003). It was enough to spark a lifelong interest in the culture, people, and music. After earning a Bachelor of Arts in Music, I returned to Kabul in 2013 where I spent a year studying Dari and doing administrative work with the International Assistance Mission (IAM), a non-profit Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). Concurrently, I was working towards my Master of Arts in Ethnomusicology and studying tabla with a local instructor.

Though I will never fully be accepted as an insider, I identify strongly with many elements of Afghan culture. A significant portion of what I know about Afghanistan has been learned through experience, much of it in early childhood. Some cultural behaviors peculiar to Afghanistan are merely engrained in my way of thinking. On the other hand, I am a native English speaker with a Western education. I do not have access to the deep insider knowledge any Afghan would grow up with; so, I have spent many years reading and studying about the culture. As a result, my observations fall somewhere between those of an insider or an outsider.

Having lived and worked in Afghanistan intermittently throughout my life, I am fascinated by Afghan music. I grew up hearing it in local shops, taxis, and at weddings. I witnessed firsthand the censorship of music under the Taliban and the proliferation of black market media. Later, I became intrigued by the popular television series Afghan Star. Hosted by Tolo TV, the largest private network in the country, Afghan Star is an amateur singing
competition similar to the globally popular *Idols* franchise.\(^1\) Borrowing terminology from Mark Slobin (1996, 2), this study deals with themes of identity, modernity, and continuity in *Afghan Star*, drawing on both the show itself and field research with Afghan viewers.\(^2\)

The theme of identity is relevant not only in terms of national character, but also as it pertains to religion, gender, ethnicity, and place. The musical styles people choose to embrace speak not only of their heritage, but also of the way they see themselves and their world. As a relatively recent addition to Afghan culture, *Afghan Star* offers a vision of what Afghan identity could look like in the twenty-first century. It places men and women from a variety of ethnic groups together on a single stage to proudly say “I am Afghan.” As such, it privileges national interest without erasing traditional ethnic lines.

The themes of modernity and continuity are tightly linked with identity. The question of what it means to be Afghan is inseparable from the questions of what it means to cling to tradition and what it means to embrace modernity. Afghans are the first to admit that they belong to a very traditional Islamic society, yet many young people in Afghanistan desire to change with the times. Some people perceive modernity as incompatible with being Afghan. On the other extreme, many young people wholeheartedly embrace Western culture, seeing it as more advanced than their own. *Afghan Star*, a type of middle ground between these two perspectives, models an alternative mode of being. It makes use of a modern Western format, but frequently showcases music that belongs in the realm of the traditional.

---

1. Created by Simon Fuller in 2001, *Pop Idol* was a British televised singing competition. *American Idol* was launched in 2002, utilizing the same format. Drawing on its success, fifty-five licensed regional variants have been televised around the world (Fremantle Media n.d.). Some have run for just a few seasons while others have aired for a decade or more. The format has also inspired a range of spin-off shows such as *The X-Factor* and *Got Talent*. Although *Afghan Star* is similar in format to *Pop Idol*, it differs in a number of key ways and is not affiliated in any way with Fremantle Media, the company that owns the *Idols* franchise.

2. Slobin lists these themes in a slightly different order: “modernity, identity, and continuity.” Here, and throughout the study, I use the word “modern” per popular usage to mean “fresh,” “new,” or “with the times.”
Statement of the Problem

When I talk to people in the West, I often ask “What do you think about when I say the word ‘Afghanistan?’ What images come to mind?” Invariably, they respond with an array of negative words and phrases: war, terrorism, desert, Taliban, burqas, opium, guns, oppression of women. While these common stereotypes have a basis in truth, they are not the whole picture. Further, they tend to heighten the fears of an already nervous Western public. In the United States and other Western nations, violence against Muslims is on the rise (Obeidallah 2015). Such violence is rooted in fear and misunderstanding; so, the negative images must be countered with pictures of hope. The problems are real, but Afghanistan, as I know it, is a place of beauty and hospitality. This message needs to be disseminated widely.

Other researchers in Afghanistan have had similar motives. In her most recent book, Sakata observes, “I want to share our experiences with those who know Afghanistan only through media stories of insurgency, corruption and oppression in order to present a more multidimensional and nuanced picture of the country and the people we have come to respect” (Sakata 2013, xi). In a new introduction for the reprint of Three Women of Herat, Veronica Doubleday lists some of the stereotypes that her research called into question.

Women held in subjugation and imprisonment, ashamed to show their bodies; women treated as chattels, given in exchange for so many camels; women kept deliberately backward and subservient, walking ten paces behind their husbands, incapable of independent thought or decision; women in harems, scantily dressed, given up to the pleasure of indolent sultans. These ill-assorted images of exploitation and oppression are in reality only half-truths, based upon facts that have been jumbled and poorly understood. (Doubleday 2006, 11)

Although journalists may have altruistic motivations for promoting these stereotypes, Doubleday shows that they may actually be a disservice to Afghan women. The stereotypes depict Afghan women as weak and submissive, when in reality they are strong and resilient.
One aim of this study is to better understand the complexity and nuances of Afghan popular culture in the twenty-first century. Discourse about Afghanistan is usually dominated by concerns over war, the drug trade, or corruption. This project is intended to counteract some of the negative attitudes many people hold about Afghanistan and Muslims in general. Hopefully it will demonstrate the positive role music plays in the lives of many Afghan people. Secondarily, the project highlights areas where further research and action are needed. Recommendations are given in Chapter Six.

Need for the Study

Home to some of the world’s oldest archaeological sites, stunning mountains, and a youthful population of around thirty-three million (World Population Statistics 2014), Afghanistan should be classed as a global tourism destination. Sadly, decades of war have made it an unlikely choice for most outsiders. Despite these hostile forces, the people of Afghanistan maintain a vibrant culture that includes unique cuisine, architecture, clothing, and music. Since 9/11 and the “War on Terror,”\(^3\) heightened awareness of Afghanistan has led to a plethora of popular literature and documentaries by Western “experts.” This is positive on one level. However, such literature often unintentionally reinforces negative stereotypes of the Afghan people and obscures more serious academic research into Afghan culture. While popular literature on Afghanistan is abundant and accessible, scholarly research is a little sparser.

Nearly thirty years ago John Baily noted that few ethnomusicologists had studied in Afghanistan, largely due to misconceptions about the music:

In comparison to India and Iran the music of Afghanistan has attracted rather little ethnomusicological research, and this is no doubt connected to the fact that Afghanistan

---

is not generally considered to have an ‘indigenous’ system of art music equivalent to the dastgāhs of Iran or the rags of North India. Part of the purpose of this study is to show that Afghanistan does have a distinct indigenous art music. (Baily 2012, ix)

Baily’s life work has clearly demonstrated the uniqueness of Afghan music. Yet the volatile situation of Afghanistan has kept many researchers out of the country for over thirty years.

To date, only a handful of ethnomusicologists have ventured into Afghanistan. Their work was conducted primarily from 1960 until the Soviet invasion of 1979 (Slobin 2003, “The Fieldwork Project”). While the quality of these studies is exceptional, even recent publications such as Hiromi Lorraine Sakata’s latest memoir describe an ethnographic situation that no longer exists (Sakata 2013, xi). This leaves massive gaps in the literature, particularly in the area of popular and regional musics. For instance, no ethnomusicologist has focused specifically on Pashtuns, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. Baily has made important strides toward understanding Afghan popular music (Baily 1981a; 1994; 2005; 2007; 2010; 2015), but his more recent work focuses primarily on the Afghan diaspora, leaving the current state of this genre in-country relatively unstudied. Sarmast (2009) offers a sweeping history of Afghan music, and Baily (2015) highlights much of what has happened in the Afghan music scene during the last four decades. However, neither of them speak into current trends among the average population of contemporary Afghanistan.

This project is an attempt to understand one part of Afghan popular culture. Hosted by Tolo TV, a subsidiary of Afghan-owned Moby Media Group, Afghan Star is a singing competition in which viewers are able to vote for their favorite contestant by mobile phone. Episodes are simulcast on Tolo TV and Radio Arman. The first season aired in September 2005, and at the time of writing the twelfth season has recently concluded. Over the past decade, the show has garnered attention from many Western media outlets including BBC News (BBC 2008;
Leithead 2008), *Time* (Baker 2008), and *People* (Grossman 2009). During the third season, a feature-length documentary with the same title as the series was made for Western audiences (Marking 2009). It highlighted the struggles of the top four contestants in season three as they headed into the final round of the competition.

While Havana Marking’s documentary raised important questions related to democracy and women’s rights, it does not represent an in-depth study of the series and its impact on Afghan society. Given its success over twelve years, the show deserves a closer examination. Rather than simply rehashing the oft-repeated statements that *Afghan Star* is a voice of democracy and freedom, it is time to take a more critical look at the role this competition actually plays in contemporary Afghanistan.

**Thesis Statement**

This thesis will explore the ways in which *Afghan Star* models national identity in the twenty-first century and seek to assess its impact on Afghan culture. Though popular culture is often dismissed as trivial, Katherine Meizel argues that reality TV, particularly the *Idols* format, is a place where serious cultural work takes place:

The *Idols* franchise has created a set of studio stages across the world, a set of forums where politics of national, regional, ethnic, and religious identities are performed….The narrative of each show in each of its regional variants represents real life, and real politics, renegotiated in song. (Meizel 2011, 7)

Like its counterparts around the world, *Afghan Star* provides a public forum to negotiate and renegotiate the traditional markers of ethnicity and identity. Regional, tribal, gender, and socio-economic differences all play a part in the competition, yet the rivalry appears genuinely friendly and an overarching sense of national pride is evident. *Afghan Star* promotes democracy, women’s rights, and innovation in music, yet maintains a strong respect for Afghan culture and
heritage. Traditional folk and classical songs are performed alongside newer styles like rock, rap, and Bollywood-style pop. Further, the judges insist on proper cultural behaviors such as respect for teachers and people in authority.

Far from being a mere copy of other Idols show, Afghan Star is symbolic of modern Afghan culture. With roughly a third of the nation tuning in each week, it is one of the main focal points of musical activity in Afghanistan, a stage for identity politics to be negotiated, and possibly a unifying force for the nation. Not only has it enabled a select group of amateur performers to rise to superstardom, but it has also democratized and normalized the process of music-making. Singing is no longer the exclusive domain of a hereditary class. Rather, it belongs to any Afghan with the ambition to succeed. By upholding some cultural norms and challenging others, Tolo TV, in part through Afghan Star, has established itself as one of the most significant cultural forces in Afghanistan.

Western commentators are particularly fascinated with the role of Afghan Star in promoting democracy and women’s rights. However, other issues emerging from the series are equally significant. When Slobin (1996, 2) suggested thinking of music in terms of modernity, identity, and continuity, he was referring to musical change in Soviet Eastern Europe. However, these words seem equally apropos in a discussion of Afghan Star. The show is about Afghanistan’s identity as a modern nation. Equally, it highlights the individuality of the performers, their tribal and regional differences, and the quest to define themselves in a complex and changing world. Performers present themselves as members of specific ethnic groups and

---

4. It is also worth noting that unlike many other television stations in Afghanistan, Tolo TV does not broadcast any illegal content (Altai Consulting 2015, 81). Afghan Star is a unique format, and Tolo TV’s adaptation of The Voice was licensed through the official channels.
culture-bearers for their own traditions. These different and sometimes conflicting identities collide throughout each season, providing a peaceful forum for culture contact.

The resulting program is simultaneously modern and ancient, for while promoting a popular Westernized vision of modernity, the show clearly links itself to local history. As one 2007 contestant, Lima Sahar, observed: “Only the name is new…Everything else in the program already existed in our culture. We have famous singers and musicians” (Baker 2008). Despite a Western format, sleek production, and a push for women’s rights, the show upholds many elements of tradition. Often, mini-documentaries within episodes have been used to educate viewers about important musicians from Afghanistan’s past. Traditional folk ensembles make frequent appearances as guest artists alongside more contemporary pop singers.

Afghan Star also links itself to modern trends of migration among Afghans. In the early years, auditions took place in cities around Afghanistan including Ghazni, Kunduz, and even across the border in Peshawar due to the high number of refugees living there. Eventually, the show settled into an annual cycle of auditions being held only in the largest cities: Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif, Herat, Jalalabad, and Kandahar. Jalalabad and Kandahar auditions typically get combined into one Pashtun-bloc episode due to fewer participants. However, from Season 8 onwards, Tolo has opened the competition to Afghans from around the world through online video auditions.

While most contestants still live in Afghanistan, the participation of diaspora Afghans shows that the concept of “Afghan-ness” is not narrowly bound to those living within Afghanistan’s borders. The winner of Season 10, Ali Saqi, had returned to Afghanistan from his home in Sweden in order to audition. During Season Eleven, Afghan Star (November 28, 2015) brought its audition process to Sydney, Australia, recognizing the desire of diaspora Afghans to
participate. A special panel of judges from the Australian-Afghan music scene presided over the selection. Unfortunately, the results were far from satisfactory. The turnout was small, and out of the few participants selected to travel to Kabul for the Top 160, none made it into the Top 12 round. On the other hand, an Afghan from Germany, Kawa Akbary, auditioned in Mazar-e-Sharif (November 6, 2015) and was selected for the Top 12. These contestants demonstrate that Afghan Star is not just for the homeland. It is for all Afghans, regardless of where they live.

In the end, all roads lead to Kabul. Participants who are selected during the audition rounds must travel to Kabul for a further set of televised tryouts in front of the judges. This reflects Kabul’s importance as the national capital, the largest city in Afghanistan, and the chief point of communication with the outside world. Afghan Star draws people from around the nation and the world into one central stage, from which they then can either shine or fail. By making music more accessible, Afghan Star has begun the process of normalizing musicianship in a society that has traditionally pushed musicians to its fringes.

Research Questions

Since its inception in 2005, Afghan Star has been highly successful, consistently drawing millions of viewers. Reportedly, over eleven million people watched the finale of season three (Marking 2009, 1:30:17), and numbers have stayed strong with close to ten million people watching the finale of season nine (Moby Group 2014). If these numbers are correct, roughly a third of Afghanistan’s population watches the show regularly and presumably an even larger number watch it on an occasional basis. By way of comparison, American Idol, one of the most successful television shows in United States history, peaked at around thirty-eight million

---

5. The reliability of these statistics is questionable and may represent no more than an educated estimate. Altai Consulting (2015, 83) reports that even most media outlets in Afghanistan don’t know much about their audience.
viewers—just twelve percent of the United States population (Meizel 2009, 8-9). In 2011, Tolo TV began uploading full episodes of *Afghan Star* to YouTube. This development has enabled diaspora Afghans to engage more fully with what is happening in the homeland. Each episode has received between one-hundred to five-hundred thousand views, and over fifty-eight thousand people have subscribed to the YouTube channel.

It is clear that the series has had a significant impact on Afghan culture, but what exactly is that impact? How do themes of identity, modernity and continuity intersect on *Afghan Star* to uphold some structures and change others? The show seems to blur distinctions between traditional culture and modernity as well as local and national identity. This study focuses on these points of intersection, bringing clarity to the issues highlighted by the competition.

**Glossary of Terms**

*Afghan* (افغان): Originally, this term referred exclusively to the Pashtun people. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it gradually came to mean anyone from Afghanistan. In 1964 the word was enshrined in the constitution as the official designation for any citizen of Afghanistan. Some minority groups resent this terminology, but no other all-encompassing term is available. For purposes of this paper “Afghan” means anyone from Afghanistan as well as their descendants living in other countries. It is also used as an adjective to describe aspects of the culture.

*Dari* (دری): The Afghan dialect of Persian. It is one of the two official languages of Afghanistan and serves as the lingua franca.

*Ghazal* (غزل): The most popular genre of Persian poetry. *Ghazals* typically are about love or mysticism. They follow a set rhyme scheme and have seven to fourteen lines. Frequently they are set to music (Loewen and McMichael 2010, 46). Because poetry plays such an important role in Afghan music, *ghazal* also refers to a style of classical singing.

*Hazara* (هزاره): A Persian speaking people group found primarily in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. Many Hazaras speak a distinct dialect known as Hazaragi. They claim descent from the Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan.
**Kharabat (خرابات):** The musicians’ quarters of old Kabul. Originally it housed the court musicians of Amir Sher Ali Khan. It gradually became home to hundreds of musicians and was one of the most important centers of musical activity in Afghanistan (Baily 2015, 17-18).

**Klasik (کلاسیک):** “Classical” music. This word can be synonymous with “ghazal” or with the kharabat style.

**Maheli (محلى):** Literally, this word means “local.” However, it has a wide range of meanings. When used in reference to music, it can be translated as “folk.” Sometimes the word is used to refer to music that is distinctly Afghan as opposed to foreign. Often, this distinction is made primarily on the basis of the instruments used. Maheli could also be translated as “traditional”—i.e. songs that have been around for many years, with unknown authors. The word also distinguishes regional styles from the more formalized urban music which has been influenced by India.

**Pashto (پښتو):** One of Afghanistan’s two official languages. It is spoken mainly in the southern provinces, as well as in Pakistan.

**Pashtun (پښتان):** The largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. Most Pashtuns live in southeastern Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan.

**Pop Music (پاپ):** A style of music intended for mass consumption, and often considered by musicians and connoisseurs to be inferior. In Afghanistan, the label “pop” encompasses a range of styles from tarz (see definition below) to Iranian, Indian, and Western hit songs. In general, pop music is characterized by the use of synthesizers, guitar, and Western-style drum kits. Often it uses major/minor keys, modulation, and harmony, which are not features of traditional Afghan music.

**Rap (رپ):** A style of music invented in urban America and increasingly popular around the globe. In Afghanistan, it is also referred to as gap (گپ)—a word that literally means “talk.”

**Tajik (تاجیک):** A Persian-speaking people group found primarily in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

**Tarz (طرز):** As defined by Baily this refers to a distinctly Afghan style of music invented from the late 1940s onwards. The main characteristics are a “verse, refrain and a melodically distinct instrumental section” (Baily 2015, 28). This contrasts with classical ghazal, in which the instrumental section repeats the main melodic theme.

**Turkmen (ترکمن):** A Turkic people group found mainly in Turkmenistan, Iran, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan.
**Ustad (استاد):** In English, this word literally translates as “teacher.” In a general sense, it can be used to address any esteemed teacher or professor. However, in many parts of the Middle East and South Asia, it is also used as an honorific for musicians and teachers. In Afghanistan, other titles were traditionally used for musicians. In the twentieth century, however, the Ministry of Culture and Information deliberately conferred the title of Ustad on many important cultural icons, likely in an effort to elevate the position of professional musicians in society (Sarmast 2009, 185).

**Uzbek (ایوژبېک):** An ethnic group found mainly in northern Afghanistan and the former Soviet states of Central Asia. The Uzbeks speak a distinct language called Uzbeki.

### Limitations of the Study

This study is not a comprehensive analysis of contemporary Afghan music. Nor is it a case study of a particular musician. Rather, it is a selective look at sociocultural themes arising from a nationally significant television show. The results should not be seen as a conclusive representation of the country as a whole, or even of a particular region or ethnic group. The opinions reflect the individual backgrounds of the people with whom I interacted. In short, this study does not attempt to answer every question related to *Afghan Star.* Nor does it provide a statistically significant, systematic survey of all viewers. Instead, it provides flashes of insight from individual members of Afghan society that help to explain what *Afghan Star* means to them and why.

Two crucial elements of this study were: 1) a ten-point questionnaire, given to anyone who showed interest, and 2) in-depth interviews with career musicians. Ideally, this research should have been conducted in a variety of locations around the country, both urban and rural. However, because security in Afghanistan remains volatile, I was not able to travel widely around the country. My research was conducted primarily in Mazar-e-Sharif, a major urban center. Smaller subsets of data were collected from Lal-wa-Sarjangal, Ghor, as well as Faizabad,
Badakhshan. I conducted this research part time, while also working a full-time job as an English teacher. This limited the amount of time I could devote to focused music research. Nonetheless, I was able to obtain a substantial number of surveys that I believe reasonably reflect the attitudes of people in Mazar-e-Sharif.

Culturally, it is normally considered inappropriate for unrelated men and women to interact in Afghanistan. I was fortunate in that several female co-workers were willing to pass out surveys to their friends and relatives. This enabled me to collect a sizeable amount of data from women without breaking any cultural norms. My wife also helped with data collection, and I was able to pass out surveys to my English students. Unfortunately, this created some conflation of the data due to social concerns. I noted that when groups of people completed the surveys together, they had a tendency to pressure each other to answer questions in particular ways. This did not surprise me, because as an educator, my experience in Afghanistan is that most people are taught to give “correct” answers rather than personal opinions. If someone older or more esteemed is present, their opinions will automatically be deferred to. Whenever possible, I attempted to survey people one-on-one, but in most cases, the more pragmatic option was to give the survey to groups of four or five people. I believe that this was a valid decision because Afghans understand themselves to be members of a group over and above their individual identity.

Before beginning data collection, an Afghan friend translated all my survey and interview questions into Dari. I have a good grasp of the Dari language, so I was able to conduct all of the fieldwork without the assistance of a translator, except for help with reading handwritten comments. However, in listening to and transcribing my recorded interviews, I realized that the linguistic barrier was sometimes problematic. In a number of cases, I was not effective in
communicating my intended meaning, and as a result I received different types of answers than I was looking for.

Assumptions

This study is rooted in the assumption that music, culture, and identity are deeply intertwined. In addition to form and structure, I believe that music should be studied as culture because “music sound is the result of human behavioral processes that are shaped by the values, attitudes, and beliefs of the people who comprise a particular culture” (Merriam 1964, 6). This idea, of course, is rooted in my Western ethnomusicological training. The idea that music is a worthwhile and integral part of culture is not necessarily shared by all of my Afghan colleagues. While most people seem to enjoy music, and devote time to it, many would assert that it is a trivial and unimportant part of life.

Although Baily discusses the issue of identity in detail, he points out that “identity (haviat) is not a term invoked very much by Afghans. It is an explanatory concept we ethnomusicologists like to impose on our data” (Oeppen and Schlenkhoff 2010, 170). However, he goes on to point out that the closely-related term farhang (culture) enjoys more prominence in daily conversation (Oeppen and Schlenkkhoff 2010, 171). Further, Tolo TV certainly invokes the concept of identity through much of their nationalistic programming. The language may be an external imposition, but for purposes of this study I am making the assumption that “identity” is a valid concept. I know of no other way to describe what is taking place when someone states with pride “I am a Pashtun,” “I am a Hazara,” or “I come from Badakhshan.”

---

6. When someone refers to “Afghan culture,” “American culture,” or “Roman culture,” they are normally thinking of a common sense of identity, values, and ways of living shared, at least to a degree, by a specific group of people. Hence, identity comprises at least part of the culture concept.

7. Justification for this assumption came midway through Season 12, when Hikmat Rezwan, a young Uzbek contestant, was voted off during the Top 5 round of Afghan Star. Throughout the season, Rezwan had
If “identity” is not a word Afghans would naturally relate to, continuity and modernity certainly are. The clash between tradition and modernity is perhaps the biggest struggle faced by Afghan young people today. Although they belong to a conservative society where many people are subsistence farmers, where arranged marriages are still the norm, and where women must cover their heads, the young people of Afghanistan are obsessed with the Internet, smartphones, Western fashions, and the English language. This, perhaps, is where the question of identity is felt most strongly. How can someone remain Afghan while at the same time embracing a modern way of life?

The remainder of this thesis explores the questions and themes that were introduced in the introduction. Chapter Two provides a general overview of prior music research in Afghanistan as well as key events in recent history. The review places Afghan Star in context and demonstrates that it fits within a pre-existing cultural pattern. In Chapter Three, I explain my research methodology and the rationale behind it. Chapter Four provides a quantitative analysis of surveys I conducted, while Chapter Five analyzes themes arising from eight ethnographic interviews. In both chapters, I have also included pertinent examples from the show itself. The thesis closes in Chapter Six with a summary of my findings, some broad conclusions to be drawn from the data, and recommendations, both for Tolo TV and for future research in Afghanistan.

attempted to sing a variety of different styles with varying degrees of success. During his final speech, he thanked Tolo TV for their help, saying: “I have found a lot of fame…but I haven’t found my identity. I will try to find my authentic place” (Afghan Star, February 9, 2017). This suggests that the word “identity” is at least beginning to find a place in Afghan popular discourse.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

What follows is a review of the extant literature on music in Afghanistan, with an aim to placing *Afghan Star* in historical context and understanding its function in contemporary society. The review is organized around the following themes: demographic information, key researchers, the historical precedent and context surrounding *Afghan Star*, and implications for interpreting the show. I have intentionally avoided a lengthy discussion of the Taliban, because most readers will have at least some familiarity with this history.  

**Demographic Information**

Afghanistan’s population is currently estimated at 33.15 million and is expected to increase by 4 percent each year (World Population Statistics 2014). The nation is both ethnically and linguistically diverse. According to the World Factbook of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA 2013, “People and Society”), the ethnic mix is 42% Pashtun, 27% Tajik, 9% Hazara, 9% Uzbek, 4% Aimak, 3% Turkmen, 2% Baloch, and 4% other. The official languages are Dari and Pashto. Approximately 50% of the population are native Dari speakers, while 35% (primarily in the south) speak Pashto. Uzbeki and Turkmen are used by 11% of the population, and thirty other languages are found in different parts of the country. In general, however, Dari is used as the lingua franca and bilingualism is common.

The term “Afghan” originally referred exclusively to the Pashtuns. The word Afghanistan (“land of the Afghans”) was created to describe the region where Pashtuns were the dominant people. Archaeological evidence suggests that this region has been inhabited for some forty-thousand years (Loewen and McMichael 2010, 199). Known as the crossroads of Asia, it was a

---

8. For a detailed account of how the Taliban impacted Afghanistan’s music culture, see Baily (2001; 2015).
center of Buddhist activity long before the arrival of Islam. Throughout history, the land has been desirable for its location and invaded successively by foreign empires including the Greeks, the Mongols, the Persians, the British, and the Soviet Union, with each one leaving its mark on the culture. This helps to explain the ethnic diversity of the region. The modern nation-state is considered to have been established in 1919 when the reigning monarch declared independence from Britain. Hence, it was only in the twentieth century that the word “Afghan” was applied broadly to any native of the country.

On the whole, Afghanistan remains largely agrarian, though urban centers are growing. The average life expectancy is low. As a result, 66% of the population is under the age of twenty-five, with the median age being 18.1 years. Gender inequality is a major problem, as shown by adult literacy rates. While significant gains have been made in this area, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) reports that as of 2011 only 18% of adult women could read and write, compared to 45% of adult men (UNESCO 2014). These percentages, however, are significantly higher in youth populations.

Musical instruments and styles differ according to region and ethnicity. For instance, the *dambura* is associated with Hazara culture, the *dutar* with the Uzbeks, and the *rubab* with the Pashtuns. On a regional level, different cities are associated with specific genres. Hence, Afghans speak of Herati, Mazari, Kabuli, or Kandahari styles. Further, they distinguish between four broad categories of music. Baily (1981a, 107-108) lists these as: *musiqi-ye-klasik* (classical music), *ghazalkhani* (ghazal singing), *musiqi-ye-mahali* (local music), and *kiliwali* (popular music). Other categories, such as religious singing, are separate but related to the above.

---

9. Sarmast states that *kiliwali* should not be used to describe popular music (Sarmast 2009, 253). Baily initially used this vocabulary because it was the language of his informants in Herat. However, he has more recently adopted Sarmast’s preferred term, *tarz* (Baily 2015, 28). For the remainder of this paper, *tarz* and the English word *pop* will be used interchangeably.
However, these four are useful terms, since they broadly correspond with Western notions of classical, light-classical, folk, and popular music.

**Key Researchers**

Until the early 1960s Afghanistan was closed to most outsiders. This changed when the progressive monarch, Zahir Shah began to welcome foreign influences. During this peaceful and open period, a handful of ethnomusicologists began documenting musical life firsthand. Felix Hoerberger from West Germany and Josef Zoch from Czechoslovakia were among the first (Baily 2002, 11). Lorraine Sakata arrived in 1966, followed by Mark Slobin a year later. Both of these researchers would eventually publish major ethnographies (Slobin 1976; Sakata 2002a).

Slobin surveyed the musical cultures of northern Afghanistan and discovered that, although each ethnic group had its own musical traditions, interactions in the teahouses of large towns had led to a “shared music culture” between the Uzbek and Tajik people (Slobin 1976, 23-88). He also discovered that certain styles of music transcended boundaries and were accepted by all people:

> Music and identity were tightly linked in various ways. Some styles, like teahouse music, religious songs, some women’s songs of celebration, and the popular songs of the radio were shared by many or all the ethnic and subethnic groupings of the population … Other musical instruments, styles, and repertoires stayed within the bounds of a particular group. (Slobin 2002, 8)

This is an important point that continues to be relevant in today’s context.

Sakata focused on ethnosemantic categories of music and musicians in three distinct regions of Afghanistan. She found that the concept of musician was divided into three broad categories: “hereditary professional,” “professional,” and “amateur,” with a wide range of terms used to describe each (Sakata 2002a, 76-105). Of these, amateur musicianship carried the least stigma (Sakata 2002a, 76-105). This was related not only to religious injunctions against music,
but also to a popular, though not necessarily accurate, image of musicians as immoral. The role of professional musicians in traditional Afghan culture might be compared to that of the Romani in Europe: they provided useful services but remained on the fringes of mainstream society.

In the mid-1970s, John Baily and his wife Veronica Doubleday conducted fieldwork in western Afghanistan. They both published major monographs on the music culture of Herat (Baily 2012; Doubleday 2006). Baily’s work focuses on two prominent families of hereditary professional musicians and musical changes that were taking place in response to popular demand. Doubleday’s is a reflexive memoir dealing with women’s music and gender issues. Together, their studies provide a fairly comprehensive picture of musical life in Herat during that era. Both Baily and Doubleday have continued to study Afghanistan and write extensively on Afghan music in the diaspora.\(^\text{10}\)

In 1979 the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, effectively putting a halt to music research. Baily was able to make a few short visits, and the Dutch ethnomusicologist Jan van Belle continued to conduct valuable fieldwork in Badakhshan through the nineteen-nineties (Baily 2002, 11). However, the face of Afghanistan had changed drastically and Western research did not keep pace. With the downfall of the Taliban in 2001, the door was once again opened to outside study. Baily, Doubleday, and Sakata have all been involved in recent music initiatives in Afghanistan. Baily and Doubleday were instrumental in the establishment of a music school in Kabul, while Sakata assisted in the digitization of music archives from Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA) (Baily 2015, 163). Further, in 2009, Ahmad Sarmast published a landmark dissertation on the history of music in Afghanistan. He is the first Afghan scholar to

\(^{10}\) Baily (2015) provides a synthesis of John Baily’s research to the present day.
engage with the research of Western ethnomusicologists and, as such, provides a much-needed emic perspective.11

Afghanistan’s media landscape is relatively new, so there is a relatively small body of literature on the impact of television and radio. However, a research firm called Altai Consulting has conducted three large-scale studies on the media landscape, published as “Afghan Media in 2005,” “Afghan Media in 2010,” and “Afghan Media in 2014.”12 These three reports assess the extent of media consumption across Afghanistan, and the market shares of different channels. Significantly, the 2014 report noted that television is the most important media source for urban audiences (Altai Consulting 2015, 39). The report also noted that while there are an estimated one hundred TV channels in Afghanistan, Tolo TV still own 49.8% of the national audience, while other channels occupy niche roles among specific demographics (Altai Consulting 2015, 42).

**Historical Precedent for Afghan Star**

Baily, Sakata, Sarmast, and Slobin have each written about the significance of the radio in reorienting the music culture of Afghanistan during the twentieth century. Their findings are worth examining in further detail, for they show that the use of electronic media has a long history in Afghanistan. Further, radio broadcasting seems to have played a crucial role in building nationalism, creating a pop culture, and reorienting the social status of musicians throughout the country. This phenomenon is not unique to Afghanistan. Danielson notes that by the 1930s, the radio was central to musical life in Egypt and throughout the Arab world. Radios

---

11. In 2014, I had the privilege of attending a concert at Dr. Sarmast’s Afghan National Institute of Music. Baily and Doubleday performed some traditional Herati pieces together with an Afghan folk ensemble.
12. I read parts of the 2005 report prior to beginning this research. Unfortunately, at the time of writing the web-link is broken, so I have only been able to access the second two reports.
were accessible to everyone, because they were installed in public places and shared (Danielson 1998, 85). Likewise, by the 1960s, the radio had reached such a prominence in Afghanistan that Slobin could write: “For the younger generation, the radio plays the main role in forming musical taste and repertoire; clearly the future belongs to the radio” (Slobin 1976, 58). It is not surprising, then, that television would eventually garner a place of primacy in Afghan culture.

As mentioned earlier, Slobin found that some genres of music served as a marker of tribal identity and difference while others were shared between groups (Slobin 2002, 8). He also noted that radio broadcasting led to a “homogenization” of styles (Slobin 1976, 95), and that radio music was gradually replacing the traditional repertoire of many musicians (Slobin 1976, 58). For instance, a certain Turkmen musician living in the town of Aqcha was unable to play any Turkmen repertoire. Instead, he played an urban style that was “a blend of traditional Uzbek-Tajik songs and instrumental pieces with music from Indian films and Radio Afghanistan, based in Kabul, the national capital” (Slobin 1970, 452). In Mazar-e-Sharif the most popular musicians were those who had studied in Kabul and were able to play in the radio style (Slobin 1970, 454). The cultural impact of the radio was so significant that Slobin even questioned whether minorities like the Kazakhs would be able to maintain their own traditions when competing against such a ubiquitous voice (Slobin 1976, 95).

Baily picked up on Slobin’s notion of a shared music culture. He traced the development of Afghan popular music, arguing that a new “national style” is part of what held the nation together in the twentieth century (Baily 1994, 45-60). Folk music had always existed in Afghanistan, and in the twentieth century, a strong tradition of classical music emerged which borrowed theoretical concepts from India and Iran. Folk music was associated with rural and tribal identity. Classical music, on the other hand, appealed to the intellectual elite, who often
claimed that Hindustani music had origins in Kabul. This type of thinking “fit well with the kind of nationalist ideology that emerged in Afghanistan in the 1930s, consistent, for example, with the claim that Pashto is the purest and oldest Aryan language” (Baily 2011, 97).

The government-owned Radio Kabul began broadcasting in 1925 (Baily 1999, 808 [print 834]).13 When the king was deposed four years later, the station was destroyed and did not begin broadcasting again until 1940. This time, with assistance from Germany, the producers began an intentional program of cultivating nationalism and unity among the different ethnic groups (Baily 1999, 808 [print 834]). Recognizing that folk music was too regional and classical music appealed only to the literati, they felt the need for a new type of music (Baily 1994, 58).

Probably in an effort to legitimize the activities of professional musicians and give them a better rank in society, the government began bestowing the honorific title of Ustad (teacher) on some highly-skilled artists (Sarmast 2009, 185). The expertise of these professionals was crucial to the success of the radio programs:

The development of Afghan popular music took place with the assistance of master musicians (ustads), descendants of Indian court musicians, whose knowledge of Indian music theory and terminology and high standards of performance were important for organising small ensembles and large orchestras at the radio station. They played a key role in training musicians, both professionals and amateurs. (Baily 2001, 17)

Ustad Qasem is generally considered the “Father of Music in Afghanistan” (Baily 1981a, 119). He played a key role in developing new music, particularly the style known as ghazal (Sarmast 2009, 243). However, Ustad Ghulam Hussain is probably the inventor of “popular music” (tarz) (Sarmast 2009, 255).

Broadcasting was not limited to tarz, however. Regional musics were also granted air time, and this served to further blur ethnic distinctions. Although singers still performed in their

13. Later, it was renamed “Radio Afghanistan” and today it operates as “Radio Television Afghanistan.”
own different languages (Pashtun, Persian, Uzbek, etc.), their tribal identities were hidden by the format of the radio:

[T]he separate identities of radio musicians have become blurred because they do not perform and are not observed within the contexts of the belief systems that helped define the musician's identity in the first place. These radio musicians' religious and ethnic identities are moot points. Their audience is not specified. Location of performance and of listening are no longer congruent. The society with or within which the musician interacts is amorphous. (Sakata 1985, 139)

This decontextualization was beneficial to many performers, for “regardless of earlier misgivings about music in live performance, and particularly when it involved dancing, the anonymity and disembodied nature of radio broadcasting … allowed the repressed enthusiasm for music free reign without disturbing the status quo” (Slobin 1976, 28). Even women, who traditionally could only perform for other women, were able to become radio performers. The radio created a “physical and social separation of performer and audience that enabled, for example, female performers to be heard by a male audience” (Baily 2010, 72). One such female performer, Farida Mahwash, achieved such a level of fame that the government granted her the title of Ustad, an honorific that had previously been applied only to men (Baily 1999, 809 [print 835]).

Unfortunately, recognition of women was not universal. Sakata recounts meeting Madam Parwin, a radio star, in 1972 (Sakata 2013, 51-52). The meeting took place in Badakhshan, and Sakata observed that while Parwin was accepted and celebrated in the official world of Kabul, people from Badakhshan looked on her with disapproval. “It seems that two social realities operated in Badakhshan, the official, foreign one from Kabul, and the local, native one of Badakhshan; recognition and acceptance in one did not necessarily signal recognition and acceptance in the other” (Sakata 2013, 52). Female musicians fared poorly in subsequent years—even Mahwash was compelled to leave Afghanistan during the nineteen-eighties and was unable to reestablish her career until moving to California in 1991 (Sakata 2013, 52).
The dominance of the radio soon led to changes on a local level. For instance, Baily observed that changes were taking place in the organology of the Herat dutar. The dutar is a two-stringed instrument used in traditional folk singing. However, in Herat, a fourteen-stringed version emerged. Baily interprets this as “a move to allow the ‘voice’ of Herat to be heard in a group that represented an integration of the diverse cultural elements in Afghanistan” (Baily 1976, 55). Whereas the two-stringed instrument was suitable for solo performances, the fourteen-stringed dutar was suitable for ensemble-type music, such as was heard on the radio. “The presence of the dutar in radio ensembles and in Kabuli-style bands in Herat is perhaps best seen as a symbol of Herat as an integral part of Afghanistan” (Baily 1976, 55). Such changes meant that music evolved from being strictly a regional activity to becoming a national pastime.

Although the conception of popular music may be seen as somewhat artificial, the new national music was immensely popular. The nineteen-sixties and seventies are typically regarded as the pinnacle of Afghanistan’s artistic achievement. It was during this era that amateurs such as Ahmad Zahir established themselves. Zahir provides a good case study for superstardom in the twentieth century. His achievements are truly remarkable, for despite an untimely death in 1979 at the age of thirty-three, his recordings continue to enjoy popularity among Afghans in the homeland and overseas. Zahir was the wealthy son of a former Prime Minister. As a result, he had access to Western instruments not available to other Afghans (Baily 2001, 18). Though he lacked formal training, his social status, wealth, and education enabled him to learn from a wide range of the best musicians of the day. He also studied in India to become an English teacher. All these influences equipped him to become a prolific singer and musician. He sang traditional songs in Dari and Pashto, but upgraded the music with the sounds of the accordion, saxophone, trap drum, and other Western instruments.
Zahir has frequently been called the “Nightingale of Afghanistan,” or the “Elvis of Afghanistan,” and in popular imagination he is almost perceived as a martyr. Although the actual circumstances of his death are unknown and alcohol may have been involved, many Afghans believe he was assassinated for political reasons. His “official website” declares this as fact (Maiwandi 2009). Zahir was not the only superstar of his day, but he remains the most popular and famous.

Any visitor to Afghanistan is likely to have heard some of Zahir’s music. When I lived in Kabul, I was aware of a radio station that played nothing but his songs. Young people play his music on their cell phones. Taxi drivers listen to it on the road. In short, his music remains timeless. The following list of reasons for Zahir’s success, taken from a collection of essays on Afghan art and literature, reveals some of the qualities Afghans look for in a star performer:

• He was the first singer to sing what people really wanted to hear.
• The youth liked his flamboyant approach, his looks, and his clothes.
• He chose poetry for his songs from Hafiz, Saadi, Rumi, and other Afghan poets.¹⁴
• His music and melody are pleasing to the ear.
• Being the son of Dr Abdul Zahir, the prime minister during Zahir Shah’s reign, he had considerable personal advantages.
• He used some of the top musicians to accompany him in his performances. (Loewen and McMichael 2010, 244)

From this list, several key qualities stand out. First, continuity with tradition is important. Afghans are proud of their heritage, and they like performers to utilize classic texts from the past. Second, they like songs that are catchy and understandable. Whereas some musicians might prefer to sing virtuosic Hindustani pieces, Afghan audiences enjoy music from their own homeland with clear words that they can understand. Third, pre-existing wealth and fame are positive traits that will help the artist achieve his or her goals. Fourth, flamboyance is expected.

¹⁴. Some Afghans would like to claim all of the Persian poets as their own. This list reflects the views of Loewen’s informants—not necessarily the opinions of Loewen and McMichael.
This fourth point deserves further comment. Afghans are normally reserved and follow strict rules of etiquette. It is therefore striking that flamboyance is high on the list. However, this is consistent with a phenomenon observed in other cultures, where superstars are not expected to fit with normal conventions but rather to break them. Virginia Danielson, for instance, wrote of Egypt: “Displaying oneself publicly as an actor on stage, as a singer of love songs, or, worst of all, as a dancer, was seen as an unworthy use of time not commensurate with dignified behavior. By becoming a star performer one could overcome these prejudices” (Danielson 1998, 31). This perhaps explains some of the appeal of Afghan Star, a show where amateurs get on stage to sing, dance, and break many of the conventional rules of the culture.

**Historical Context for Afghan Star**

Although the Taliban controlled Afghanistan for less than a decade, their regime still lingers in the memory of the Afghan people and Western commentators. Infamous for their repression of women and fundamentalist ideology, they are also known for their harsh censorship of music. During their rule (1996-2001) musical instruments were forbidden and vehicles were routinely stopped to check for cassettes. Many musicians fled to the West and their instruments were destroyed. During this period only certain types of religious chanting were allowed.¹⁵

The reason for this censorship is threefold. The first aspect was religious. According to the Taliban’s interpretation of Islam, music is a sinful activity. The Qur’an and various hadith can easily be cited to support this view, though it is certainly not a perspective held by all Muslims.¹⁶ The second aspect was cultural. Although the central government was actively

---

¹⁵ Interestingly, the Taliban did have a music of their own. Examples can be heard in the cd that accompanies the print version of *Can You Stop the Birds Singing?* (Baily 2001). Because it did not use instruments, certain forms of religious chanting fell outside the boundaries of what they considered music.

¹⁶ For a comprehensive introduction to the Islamic argument against music, see *Slippery Stone* (Baig 2008).
promoting musical activity through the 1970s, rural Afghans probably still maintained traditional suspicions that musicians were immoral. Third, the ban was at least partially driven by political motivations. Baily argues that the Taliban censorship had its roots in refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran (Baily 2001, 28). The Soviet Union occupied Afghanistan in 1979 beginning a long season of war in which many casualties were lost. In Iran, the Ayatollah had declared music forbidden, so refugees who went there were unable to listen to music. Pakistan had a much freer climate. However, mullahs had a strong influence in the refugee camps and declared a season of mourning for the Mujahedeen who had died in the war (Baily 2001, 28). Hence, music was considered inappropriate.

After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the Rabbani government (1992-1996) allowed very little music to be broadcast openly, so when the Taliban took control in 1996, it was not a sudden change they implemented. Rather, their ban of music was the final stage in a slow decline that was already taking place. War with the Soviets left little time for musical innovation in Afghanistan, and many professionals left the country. Nonetheless, the majority of Afghan people did not appreciate the proscription of music. Many people kept radios hidden in their homes, and a large black market existed for cassettes smuggled in from Pakistan, despite severe punishments for those who were caught.

Meanwhile, outside of Afghanistan, musicians who had fled the country continued to develop their art in new directions. Baily conducted ground-breaking fieldwork among the Afghan diaspora. Of the musicians who fled Afghanistan, he found that many of the hereditary professionals ended up in Pakistan (Baily 2005, 218). Though some were famous in their homeland, they now joined the ranks of hardworking professional musicians in Pakistan, serving the Pashtun people of Peshawar with music for wedding celebrations (Baily 2005, 219). Due to
the close proximity of Afghan and Hindustani traditions as well as a common language, they were able to fit in with “minimal change,” though many musicians learned new skills there (Baily 2005, 221-222).

For Afghan musicians in the West, the situation was quite different. Migration led to whole new varieties of music:

[I]n Pakistan, Afghan music became reconnected with its Indian roots, and in Iran with its Iranian roots; while in the West the Afghan musicians had the opportunity to take forward the Ahmad Zahir project to modernise and westernise Afghan music, with Western electronic instruments like keyboards and drum machines, and with the development of simple harmonic progressions. (Oeppen and Schlenkhoff 2010, 162)

In Fremont, California (also known as “Little Kabul”), a new type of music developed. From 1986 onwards, Qader Eshpari began exploiting the potential of electronic music, programming keyboards with Afghan rhythms (Baily 2010, 77; 2005, 227). The keyboard soon replaced the harmonium as the prime solo instrument. Further, it opened up the possibility for one-man bands since it could be programmed with the rhythm and sounds of traditional Afghan instruments.

Hence, according to Baily (2007, 7), the “centers of musical creativity” shifted. Cultural capital was no longer flowing from Kabul to the outlying regions. Now it was flowing from centers like Fremont, Peshawar, and London back into Kabul. Afghanistan has always been at the crossroads of Asia, drawing elements of its culture from the various empires that left their mark. Now more than ever it began drawing on sources from other parts of the globe. “One cannot perhaps expect Kabul to function today as a center of creativity because the very institution that fostered such activity in the past—the radio station—is no longer fully functional” (Baily 2007, 7). Notwithstanding these comments, private television programming, particularly *Afghan Star*, may now be filling that role.
The collapse of the Taliban in 2001 created an immediate demand for commercial music. Many performers, such as Farhad Darya, had an instant audience. Already a rising star in Kabul during the 1980s, Darya was exiled for his political views. Relocated to the West, Darya quickly achieved success among the Afghan diaspora (Official Website of Farhad Darya 2007). Although he resides in the United States, Darya is immensely popular with all age groups in Afghanistan. He is at once traditional and unconventional. Darya sings classical ghazals, but also pop, rock, and folk music. He also sings in many different languages, including Dari, Pashto, Hazaragi, Urdu, and English (Official Website of Farhad Darya 2007) and his message is highly patriotic. As such, he has mass appeal both in Afghanistan and among exiled Afghans.

It was into this cultural milieu that *Afghan Star* made its debut appearance. The arts had previously enjoyed official sponsorship from the government leading Baily to write, shortly before the collapse of the Taliban, that musical revival “will have to be inspired by a new government initiative” (Baily 2001, 45). However, with a newly elected democratic government it was appropriate that arts patronage came in the form of private enterprise. The producers of *Afghan Star* viewed it as an opportunity to rebuild the culture of Afghanistan through television.

After suffering from the decades of civil war and experiencing slight peace in Afghanistan, the first step to be taken was the establishment of radio and television stations and Tolo Television was among those emerging medium [sic]. After a short time Tolo Television introduced its most popular show (*Afghan Star*) to its audience. This program immediately became a must-watch show among the youth and other people who at the weekends would eagerly wait for this amazing show; so it could fill their houses with excitement, joy and voice of the new stars. (Tolo TV n.d.)

Enjoying sponsorship from the mobile phone company, *Roshan*, the show provided an opportunity for Afghans to engage with music in an unprecedented way. For aspiring performers, the cash prize of US$5000 was appealing, but perhaps they were even more attracted to the idea
of the accompanying fame. For an audience unacquainted with reality television, the concept was completely groundbreaking.

Television, since it is both visual and aural, is closer to direct performance than radio. Therefore, it is both more appealing and more controversial. However, it seems the radio had paved the way for music to gain a dominant place in society, for “detached as it is from local life, [the radio] nevertheless has its impact on local mores relating to the role of music” (Slobin 1976, 28-29). In fact, Tolo TV did not begin immediate broadcasting upon the collapse of the Taliban. Instead, Moby Group began by establishing Radio Arman, a station that stretched the established boundaries by placing male and female presenters in the same talk shows (Mohseni 2015). This helped to prepare the way for other radio and television stations.

For all its controversy, by the end of its third season, Afghan Star had reportedly garnered a viewership of some eleven million (Marking 2009, 1:30:17). This success might be partly explained by the return of refugees from overseas. Their experiences made them more open to other cultures and more keenly aware of their national identity. “The experience of exile in particular helped forge this among at least 5 million Afghan refugees—about one-third of the total population—a sense of belonging to one country” (Hyman 2002, 311). On the other hand, a decade without music left people in Afghanistan hungry for new forms of entertainment. Afghan Star was simultaneously nationalistic, modern, and traditional. Hence it appealed to the interests of a wide segment of the population. In Marking’s (2009, 1:02:40) documentary, Lema Sahar, a female contestant from Kandahar, reported that she even had members of the Taliban voting for her.
Implications

In Western media, *Afghan Star* has frequently been represented as a compelling voice for democracy and women’s rights. This fits with a Western vision of democracy promotion.

The *Idols* design and its progeny, intertwined with heavy political rhetoric, have thrived in the current period of intensive international democracy promotion. Although *Pop Idol*, the first effort, emerged before 9/11 escalated U.S. discourse and action toward these ends, the timing turned out to be ideal, for the ideals of the time. (Meizel 2011, 211)

Early on, *Afghan Star* was hailed as a first chance for the Afghan people to experience democratic processes. This is a fair representation of what the show is about, but its significance goes far beyond mere rehearsal of the election process.

Referring to *American Idol*, Katherine Meizel writes, “In the end I have found that what superficially appears to be a form of light entertainment is, in fact, doing serious cultural work, and is a powerful tool in the process of deciding, and selling, who we are” (Meizel 2011, 218). Likewise, other similar shows serve as a forum for identity politics to be negotiated on stage before a wide audience:

The *Idols* franchise has created a set of studio stages across the world, a set of forums where politics of national, regional, ethnic, and religious identities are performed…The narrative of each show in each of its regional variants represents real life, and real politics, renegotiated in song. (Meizel 2011, 7)

*Afghan Star* represents the real lives of individuals in a war-torn nation. The contestants have hopes and dreams, just like people elsewhere in the world. By singing before an audience, they are able to make a name for themselves and represent their own tribe or identity.

While a wide range of TV and radio stations now exist in Afghanistan, Tolo TV, as the largest news and entertainment provider, fills a place once occupied by Radio Afghanistan. Though the government-owned station still functions, it is no longer the center of musical activity. Baily’s research suggests that musical creativity is now centered outside of Afghanistan,
with ideas flowing back into the country. True as this may be, *Afghan Star* seems to act as a focal point, bringing together musicians from around the world into one venue and raising up a new generation of popular singers. Times have changed and musicians no longer enjoy, for instance, the patronage of a royal family. However, *Afghan Star* effectively serves as a form of patronage for amateurs.

From the discussion above, some general observations can be made. First, mass media has a long history in Afghanistan. The radio played a crucial role in building national identity in the twentieth century. It did this by generating a new style of music (*tarz*) that had nationwide appeal. However, the goal was never to eliminate regional styles. Tribal identity was preserved but reinterpreted to fit within a broader nationalistic program. Given the vast ethnolinguistic diversity in Afghanistan, successfully building a national style through the radio is quite an accomplishment. Equally impressive is that *Afghan Star* has aired successfully for over a decade.

Second, the concept of amateurs rising to superstardom is not new in Afghanistan. It has precedent going back to at least the nineteen-fifties. Stars originally achieved status by way of the radio. Now, they do so through television and the internet. Superstars of history, such as Ahmad Zahir and Farhad Darya, were self-taught rather than hereditary, and *Afghan Star* continues in that vein. Music has always been controversial in Afghanistan, but amateur musicianship was traditionally the most respectable form. Hence the format of an amateur singing competition fits within a pre-existing cultural pattern.

Third, the popularity and success of *Afghan Star* can be explained by the fact that it has precedent in Afghan culture and history, it links Afghanistan to other cultures, and it arrived at a time when entertainment was sparse. In a post 9/11 world, outside influences would inevitably come to Afghanistan. Remarkably, they have done so without overriding traditional music-
cultural values. Unlike *American Idol*, which privileges a very narrow style of popular singing, the performances on *Afghan Star* are diverse and varied in a wide range of genres—both traditional and modern. Hence, *Afghan Star* models a new identity for Afghanistan that is modern, but retains continuity with its past.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Due to its isolation, ethnic diversity, and strong tribal allegiances, Afghanistan was once considered a prime location for traditional ethnography (Slobin 2003, “The Fieldwork Project”). Fieldwork conducted in the nineteen-sixties and seventies yielded a comparative study of folk musics in northern Afghanistan (Slobin 1976), an ethnolinguistic analysis of musical concepts in three distinct regions (Sakata 2002a), and a case study of professional musicians in Herat (Baily 2012). Each of these ethnographies dealt with a specific group or groups of people, as delineated by tribal identity, region, or professional status.

Recently, ethnographers in various disciplines have moved away from a focus on discrete populations and towards study of “groups of people embedded within larger communities or institutions” (LeCompte and Schensul 2010, 155). This shift reflects the reality of globalization, which has blurred many traditional boundaries. In Afghanistan, tribal and regional identities remain strong, but they are now mixed with other markers that influence the way people act and relate to one another. People still identify as Pashtun, Hazara, or Tajik, but social distinctions such as education level and socioeconomic status have become increasingly important. Urban dwellers behave in different ways from people in rural communities. Returning refugees bring new ideas and ways of life from other countries where they have lived. Further, technology has enabled many Afghans to establish connections with people around the globe.

In this milieu, it is possible to find Pashtuns who enjoy the folk music of Badakhshan, Tajiks who listen to Pashto landai songs, and Hazaras with an appreciation for hip-hop. The boundaries still exist, but they have become less distinct, making room for a greater degree of nationalism. “Afghans may quarrel happily among themselves, but they stand together and assert
their pride in being Afghan when outsiders threaten” (Dupree 2002, 978). Few institutions reflect this reality as well as the television hit series *Afghan Star*.

**Research Tools**

In developing a research methodology, I found Katherine Meizel’s research on *American Idol* particularly helpful (Meizel 2011). *Afghan Star* is much more than just two hours of television a week. Television is at the core of this event, but it also takes place in a variety of other settings. Auditions in major cities, performances in front of a live studio audience, and voting by mobile phone are all an important part of this major cultural phenomenon. Meizel observes that in this type of setting “the field” is not a well-defined, tangible reality. Rather, it cuts across multiple settings, media, and subcultures (Meizel 2011, 10-11). Traditional fieldwork must therefore be supplemented by other techniques.

Because of the exceptionally cross-mediated nature of the *American Idol* enterprise, and the discourse surrounding it, research in this project required not only ethnographic research but also the study of multiple *Idol* texts. The five main components of research included: (1) ethnographic research conducted through interviews and participant observation; (2) analysis of televised *American Idol* footage; (3) commercial recordings affiliated with the show and its contestants; (4) critical discourse in print and online periodicals, regarding the show and its performance styles; and (5) internet literature officially associated with the show. (Meizel 2011, 11)

For this project, I used a range of similar tools, albeit on a smaller scale.

My research had four main components. The first was archival: using internet research tools, I was able to watch the series from its inception to the present. The second component involved participant observation, largely mediated through technology. I followed Season Eleven each week as it aired, participated in voting, and followed updates via social media. Between episodes, I discussed performances with my Afghan colleagues. Third, I conducted formal interviews with musicians which I recorded, then transcribed and translated into English. Finally,
I distributed an opinion survey about *Afghan Star* to a wide range of Afghans. In the process, I had many informal conversations about the series.

**Fieldwork Procedures**

The archival portion of my study involved watching all the previous seasons of *Afghan Star*. From season 7 onwards, the show has been posted in its entirety on YouTube. Older seasons were not available as whole episodes, but Tolo TV’s YouTube channel had most of the major performances, as well as key moments from the auditions. This enabled me to gain a complete picture of the show from its inception and see how it has changed over time. It also meant that I was familiar with all of the contestants and judges, so when interviewing and conducting surveys, I understood the references made by my respondents.

In addition to viewing the show, I found *Afghan Star*’s official website (www.afghanstar.tv) to have a wealth of information about the series. The website has been active since the show first started in 2005. Although it is frequently updated, I used an archive retrieval tool, Wayback Machine, to access older versions that have been removed from the internet. Using this method, I was able to learn the rules of the competition, access information about previous contestants and judges, as well as read comments by viewers.

*Afghan Star* is a multi-media event. Contestants are selected through auditions which take place in major cities around Afghanistan. After narrowing down the competition to twelve performers, the judges open it up to public opinion. Every week, two shows are broadcast. In the first show each performer has a chance to sing one song before a studio audience. These performances are simulcast on television and radio. Viewers are then invited to vote for their favorite performer by text messaging or dialing a special number. After the votes have been counted, a second show reveals the results. In the results shows, contestants sing duets or group
songs often centered around a theme, such as “patriotic songs” or “songs about nature.” At the end of the results show, the performer with the lowest number of votes has to leave. This process continues each week until only one performer remains. Each season also includes a number of guest performances from professional Afghan singers living around the world. Through its history, the line-up of guest artists has been impressive, ranging from Farhad Darya and Naghma (both superstars in Afghanistan and the diaspora) all the way to folk ensembles from rural areas.

Becoming a participant observer required engaging with *Afghan Star* through electronic and other media. During the first half of Season Eleven, I was outside of Afghanistan. Therefore, I watched the show on YouTube each week after it aired. A special phone number allowed me to vote from overseas, and I also followed updates and conversations taking place on social media. I arrived back in Afghanistan in February of 2016. From that point on, I was able to watch the broadcasts each week on Tolo TV and discuss the series with friends in Mazar-e-Sharif. Most of my fieldwork took place between Seasons 11 and 12, but I continued to watch the series regularly through Season 12, which finished on March 21, 2017.

Beyond the show itself, I wanted to understand how it is perceived by musicians and the Afghan population at large. Do Afghans view the idea of a talent competition as foreign or as something local? Western commentators have picked up on the voting process used in the series, hailing it as a harbinger of democracy in Afghanistan. Does the average Afghan relate the voting process of *Afghan Star* to political elections? Further, what are they actually voting for? Do they vote for the best singer or for the contestant whose personality they prefer? What genres of music do they like best? Do voters give priority to people from their own ethnic group? These questions help to explain the bigger question of which elements are traditionally Afghan and how much of an impact the show has had on Afghan culture.
To answer these questions, I conducted eight formal interviews with carefully selected informants. In addition, I passed out a survey that involved one hundred and sixty-three participants in Mazar-e-Sharif, eighteen from Ghor province, and eleven from Badakhshan.

**Participants in the Study**

Prior to beginning data collection, I applied for and received approval from Liberty University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Before recording the interviews, each of my respondents gave their consent by signing an informed consent document (Appendix B). With the exception of one interview involving a Tolo TV representative, I stated that I would use pseudonyms to protect the personal information of respondents. In all, I conducted eight recorded interviews. The first one took place via telephone with Massood Sanjer, the Head of Tolo TV. I also interviewed six professional musicians in Mazar-e-Sharif, and one amateur in Ghor province. Each one is referred to by a pseudonym in the text that follows.

Because the survey data did not involve the collection of personal, identifiable information, Liberty’s IRB waived the requirement to have respondents sign a document. Literate subjects were given a copy of the informed consent document in Dari or English to read for themselves prior to filling out the survey on paper. In the case of illiterate respondents, I read the document out loud to them in Dari and had a witness sign the necessary consent forms. After this, I read the survey questions out loud and recorded their answers directly onto the paper form. Each participant was given the opportunity to keep a copy of the consent documents. Since most of the results came from Mazar-e-Sharif, the demographic breakdown reflected that of the city.

---

17. I have included the English version here, but most respondents signed this form in Dari.
18. In this context, I use professional to mean “someone who makes money by playing music.” The interviewees had varying levels of musical ability. Likewise, amateur here refers to someone who plays music out of interest rather than for money.
rather than the country as a whole. Hence, the majority of respondents were Tajik, although all five of the largest ethnic groups were well-represented. Two smaller subsamples came from Lalwa-Sarjangal, Ghor, and Faizabad, Badakhshan.

**Data Collection Methods**

Prior to beginning fieldwork, I had my survey, interview questions, and informed consent documents translated into Dari. The interview with Massood Sanjer was in English. All the rest of the interviews were in Dari. I located musicians by asking my English students where to go. They told me of a neighborhood where musicians are available for hire. I simply showed up day after day, introduced myself to different singers, and asked to be granted an interview. Some musicians made mention of payment, but dropped the subject when they realized I was conducting purely academic research.

In each case, the interview took about twenty minutes. After gaining each participant’s consent, I recorded the questions and answers using a *Zoom H2 Digital Recorder*. For the most part, I followed scripted questions written in Dari. However, I probed for further information when needed. I then translated the interviews into English and created a written transcript for each one.

Survey respondents came from a variety of places. While conducting this research, I was also working full time as an English teacher so I gave the English version of the survey to my students. I also spent many of the hot summer days wandering through the bazaar and meeting people: shopkeepers, taxi drivers, barbers, people chatting on the street. I handed out paper copies of the survey to anyone who was willing to give me five minutes of their time. The face to face nature of the survey made it difficult to collect as many as I wanted. However, in many cases it served as a conversation starter and allowed respondents to give me extra information.
orally. With IRB permission, I also gave multiple copies of the survey to some respondents. They, in turn, passed them out to friends and family members. Several of my colleagues assisted me in distributing surveys, enabling me to collect data from a wider range of people and from different regions. I did not personally collect survey data from Faizabad or Lal-wa-Sarjangal, but instead relied on my connections in those regions.

I did not record the names of any survey respondents. Instead, I assigned a number to each completed questionnaire and entered the data into a Microsoft Access database. Most of the surveys were completed in Dari, and in many cases the handwritten comments were difficult to read. One of my language teachers assisted me in deciphering the handwriting and translating it into English.

**Timeline**

The formal period of data collection took place between February and October of 2016. The scope of this study was determined by budgetary, time, and security constraints. I was not able to travel widely around the country for research purposes or hire research assistants, and my visa stipulated that I work full-time as an English teacher. This meant that research was conducted during my free time. The month of Ramadan fell during June, one of the hottest months of the year. Musicians, for the most part, were bored and out of work, which worked in my favor.

Informally, this project is rooted in many years of studying Afghan culture. I have been collecting books and articles on Afghan music since 2009. In 2013, I did six months of intensive Dari language and Tabla study in Kabul. During that time, I attended many concerts, including a performance by a former Afghan Star contestant. I have also been to weddings, funerals, Qur’an
readings, and parties. These experiences enabled me to build immediate rapport with my respondents, so they provided useful answers in a relatively short time span.
Chapter 4: Survey Results

The first set of results arises from the ten-point questionnaire. The original survey instrument can be found in Appendix C both in English and Dari. In addition to ten limited-choice questions, the survey asked respondents to list their gender and ethnicity, and it included a space for written comments. Under ethnicity, I listed the four largest ethnic groups in Afghanistan and included a space for people to write in their ethnicity if it did not fit with the four categories. In retrospect, it would have been better to compile a larger list, because some members of minority groups chose one of the four main categories when they didn’t see their own ethnicity listed. Fortunately, since I conducted most of the surveys face to face, I was able to explain the purpose of the “Other” option. Another issue I did not consider until it was too late is that it would have been wise to collect data on age group. Most of the respondents were young (18-30 years old), but a number of older people also completed the survey and it would have been useful to compare responses by age group. For purposes of analysis, I have chosen to keep the data from the three different regions separate.

Mazar-e-Sharif

In total, one-hundred and sixty-three people from Mazar-e-Sharif completed the survey. Of these, sixty-four respondents were female (39%) and ninety-nine male (61%). The self-reported ethnic breakdown included: sixty-five Tajiks (41%), thirty-four Hazaras (22%), twenty-seven Pashtuns (17%), fourteen Uzbeks (9%), eight Turkmen (5%), three Arabs (2%), two Qezelbash (1%), one Sadat, and one Hazara/Tajik. A few responses did not fit into the above categories. One person selected all of the above categories and commented that I shouldn’t have asked about ethnicity. Another person circled “other,” but left the space blank. Four people did
not select any ethnicity. One person wrote “human,” and another wrote “Afghan.” This final response could be synonymous with “Pashtun,” but I believe the intent was to indicate that Afghan national identity is more important than individual ethnicity. These non-conforming responses made a clear statement that the respondents believe national unity is more important than unique tribal affiliations. In fact, many respondents questioned my reasons for asking about their ethnicity: “We’re all Afghan. Why does ethnicity matter?” This demonstrated that national identity has, for many young Afghans, become a significant issue.

![Figure 4.0 Ethnic Breakdown of Survey Respondents](image)

When asked how often they watched *Afghan Star*, fifty-one respondents selected “once a week,” thirty-one said “twice a week,” forty-two selected “sometimes,” and thirty-five replied “never.” Four respondents left the question blank. This means that 76% of the randomly-selected respondents do watch *Afghan Star* at least occasionally. Several respondents provided additional information such as “I’m too tired to watch it at night,” “I don’t have time,” “I used to watch it, but haven’t for a few years,” “I watched it when it was interesting,” or “only if I have time.” As I collected data, my perception was that people were likely to underreport the amount of time they
spend watching TV. For instance, one respondent initially told me that he had no TV so he was unable to watch *Afghan Star*. However, when he saw the survey, he changed his answer and stated that he watches it twice a week. Realistically, in Afghanistan it is not necessary to own a TV to actually watch it. People spend large amounts of time visiting relatives and friends, so it is not surprising that someone who can’t afford to own a TV would watch it at someone else’s house. Other respondents who selected “never” admitted that they had on occasion watched an episode.

![Figure 4.1 "How often do you watch Afghan Star?"

*Afghan Star* runs each year from October to the end of March. Performance rounds take place on Thursday nights at 9, and the results are announced on Fridays, at the end of the 9 PM results show. In addition, a “Behind the Scenes” episode airs on Friday afternoons, and reruns usually take place during the days that follow. Research by Altai Consulting (2015, 107n58) indicates that the prime time for television in Afghanistan is 6 PM to 10 PM—which means

19. Friday is the official weekend in Afghanistan, because it is the Muslim day of worship. Many people also have a day off on Thursday or on Saturday.
Afghan Star occupies the most-watched television slot in the country. In the winter months, there is very little to do at night, so people like to watch TV to pass the time. Television has also become linked to the traditional value of hospitality (cf. Altai Consulting 2010, 106). I have often been a guest in someone’s home and they turned on the television to prevent me from getting bored. Even in rural areas without electricity, television sets are increasingly common. In some regions, people use solar-charged batteries to run small TV’s the size of laptops with a satellite dish (Ruth Olson, p.c.). Marking’s documentary showed people bringing car batteries to a communal charging station so that they could power their televisions (Marking 2009, 1:17:45).

It is interesting to compare the responses by gender. Fifty-three percent of the women said that they watch Afghan Star once or twice a week, whereas only forty-eight percent of men watched it this often. In addition, twenty-five percent of the men said they never watched Afghan Star, while only sixteen percent of women answered “never” to the same question. These data, however, may be skewed by the fact that a high proportion of female respondents were Hazara and very few were Pashtun.

“Occasionally, when I’m free.” “Because I have lots of work, so…” “I don’t have any special interest and haven’t watched it for four years now.” “Sometimes.” “Each year.” “I’m very busy with lessons.” “I saw Season 11.” “Because I’m a student, I study my lessons.” “My whole family watches the show with interest every year.” “When I have time.” “3-4 times a week. I’m a fan!” “I watch it on YouTube.” “Thursday and Friday: 9 PM -10:30 PM.” “When I suddenly watch TV.” “When the program was interesting.” “Just when at home, because I work.” “I watch the final.” “Rarely. Maybe once a week when it’s on.” “Watched Season 1. Since then, only sometimes.” “I watch it to kill time.” “I only watched two seasons.” “I’m usually busy with study. I just watch if I have time.” “Maybe once or twice in every season.” “I’m tired at night and can’t watch.” “Mostly the finals.” “It depends on my free time.” “I’ve only seen it once in the past three years, but I’ve heard about it often.” “I don’t have time or a TV.” “When I have free time. I do always watch it at night.” “Once or twice a year.”

Figure 4.1.1 “How often do you watch Afghan Star?”
The second question asked was “How many years have you been watching it?” As expected, responses were diverse. Thirty-seven people (23%) either left the question blank or wrote “never” or “zero.” On the other end of the spectrum, fifty-seven people (35%) said that they have been watching the show for eleven years. The data are summarized in Figure 4.2.

While the sample is not large enough to generalize with confidence, these data suggest that most people in Mazar have watched *Afghan Star* at least on an occasional basis. Unfortunately, the survey did not ask about people who had watched a season or two then stopped. Presumably, these people either left the question blank or selected a number corresponding to the years that they did watch the show. A few people made note of this on the form.
In contrast to the high rate of viewership, only sixty-two respondents (38%) said that they vote for their favorite contestants. One hundred people (61%) said that they don’t vote (though some of them had voted in the past). Only one person (Pashtun) did not answer the question. When pressed to explain why, people indicated that they generally saw voting for *Afghan Star* as a waste of money or they felt that their vote would not make a difference. Till the current season, the cheapest way to vote was to send a text message, which costs between one to three Afghanis (just a few cents). This is only possible for customers of a select few mobile providers. Alternatively, viewers can dial 456 from any telephone. They are then able to cast their vote through an automated IVR system. This system charges the caller ten Afghanis per minute, and it takes roughly one minute to vote each time, meaning it requires patience and money.

In the early years of *Afghan Star*, it was only possible to send one text message vote per SIM card. Since SIM cards were expensive at that time, the average viewer could not afford to vote multiple times. However, from seasons four through ten, people were allowed to text their votes as many times as they liked from one SIM card. This created a scenario where people...
would sponsor a contestant that they favored. It was easy and cheap to vote multiple times. If a contestant had money, they could buy credit and vote for themselves. Campaigning became a large part of the program, with people going from door to door to collect money for votes. Over time, this caused viewers to doubt whether their vote would make a difference.

For Season 11 (2015-2016), *Afghan Star* returned to a one-SIM-card-one-vote system. The calling system is still available and is the only option for overseas voters. If someone wishes to send a hundred text messages, they can do so for a chance to win prizes. However, only one vote per SIM card is counted towards the competition. This is a shrewd move on the part of Tolo TV, since it enables the mobile companies to continue turning a handsome profit while at the same time answering the charges that the process is unfair. In Season 12 (2016-2017), Tolo added the option of voting through Facebook, making it possible to cast one vote completely free of charge. While these measures probably increase audience favorability, they are unlikely to significantly change the end results because SIM cards are now cheap and do not always require registration (in 2016, I purchased one for 50 Afghanis—less than $1).

Figure 4.3 "Do you vote for your favorite contestant?"
The survey results indicate that many people, at least in Mazar-e-Sharif, are unwilling to spend their money on voting for a TV program. Hence the results of the show, while chosen through a democratic process, do not necessarily reflect the tastes of the whole viewing audience, but simply those who are avid fans and willing to campaign on behalf of their favorite contestant. In some respects, this is not dissimilar to any democracy where voters have the freedom to cast a ballot or not. Low voter turnout has an impact on many elections. On the other hand, it is not democratic for one person to vote multiple times, which is reportedly a common occurrence.

One informant told me that many people, especially Pashtuns, think it is a sin to vote. This is probably because voting signifies active participation and support of a musical program as opposed to simply viewing it. This view of music, which may seem hypocritical to Westerners, is paralleled by a seemingly contradictory view of women in Afghanistan. Many Afghan men insist that women ought to be covered, yet they see nothing wrong with watching videos of scantily-clad women. In fact, Altai Consulting (2010, 126) found that in 2010 the most popular online image searches in Afghanistan were “girls,” “Afghanistan,” and “hot.” For these men, viewing and enjoying something “sinful” does not necessarily constitute a sin in itself. In a culture that highlights sin and guilt, this would seem absurd, but Afghans more often think in terms of shame and honor. There is no shame in watching other people perform on stage. It would only be shameful to actually become a participant.

Some people may criticize Afghan Star and see it as important to refrain from voting, but have no problem with watching a singing show or seeing uncovered women dancing on stage. A reverse phenomenon is that Islamic television channels have a smaller following. Altai Consulting (2015, 99) reports: “Outlets can have a favorable reputation, but not necessarily be noted as a favorite (e.g. RTA). This is usually linked to a dichotomy between the type of channel
that the audience thinks they should support (for example, those that are strongly Islamic, very focused on education, or representative) and the type of channel they actually enjoy watching.” Regardless of the ideals they hold, people watch programs that they enjoy.

Music is, in fact, a gray area for many Muslims. I have frequently asked Afghans about the role of music in religion. There is no clear consensus on whether it is acceptable (halal) or forbidden (haram). Opponents of music are generally concerned about other behaviors that go with it (drinking, dancing, etc.). On the other hand, most seem to agree that there is no place for music in religion. Hence, while religion finds a place in all areas of life, music occupies a limited sphere—mainly weddings and small social gatherings. Most people engage with music as observers only.

In addition to seeing it as a waste of money or morally questionable, seventy of the respondents (43%) felt that the competition was unfair. Seventy-two people (44%) stated that the competition was fair. The remaining twenty-one respondents (13%) either left the question blank or wrote in “maybe” or “I don’t know.” Breaking the answers down by ethnicity (Figure 4.4), Tajiks were the most likely to answer “Yes, it’s fair,” while Pashtuns were the most likely to say “No, it’s not.” In many ways, this is unsurprising, since the show is predominantly in Dari, with most songs being renditions of Persian poetry. While Pashtuns have, on several occasions, made it to the Top Three, there has never been a Pashto-speaking winner.
Further clarification of this ethnic issue came with the next question: “Is your ethnic group fairly represented on the show?” Hazaras were the only ethnic group where the majority of people said “Yes.” Presumably, Hazaras have gained the most from Afghan Star. Due to their Shi’ite faith and their historic connection with Mongolia, Hazaras have long been a persecuted minority in Afghanistan. Yet out of eleven seasons, five Hazaras have won first place in this nationwide singing competition, a number disproportionate to their population. I have heard Afghans cite this fact to show that the nation is not racist—i.e. “people vote for the most talented singer, not just their ethnic group.” However, another possible explanation is that, given their historic low status, Hazaras feel a need to promote their own culture—leading them to vote more frequently than other ethnic groups do.

My own feeling, from talking with Afghans of all backgrounds, is that Hazaras are the most enthusiastic supporters of the competition. Beyond the data from this survey, I don’t have statistical evidence for this view. However, one of my interviewees stated this plainly, and other Afghans—both Hazara and Tajik—have told me the same. Their Shi’ite faith seems to make
room for musical expression. Further, Afghan Star offers a stage for a marginalized people to make their voices heard nationally. This fits with something Alan Lomax once observed: “An ‘underdeveloped’ people feels a renewed sense of significance when its own artists, communicating in genuine style, appear on the powerful and prestigious mass media or begin to use them for their own purposes” (Lomax 1968, 9). Interestingly, a few respondents answered “No” to Question 4 and “Yes” to Question 5. I did not question them on this, but it may indicate an acknowledgment that their own people are disproportionately represented.

When asked if they were happy with the results of Season 11, seventy-nine respondents (48%) said “Yes.” Fifty-one respondents (31%) said “No,” and the remainder either left the question blank or wrote in answers like “I don’t know,” or “I didn’t watch it.” This high acceptance rate was not surprising, because the winner of Season 11 was from Mazar-e-Sharif. Many Afghans have told me that people vote according to their own region or city, and this result is consistent with that hypothesis. It also supports the claim that viewers tend to vote for
their own ethnic group. The winner of Season 11 (declared March 21, 2016) was Tajik, and unsurprisingly, satisfaction with the winner was highest among Tajiks.

![Figure 4.6 "Are you happy with the results of Season 11?"](#)

This question was personally interesting to me, because I had followed Season 11 closely while it was on television. Habibullah Fani, a young Tajik man from Mazar-e-Sharif, was the winner of the series. He received generally positive feedback from the judges, though they gave higher scores to other contestants. Throughout the season, he performed with a very serious demeanor, rarely smiled, and never danced. Habibullah was eliminated in the Top 8 round (January 28, 2016). However, *Afghan Star* has a Wild Card show after the Top 5, in which all the eliminated contestants get one chance to sing. Viewers get to vote for one contestant to reenter the competition. Habibullah Fani performed in the Wild Card round, got voted back on to the show (February 18, 2016), and went on to be crowned winner of Season 11. The two runners-up—one from Herat, and one from Kabul—were both favorites of the judges.
During the Wild Card round, I was in Kabul and there was no electricity because the Taliban had bombed a major power line. I spoke with some people about *Afghan Star* and they told me they normally do watch it, but were unable to do so because of the power cuts. Mazar-e-Sharif, on the other hand, had good electricity during this time period. I hypothesized that Habibullah won the competition due to more consistent electricity in his hometown. When I shared this theory with an Afghan friend, he disagreed with me because he felt the competition really came down to who had the most money or sponsors. However, if the majority of viewers in Mazar liked Habibullah Fani, this lends credence to my theory that external events in one city can have a major impact on the outcome of the series.

One critical question I wanted to answer was how favorable Afghans are towards *Afghan Star*. Tolo TV has often been accused of being too progressive, to the point of going contrary to
Afghan values. For this reason, the questionnaire asked about the show’s effect on society. Results were quite evenly split.

![Figure 4.7 "Does Afghan Star have a positive or negative effect on society?"]

Sixty-five respondents (40%) said that *Afghan Star* has a negative effect on society, whereas another sixty-six (40%) felt it was positive. Fifteen respondents (9%) left the question blank. Six people (4%) said that it was both positive and negative. Others were non-committal. Some people wrote “I don’t know” or “Yes, it has an effect.” Interestingly, three people said that it has no effect at all.

Unsurprisingly, people who had been watching *Afghan Star* for a long time generally felt that it was positive. 77% of the people who said they have been watching the show for eleven years felt that the show had a positive effect on society. By contrast, 86% of people who said they never watched it felt that it had a negative effect on society. Positive regard for the show also varied according to ethnicity. Tajiks, Hazaras, and Turkmen were most likely to view the

---

20. Initially, I left a blank space for writing the answer to this question. After seeing these non-committal answers, I changed the design of the questionnaire to make all of the questions limited choice.
show as positive, while Pashtuns and Uzbeks tended to perceive it as a negative influence on society. As with the other questions, the sample size was too small to generalize. However, individual informants corroborated this view of how different ethnic groups perceive the show. One Tajik man told me that Pashtuns think *Afghan Star* is sinful, Hazaras and Tajiks like it, and Uzbeks don’t really think about it. Of course, this is blatant stereotyping, but it does highlight some of the perceived differences.

![Figure 4.7.1 Breakdown of Responses by Ethnicity](image.png)

There was also a difference in the way men and women responded to this question. Overall, 42% of the men felt that the show was a negative influence on society, compared to only 38% of women. Only 36% of the men thought it had a positive effect on society, as opposed to 48% of women. These results may reflect a higher degree of religious indoctrination on the part of the men. Afghans disagree on whether or not music is an acceptable activity. However, nearly everyone I have asked says that the mullahs are opposed to singing and dancing.
The next question on the survey asked participants to choose between four different options: “What qualities are most important in an Afghan Star?”

a) Talent  
b) Nice personality  
c) Good looks  
d) The right ethnic group

Eighty-six respondents (53%) selected talent. Twelve (7%) said that personality was the most important. Only four people (2%) thought appearance was the most important, and six people (4%) chose ethnicity. The remainder of the answers involved combinations of the above qualities. Thirty-three of these responses included talent as one of the important qualities. Hence, 74% of the respondents felt that talent was critical to success. On the other hand, many people expressed dissatisfaction in the way other people vote. I was told on numerous occasions that “everyone just votes for their own ethnic group or city.” I was also informed that money is the only thing that counts in the competition.
Many people seemed to think that the vote should be based on talent, but is actually divided across ethnic and regional lines. In other words, Hazaras vote for Hazaras, Pashtuns vote for Pashtuns, and people from Herat vote for singers from Herat—all without regard to who is the best singer. Assuming this is true, the natural conclusion would be that the largest ethnic group should win each season. This, however is clearly not the case. Five of the eleven winners have been ethnically Hazara. As mentioned earlier, Hazaras only comprise 9% of the nation’s population. If ethnicity were the primary factor, it seems unlikely that Hazaras would have won so often. However, if certain ethnic groups watch the show more fervently than others, coalition voting becomes a distinct possibility. As discussed earlier, the voting system ensures that the results necessarily reflect the preferences of the most avid fanatics.

During Season 10, viewers of Afghan Star’s YouTube channel frequently left comments complaining about how Pashtuns never win the show. Some viewers felt that this was evidence the show is rigged. Yet Altai Consulting’s research shows that in Pashto-speaking regions, Tolo TV commands only 25.3% of the viewer market, whereas among Dari speakers, it takes home
57.5% of the viewership (Altai Consulting 2015, 96). In other words, Pashto speakers are less likely to watch *Afghan Star* to begin with. Any Pashtun contestant is therefore faced with a handicap, despite being from the majority ethnic group.

Judges, contestants, and viewers alike all speak lofty words about voting for talent, not ethnicity. Personally, I question whether it is possible for any viewer to discern talent without their own cognitive biases coming into play. Ethnomusicology has shown that musical tastes are the product of social conditioning. Therefore, it is only natural for humans to assume that the music of other cultures is inferior. A Hazara viewer will, quite reasonably, think that Hazara singers are the most talented. A Pashtun viewer will naturally choose someone who sings Pashto songs. This does not necessarily mean they have ill-will towards other groups. It may simply reflect the aesthetic standards they have been conditioned to prefer.

There are times when *Afghan Star* appears to brush over significant differences. In Seasons 8, 9, and 10, Uzbek contestants were repeatedly criticized for singing with a nasal tone. Yet none of the judges were ethnically Uzbek. This struck me as biased. How can a Persian-speaking judge criticize the performance of someone who is singing in Uzbeki? Could it be that this is actually stylistically correct? While Afghanistan has a common grammar of music, regional variance is diverse enough that what is “correct” in one region could be considered “wrong” in another. The situation has parallels in other television programs. Fremantle Media appeared to be inclusive and unifying when they aired a two-episode TV series known as *World Idol*, which pitted the winners of eleven local *Idols* competitions against each other. Yet Meizel observes that the competition “implicitly promoted the idea that ‘pop music’ may everywhere be defined through English-language songs and U.K., U.S., or Irish musicians” (Meizel 2011, 195). Difference was brushed over and superficially reconciled citing the misguided but oft-quoted
maxim that “music is a universal language” (Meizel 2011, 196). Such truisms sound lofty, but an acknowledgment of difference probably goes further towards promoting mutual understanding.

I also question whether the average Afghan viewer has enough knowledge of music to actually choose “the most talented” singer. Historically, music was the exclusive domain of hereditary professionals and their associates. Amateurs could break into that world, but this has never been entirely socially acceptable. To date, there is no music education in Afghanistan’s public school system. Whereas music in the West developed with patronage from the church, Islam has a tenuous relationship with music, and it is almost never used in worship, except by some Sufis and Ismailis. Today, the main venue for live music in Afghanistan is weddings. Some people hire musicians for parties, but most people only interact with music through videos and audio recordings. So only those who choose to invest time in studying music with a teacher know about pitch, rhythm, and melodic modes. The judges on Afghan Star are knowledgeable and provide meaningful critiques of each singer. However, the decision of the voting audience does not necessarily match the stated preferences of the judging panel.

In order to gauge the actual degree of acceptance for Afghan Star, the questionnaire asked: “Would you be happy if someone from your family competed on Afghan Star?” It is one thing to accept Afghan Star in principle, and to support members of your ethnic group. It is entirely different to support a family member in a decision that could threaten their reputation in the community. Fifty-eight respondents (36%) said they would be happy if a family member was

21. I realize that I am treading on dangerous ground here, since the term “talent” means different things in different cultures and even to different individuals. However, among musicians within a given culture, there seem to be generally accepted notions of what makes one person more talented than another. The judges and contestants on Afghan Star often urge viewers to vote according to talent, though I have never been entirely sure who gets to define this. The question may be inappropriate, yet I can’t help but ask.

22. This became an important discussion in Season 12, when the popular vote did match the judges’ critiques. At various times in the season, the judges commented that the Afghan public had become knowledgeable and were making good decisions.
on *Afghan Star*. One hundred (61%) said they would not be happy, and the remaining five respondents left the question blank. Hazaras were the only ethnic group in which more people said “yes” than “no.” This is consistent with the rest of my findings, which suggest a greater degree of openness to *Afghan Star* among Hazaras than in other ethnic groups.

A Western reader may see it as disingenuous for someone to be a fan of the show but not want their family members to take part. However, I see this as a protective mechanism. In the West, where individual dreams are highly valued, people would be considered selfish if they refused to support the goals of their family member. Afghanistan, however, has a deep-rooted culture of shame and honor. The actions of one person affect the whole group. While a family might support musical activity, their friends, neighbors, relatives, and the wider community must be taken into consideration. Otherwise, the actions of an individual could bring deep shame on them.
While I was conducting surveys, I heard from many people that “families who let their children sing on Afghan Star have no honor.” I believe this is related to the stigma of music being associated with alcohol, narcotics, and illicit sexual activity. This is particularly true if the singer is a woman. As one Afghan woman put it:

If a woman sings and a man hears her, he will think her voice is beautiful and will lust after her. Maybe he will be on the street separated by the wall or in a neighbor’s aouli [yard]. Maybe he will never see the woman who sings, but he hears her voice. If that happens, he will want her. It’s her fault. She has sinned. She made him want her. The sin is hers. She will be punished. That’s why a woman should never sing, even in her own aouli. (McCord 2012, 182)

I have heard Afghan men express similar viewpoints (including one of the interviewees in the next chapter). Women who sing in public, therefore, are often perceived as women of ill-repute. Given this stigma, it is highly significant that Afghan Star provides opportunities for women to perform. While the series is traditional in some respects (reviving ancient music, promoting respect for teachers), its portrayal of women challenges the prevailing cultural norms.

Havana Marking’s (2009) documentary on Afghan Star highlighted the difficulties female performers face when they choose to sing in public. In Season 3, two women made it into the Top 12: Setara Hussainzada, a Tajik woman from Herat, and Lema Sahar, a Pashtun from Kandahar. Setara was outgoing and expressive, singing upbeat pop songs, whereas Lema continually retained her composure, singing Pashtun folk songs in a traditional manner. Setara was eliminated in seventh place (February 9, 2008). During her final performance, she danced on stage, and her scarf slipped off of her head. By Western standards, Setara’s performance was extremely modest, but it was too much for Afghan viewers, and it enraged religious leaders.

23. These connections might not seem obvious, but in English we do speak about “wine, women, and song” as well as “drugs, sex, and rock n’ roll.”
across the country. A council of clerics met and attempted to shut down the program, yet Tolo TV continued to press forward.

Setara returned to Herat, only to discover that she had become a pariah in her hometown. In the documentary, people appear on camera saying that she deserved to be killed for the shame she had brought on her city (Marking 2009, 55:33). She was eventually forced to relocate to Kabul for her own protection.

Meanwhile, Lema Sahar went on to claim third place in the competition. The difference was her extremely modest behavior. Since then, one or two women have competed on *Afghan Star* nearly every year. However, no female contestant has won the competition to date.

The producers and judges clearly approve of women taking part in the competition, but I wanted to know how viewers feel about this

| Season 1 | Safia Akbarzada (11) |
| Season 2 | Hadia Hamraz (9), Farida Tarana (8) |
| Season 3 | Setara Hussainzada (8), Lema Sahar (3) |
| Season 4 | Elaha Soror (8) |
| Season 5 | No women in the Top Twelve |
| Season 6 | Shabana Azizi (7), Soroya Talash (9) |
| Season 7 | Bahar Hamraz (10) |
| Season 8 | Baran Arya (7), Latifa Azizi (4) |
| Season 9 | Khushbo Ahmadi (11), Anahita Ulfat (5 [Take 2]) |
| Season 10 | Morsal Farahmand (11), Zeba Noori (9) |
| Season 11 | Sahar Aryan (5 [Take 1]), Zeba Hamidi (5 [Take 2]) |
| Season 12 | Sheqayeq Roya (7), Zalala Hashimey (2) |
issue. Therefore, the questionnaire asked: “Is it good that women compete in *Afghan Star*?”

Given the examples cited above, I expected a very small percentage of people to say yes. However, eighty-two respondents (50%) said they thought it was good that women compete on *Afghan Star*. Seventy-four respondents (45%) said that it was not good. One person answered “Yes and No,” then explained that, although it was good, women who compete will face problems. Another person commented that neither men nor women should sing on *Afghan Star*. Someone else said “It’s up to the family.” Four respondents left the question blank.

As with other questions, Tajik and Hazara respondents showed the highest degree of openness to the values promoted by *Afghan Star*. Further, women were more accepting of female performances than men. 58% of female respondents answered yes, compared to only 45% of the males. Overall, the responses were more positive than I expected. I asked some of the respondents why women never win. The general response was that the women who have performed on *Afghan Star* lack talent. As a keen observer and fan of Afghan music, I would say that this is not true in every case. Some of the female contestants have been exceptional.
However, I agree that many female contestants have not reached the same level of artistry as their male counterparts.

For a casual Western observer, the conclusion to be drawn from *Afghan Star* might be that Afghans do not want a woman to win. However, while they would be ashamed if their own sisters sang on TV, Afghan men love to watch women sing and dance. It is not a lack of interest that prevents women from succeeding. I believe the underlying reason no woman has won *Afghan Star* is that there are fewer opportunities for them to develop their skills as musicians. A man with an interest in music can quite easily find a teacher. He may face opposition from his family, but the opportunities for him to develop are available. A woman, however, must contend not only with opposition from her family, but with society telling her it is a sin to sing. Teachers may be unwilling to provide lessons to women for fear of damage to their own reputation.

---

24. Doubleday (2006) recounts that in the 1970s, there were several groups of female musicians in Herat who performed for other women. In general, they operated in a separate domain from men. Most of the repertoire was the same as the men (Doubleday 2006, 182) but they had less knowledge of music theory or notation because male performers guarded this information from them (Doubleday 2006, 178). I imagine that there are similar groups today, but I have not encountered them personally.
Hence, very few women even audition for *Afghan Star*. From this group, a small number of the best singers are chosen, but most of them have not had the same training opportunities as the male contestants. Sexism certainly plays a role, but it is more structural than overt.

The ten questions in my survey provided useful answers to question I had come up with. However, I also wanted to elicit other issues that I hadn’t thought of myself. Therefore, I left a space at the end for respondents to write in additional comments. Not everyone took advantage of this opportunity, but many people did. The comments clarified why viewers perceive *Afghan Star* as positive or negative.

Reasons why the show is considered positive included:

- It elevates the talent of young people.
- It has encouraged the development of Afghan music.
- It helps to combat racism and sexism.
- It brings people together.
- It’s a place where men and women of all ethnicities stand together as equals.
- It has provided a stage for the advancement of local and regional styles of music.
- It symbolizes the freedom Afghans desire.
- It is entertaining.

Reasons why *Afghan Star* is negative included:

- It is un-Islamic.
- It leads to sinful behavior (dancing, drinking, extra-marital sex).
- Through the passage of time, it has become boring.
- It doesn’t promote good artistry, just singers who have money or sponsors.
- It divides people. Everyone just votes for their own tribe.
- It distracts people from things that are really important, like education and developing their country.
- Women who go on *Afghan Star* can be abused.
- Powerful people pressure others into voting in a particular way.

Several comments highlighted an underlying sense of cognitive dissonance related to enjoyment of music and television.25 One of the most interesting ones came from a Tajik woman:

---

25. Thanks to my mother, Ruth Olson, for pointing out the significance of these comments.
Afghan Star has a negative impact on society. It’s good that women sing, but not in Afghanistan. I don't like Afghan Star because it isn't good for Afghanistan. Our country needs knowledge and economic development, but nowadays a lot of students didn't like knowledge. They like Afghan Star. A lot of money is spent on Afghan Star instead of knowledge. I think money should be spent on governmental schools. Because some people are very poor they can’t buy some materials or continue their education. It’s most important to increase our knowledge. If Afghanistan becomes like other countries, that would be good for everyone. Afghanistan needs to improve. A lot of people in Afghanistan have negative ideas. These need to change through education. I want peace in our country. I want all the people of Afghanistan to not disturb each other and to think well of everyone like in other countries. Afghan Star has a negative effect on some people. I will like it in the future, but not now.26

This response is typical of Afghan diplomacy. Rather than admitting to enjoyment of the show, this woman subtly expressed a desire for Afghan culture to change. For her, it is unacceptable to like Afghan Star because it would betray what she sees as her cultural values. If the culture changed, then she would gladly change with it.

The tension between a desire for change and the need to conform seems to be inherent in Afghan culture. A poignant example of this phenomenon is found at weddings. Weddings are an extremely costly affair. In large cities, a “good wedding” involves renting a wedding hall, a live band, and food for upwards of three hundred guests. Wedding expenses are usually higher than families can afford, so many people go into debt that can take years to pay off. Most people I have talked to about this feel that the custom is inherently problematic—that weddings should be small and inexpensive. However, they still feel that it is necessary to conform. To defy societal expectation would be to bring shame upon one’s family and social group.

A similar commentary on the desire for societal change and the need to conform came from a Pashtun man:

For now, we live a traditional life, so I would [not] want my family members to join Afghan Star, but in the future, yes! Of course women also have the right to live. They want their own way of life, and they are half of our society. We can't ignore them. The way which we are living in Afghanistan is miserable, but we believe it’s gonna change

26. I have lightly edited the grammar in this comment and the next, both of which were written in English.
one day so we can live like other societies. For example, I want to play guitar, but first, there are no courses, and second it is not so common in my society. But I believe one day it’s going to change.

In other words, Afghanistan needs to modernize and change, but until it does we must conform to the traditional roles that our culture expects from us.

**Lal wa Sarjangal**

A small subset of data came from a rural area in the Hazarajat region of Ghor province. Unlike Mazar, all of the respondents were from one ethnic group (Hazara). Seven respondents were female and eleven were male. Six of the respondents (33%) stated that they watch *Afghan Star* once a week. Another six selected twice a week, four (22%) said they watch the show occasionally, and two (11%) said they never watch it. This group of people had been watching the show for a comparatively shorter period of time compared to people in Mazar. No one claimed to have watched all eleven seasons. This is probably because they lack electricity, and have had television for a shorter time than their urban counterparts.

![Figure 4.11 "How many years have you been watching Afghan Star?"

![Bar chart showing the distribution of years respondents have been watching Afghan Star.](chart.png)
Compared to Mazar-e-Sharif, a high percentage of people said that they vote. Fourteen respondents (78%) said that they vote for their favorite contestant, while only four (22%) did not. On the other hand, they seemed to have low confidence in the results. Fifteen (83%) felt that the competition was unfair, two (11%) said it was fair, and one wrote “I don’t know.” Likewise, fifteen respondents (83%) felt that their ethnic group was not fairly represented. One person answered yes, one said “I don’t know,” and one person circled both “yes” and “no.” These responses were different from the replies of urban Hazaras, which perhaps reflects the fact that rural dwellers, particularly in the Hazarajat, have fewer educational opportunities, less infrastructure, and generally feel neglected by the government. A sense of injustice may therefore be transferred into their views of Afghan Star, despite disproportionate representation of Hazaras on the series.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, only fourteen respondents (78%) were happy with the results of Season 11. Three were happy with Habibullah Fani’s victory, and one person had not seen the show. On the other hand, twelve respondents (67%) felt that Afghan Star has a positive effect on society, and only six people (33%) said it was negative. This was consistent with the results from Hazaras in Mazar-e-Sharif.

Similar to Mazar-e-Sharif, thirteen respondents (72%) said that talent was the most important quality for an Afghan star. In fact, eight people wrote comments to the effect that Afghan Star ought to be about talent, and should not be affected by race or politics. Four people (22%) felt that the most important quality for a star was ethnicity, and one person thought personality was the most important. Since most of these respondents also felt that the competition was unfair, the perception seems to be that Afghan Star should be about talent, but
actually involves other factors. Most of the comments at the end of the survey vented frustrations over the focus on ethnicity.

In the Hazarajat, musicianship probably carries less stigma than in other parts of the country. Thirteen respondents (72%) said that they would be happy if a family member performed on *Afghan Star*, whereas only five (28%) said no. Many Hazaras I know pride themselves in being open-minded. Hence, these results are not surprising. Likewise, it was no surprise that thirteen respondents (72%) felt it was good that women perform on *Afghan Star*. The sample from Lal-wa-Sarjangal was small, but the results lend credence to my theory that Hazaras are the most avid supporters of the series.

**Faizabad, Badakhshan**

Another subset of data came from Faizabad, a small city in northeastern Afghanistan, close to the Tajikistan border. Faizabad, the capital of Badakhshan province, is one of the few areas of Afghanistan that was never captured by the Taliban. It is inhabited by people from all of the major ethnic groups, as well as many minority groups with distinct languages. Badakhshan also has very distinct styles of folk music compared to the rest of the country. I received data from ten men and one woman in Faizabad. Four of them identified their ethnicity as Shughni, three were Munji, two Sangechli, and two Tajik.

All of the respondents reported watching *Afghan Star*: six said that they watch it once a week, four said twice a week, and one said every other week. Compared with the other regions, most of the respondents had been watching the show for a relatively short period of time. One Shughni man had watched all eleven seasons, and another had been watching for ten. However, most of the respondents had only been watching the show for a few years. This may be because Faizabad has very inconsistent electricity. I suspect that people in Faizabad really began to take
an interest from Season 9 onwards. In Season 9 (2013-2014), a contestant from Faizabad performed on *Afghan Star*. He played a unique stringed instrument called a *qushqarcha*, and drew the attention of the whole nation with his arrangements of ancient Khorasani pieces. When he visited his hometown for a concert in the middle of the season, Dawood Pazhman was welcomed as a hero. He made it to the fourth place before being eliminated (March 6, 2014).

Season 10 again offered Badakhshan a place on the map. Panjshanbe Maftoon, a folk singer from Badakhshan, made it all the way to second place (March 21, 2015). His success contradicts the claim that you have to have money in order to succeed, because he came from a very poor family. Following Season 10, Tolo TV aired the second season of *Superstar Afghanistan*. *Superstar* has aired twice on Tolo TV—during the summer after Season 5 of *Afghan Star* (2010), and again after Season 10 (2015). *Superstar* pitted twelve contestants from previous seasons of *Afghan Star* against each other for the popular vote. The twelve contestants were chosen by a panel of judges. Because of his unique sound, Dawood Pazhman was selected to participate, and made it to the eighth place (*Superstar* June 12, 2015).
I suspect that the opportunity to see one of their own on TV has drawn many new viewers from Badakhshan province. In fact, ten of the eleven respondents said that they vote for their favorite contestants. Five respondents said that the competition was unfair, whereas six thought it was fair. Likewise, five felt that their ethnic group was not fairly represented, as opposed to six who did. Six of the eleven respondents were happy with the results of season 11.

All eleven respondents said that *Afghan Star* has a positive effect on society. This perhaps suggests satisfaction that their regional voice has been represented. It may also reflect a greater degree of religious openness from minority people, some of whom are Ismaili Muslims. Consistent with the results from Mazar and Lal, ten of the eleven respondents listed talent as the most important quality for a star, although three also selected ethnicity and one circled personality. The one person who did not circle talent thought ethnicity was most important. All of the respondents said that they would be happy if a family member performed. In addition, they all thought it was good that women perform on *Afghan Star*. Unfortunately, the sample did not include Pashtuns, Hazaras, Uzbeks, or a significant number of Tajiks. Because Faizabad is generally a conservative area, I suspect that the data I collected reflects the views of members of minority groups rather than the majority of people in the city.

Four people wrote comments at the end of the survey. One person expressed that *Afghan Star* is free and open to everyone—provided they have good donors and the right ethnic group. Another stated that stars should be chosen exclusively on the basis of talent. A third person said that *Afghan Star* is crucial for the development of music in Afghanistan. The fourth commented that he would be happier if the judges decided the winner—not the popular vote.
Concluding Remarks

The survey data showed that most of the randomly-selected respondents watch *Afghan Star* at least on a casual basis, and all of them were familiar with it. Unsurprisingly, given its size and good electricity, people in Mazar-e-Sharif had been watching the show longer than people in other regions. However, it seemed that rural Afghans were more likely to vote—perhaps because the process is still novel to them.

In general, I found that the highest degree of openness to the show was among Hazara people. Hazaras were also the most likely to express satisfaction for the way their ethnic group is represented on the series. This is likely because *Afghan Star* is one of the few arenas where they have an adequate voice in Afghanistan. In fact, *Afghan Star* is a voice for people who would otherwise be underrepresented. Pashtuns, dominant in most areas of Afghan culture, were the least likely to approve of the series or vote, but minority groups expressed their approval of the show, likely because it represents their concerns.

The survey showed a surprisingly high level of support for women performing on *Afghan Star*, but fewer people felt it would be good if members of their own family performed. I believe this demonstrates that people are interested in change, but not quite ready to embrace it until they can do so without social risk. At present, while there is support for the values espoused by *Afghan Star*, it is not widespread enough to represent the majority view. Therefore, people are unwilling to wholeheartedly endorse it.

The surveys revealed that some people think the competition is too commercial, in effect cheapening artistry. On the other hand, a high percentage of people feel that the competition is fair and based on genuine talent. These themes came up again in the interviews presented in the next chapter.
Chapter 5: Interview Results

In all, I interviewed eight participants chosen for their knowledge of music, or of *Afghan Star*. Massood Sanjer specifically granted permission to publish his name. In all other cases, I have assigned pseudonyms to conceal the identities of the musicians. The purpose of the interviews was to learn about the intent of the producers, gain more information about the genres of music on *Afghan Star*, see if professional musicians held it in esteem, and find out if the show had significantly impacted their profession. Most of the Mazar interviews took place during Ramazan (Ramadan), the month of fasting. Musicians informed me that they did not have much work during this time, because people do not have weddings or music parties during this month. In any case, it meant that people were free to talk to me. The interviewees are listed below.

One representative for Tolo TV, living in Kabul:

1. Massood Sanjer – Head of Tolo TV and Director, General Entertainment Channels Moby Group

six professional musicians working in Mazar-e-Sharif:

|   | Primary Genre | Age
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Ali</td>
<td>Pop/Ghazal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Mohammad</td>
<td>Folk/Classical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Wali</td>
<td>Folk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Jamshed</td>
<td>Pop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Hamid</td>
<td>Pop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Rahmat</td>
<td>Folk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One amateur musician from the Hazarajat:

8. Hussain – Folk – 21

27. My experience is contrary to the situation Baily describes in Herat in the 1970s where the month of Ramazan was filled with concerts (Baily 2015, 37).

28. These figures are simply my best guess. I did not actually ask the interviewees how old they were.
Although I spoke with many musicians in Mazar-e-Sharif, I found that it was mainly younger and middle-aged musicians who were willing to conduct interviews. Musicians in their mid-to-late thirties had a tendency to defer to singers with a higher status. Hence, several men I spoke with said “no, don’t ask me these questions, talk to so and so—he knows better.” One person told me that he would be able to answer my questions, but if he did, it would be inappropriate because there were other, more senior musicians around. Young men in their early twenties did not seem to have the same hesitation and willingly talked to me. I suspect this is because they perceived themselves as more modern. The younger men were less versed in classical music, and all of them played electronic keyboards. In general, I followed a set of scripted questions, although I added clarifying questions or probed for further information where it was warranted.

Several common ideas ran throughout the interviews. On the positive side, most of the interviewees felt that Afghan Star was a good tool for youth development and educating the public about music. They also perceived it as genuinely Afghan. On the other hand, several of the musicians felt that the show has had a negative impact on their craft by oversaturating and commercializing the field of music, thereby devaluing artistry. Key themes from the interviews are analyzed below.

**Youth Development**

A significant theme arising from the interviews was that Afghan Star plays an important role in helping youth to develop and achieve their goals. Nearly all of the interviewees agreed on this point, although they had varying degrees of positive regard for the show. The four younger musicians expressed a high degree of appreciation for the impact of the series, whereas the three
older musicians were somewhat critical of the way it shortcuts the process of rising to fame, which previously involved years of study with a master teacher.

Massood Sanjer noted that *Afghan Star*, by making music more acceptable, has created a space for young people to pursue their dreams:

You know, in the past, people were not big fans of their kids or their children to go and participate and become a musician. But now the kids, their boys and they daughters, they wanna, they wanna participate, so the perception of people, uhh, very big, has changed. You know, there’s a pride now, that in the past they were seeing it was someone from a profession. It doesn’t mean they didn’t like it…they liked it but part of the society, they just, you know, they would hide that.

While Afghanistan had a vibrant musical culture prior to the Taliban, most people felt that playing music was not an acceptable activity for someone from an honorable family. Such perceptions persist even today, but *Afghan Star* has begun the process of normalizing musicianship in society. In this new freer climate, it is possible for young people to have dreams and pursue a career in the arts.

Ali, himself an aspiring wedding singer, explicitly stated that youth development is the reason for *Afghan Star’s* success. He repeatedly brought up the examples of Fayaz Hameed and Sharif Deedar, two well-established musicians who began their careers by performing on *Afghan Star*. He noted that every year, the show gives birth to twelve new singers who all go on to record videos and perform at parties.

Jamshed also expressed approval for the way the series has challenged young singers to push themselves and become better. “In the past, you could go on *Afghan Star* without singing in tune. Now, if you’re not properly prepared, you can’t participate. It’s become really good.” This view was shared by Hamid, who told me:

*Afghan Star* is a commercial success because it develops musicians. It develops those singers and raises them up. The singers want this art that they have to be at a high level. For example, to have an incentive and for singing to be encouraged. Most people don’t
know a lot of singers, but if you go there [on Afghan Star], you become known. Everyone gets their own fans—a lot of fans.

Hamid stated that young Afghans are inspired to audition because of the competitive nature of the show. This competition enables them to reach a higher standard of artistry:

*Afghan Star* is a competitive show where people want to compete with someone else and reach the top. This helps them to progress. They become better artists, and more acceptable singers. They develop, people give them their hearts, everyone develops. They say they need to have more fans and be the winner. Win and have more fans. The person who tries hard becomes a good artist.

Furthermore, he felt that the competition is completely fair because it gives everyone a chance to develop and learn new things.

Hussain, the one amateur musician I spoke to, highlighted the importance of the interactions between judges and contestants:

A lot has changed [because of *Afghan Star*]. Because when we observe *Afghan Star*, we see that people who have problems—these are discovered on the show. We see that the judges point out the errors of young singers. Now, when a singer performs these songs, people can distinguish the problem. It’s a lesson for singers, so it definitely changes them.

Not only does *Afghan Star* help the contestants, but he noted that it gives him an opportunity to work on his own skills. “I’m alone in my room, and I can play. I observe *Afghan Star*, and if it’s a *maheli* style, like *dambura*, I can easily tell where they have a problem. In this way I can also solve my own problems. For this reason, it brings good change for musicians.” Hence, as a viewer, he uses *Afghan Star* as an educational tool.

While the four younger musicians were enthusiastic about *Afghan Star*, the three older men I talked to expressed some reservations about its value. Mohammad, a well-established and respected musician, highlighted the importance of studying music prior to ever entering the competition:
Before a young person goes and participates in *Afghan Star*, if they first find a teacher, learn the necessary things, become a proper student of music — learn *rags*, *ragini*, pitch, rhythm, poetry, and composition of *ghazals* — then pay attention to appearance and character, they will definitely be accepted.

He felt that unfortunately, young contestants do not necessarily follow the appropriate process.

This has had a negative effect on the craft:

In every style, every type of music, everyone is able to become number one. Everyone wants to become number one. In the past, one student would study with me for ten years to learn music. Now, because of television, internet, keyboards, computers, young people study music for a year, then want to go and compete.

The traditional method of learning music, by binding oneself to an established teacher, is therefore at risk because of modern technology. Understandably, this is concerning to older musicians, since they recognize that traditional genres and customs could easily be lost unless they are passed on to the next generation.

Like Mohammad, Wali downplayed the importance of *Afghan Star*. He acknowledged that *Afghan Star* helps singers to improve, but felt that it was not an adequate forum for skills development:

In the past, people didn’t know music. Now they’ve been included by *Afghan Star* so they can memorize or learn to sing. But when a student studies with a teacher, and begins with the ABC’s, and contracts to learn… the people who sing on *Afghan Star* don’t have that same kind of knowledge like a student who studies with a teacher. Now we have singers who before *Afghan Star* knew five or six pieces — no more. If they go to a program, those six songs will be finished in an hour. After that, what will they sing? But our musicians who sing *maheli*, *kataghani*, and worked with a teacher, they have 20 or 50 pieces, songs, and compositions, and make people happy.

On the other hand, he stated clearly that the judges on *Afghan Star* are properly qualified and give accurate assessments. “They are rightly acclaimed. If someone sings with no sense of pitch or rhythm, the judges are not able to do anything corrupt and give a higher number. Everyone is given a number equal to the ability that they have in music or singing.”
Rahmat, himself a hereditary musician, had the most negative things to say. He felt that the series had little value, because it involves mostly performances of cover songs and the singers lack professional training.

For a number of people, *Afghan Star* created a problematic domain where even if someone is not an artist, by a golden chance they can become famous. A lot of people who are not professional musicians have reached fame through this medium. It’s commercial.

This concern is similar to what Wali and Mohammad both shared: young people should not try to create a shortcut to success and fame, because this leads to a degradation of artistry. A classically-trained musician would have a solid understanding of music theory, including *raga*, *taal*, and the rules for poetic composition. Amateur singers, while they might make use of these concepts intuitively, are probably less able to articulate their significance or perform as wide of a repertoire.

In their quest for progress and modernity, many young people look to the West for inspiration rather than their own culture. Nothing symbolizes this better than the role of rap music in the competition. Rap is a genre of music that originated in urban America and has become a global symbol of rebellion, self-expression, and giving voice to the voiceless. In Afghanistan, the first rapper arrived on the scene in 2006. Bezhan Zafarmal, who goes by the stage name DJ Besho, raps in Dari about peace, love, and national unity (Coghlan 2006). He has a strong following among Afghan youth, many of whom emulate his style.

DJ Besho has appeared as a guest artist in several seasons of *Afghan Star*, and rap music has come to be an accepted genre on the series. This is remarkable, because from Season 2 onwards, the judges have often opposed performances perceived as foreign. *Afghan Star* is about Afghan music, and performers who sound too foreign are not well-received. Season 8 winner Sajid Jannaty received a lower score during one of his performances because he sang part of it in
Hindi (February 1, 2013). Rap, however, despite its foreign origins, has gradually been accepted as part of Afghan culture.

During Season 7 of Afghan Star, DJ Besho appeared as a guest during the Top 4 elimination show (March 2, 2012). In his honor, each of the stars performed a Dari hip-hop song. The result was an interesting blend of genres. Each of the songs was more like experimental spoken word than actual rap. Yet it firmly established that rap has a place in Afghan culture, and it encouraged young people to pursue rap music as a valid genre.

In the years that followed, several rappers auditioned for Afghan Star, and some made it as far as the Top 24. It was not until Season 11 (2014-2015) that a rapper made it into the Top 12. Intriguingly, it was a woman from Herat who secured this claim to fame. Rap music is a genre often criticized for sexism, so Zeba Hamidy essentially challenged both Afghan and international gender norms by participating in the series. Hamidy performed covers of DJ Besho songs as well as traditional Afghan songs remade into a sort of spoken word poetry. She gained enough of a following to make it to the second Top 5 elimination round (February 26, 2016).

At the time of writing (spring 2017), a Hazara rapper from Mazar-e-Sharif has just secured the first place in Season 12. Week after week throughout the season, he maintained the highest number of votes from the viewing audience. Unlike most contestants on Afghan Star, Syed Jamal Mubarez wrote his own songs, some of them in Hazaragi. His lyrics highlighted the ordinary struggles of Afghan people today: unemployment, corruption, insecurity, and inequality of women. While someone steeped in hip-hop culture would certainly find things to criticize about his vocal timbre and breathing techniques, the judges were overwhelmingly positive about his performances. Part of this may be because they were less familiar with judging rap music than local styles. In addition, they were probably unwilling to criticize such a popular contestant.
who addressed the struggles of his nation. Rap is still a novelty in Afghanistan, but I suspect it will continue to grow in popularity in years to come.

**Distinct Afghan Character**

When I asked Massood Sanjer about the relationship between *American Idol* and *Afghan Star*, he was quick to inform me that the only connection is they are both music competitions. *Afghan Star* has a unique format and very different goals. This is true. Beyond differences in the format *Afghan Star*, in fact, has a broader focus than *Idol*. The *Idol* competitions are open to pop singers aged eighteen-to-thirty living in a specific geographic zone. “[T]he goal is to find performers without current professional contracts (*Idol* contestants cannot be signed to any other management or recording contracts at the time they appear on the show) and bestow one upon them, thus effecting a change in their social—and economic—status from amateur to professional” (Meizel 2011,29). *Afghan Star* is open to Afghans of all ages living anywhere in the world, some of whom are already professional musicians. The goal is to bring positive entertainment to the Afghan people and introduce otherwise unknown artists. While pop music certainly has a big place in *Afghan Star*, the show is open to any style, provided it is seen as Afghan. Recent contestants have included rappers (Zeba Hamidy, Season 11; Syed Jamal Mubarez, Season 12), a rocker (Asher Ehsas, Season 10) a classical singer from a hereditary musician family (Jamshed Sakhi, Season 8), and a Badakhshani folk singer (Panjshanbe Maftoon, Season 10).

For all its controversy and modern image, *Afghan Star* is recognized as being an Afghan creation. It may be that other television formats don’t have the same credibility. Tolo TV brought

---

29. The issue of being signed to a record label has less significance in an Afghan context. Career musicians cannot make a living from selling recordings because piracy is rampant.
a licensed adaptation of *The Voice* to Afghanistan in 2013. However, Massood Sanjer explained: “it was running for two seasons but we just shut it off, it wasn’t working for us.” He clarified for me that the rules were too complicated. For example, viewers found it too difficult to remember the names of sixty-four contestants. I also suspect that Afghan audiences were not pleased with an imported format, preferring to see something homegrown. In any case, most of the judges from *The Voice* transferred into *Afghan Star* the following year.

Most of the musicians I interviewed spoke positively about the influence of Wahid Qasemi (also spelled Vaheed Kaacemy) on *Afghan Star*. Qasemi, grandson of the famous Ustad Qasem, has been the music director since Season 9 (2013-2014). Hailing from the same generation of musicians as Farhad Darya, he established his career in the late 1970s by forming the band *Shine*, which combined Western instruments with Afghan melodies. Wahid Qasemi now lives in Toronto, Canada, but remains an active player in the Afghan music scene. Not only does he record his own songs, but he composes music for other artists and has done extensive research on the folk traditions of Afghanistan. Qasemi’s presence on *Afghan Star* marked a shift away from the westernized pop sounds that were popular in early years, and back towards the folkloric music of Afghanistan. Qasemi is concerned with preserving the traditional culture of Afghanistan for posterity (Zeer wa Bum n.d.).

Whereas some previous music directors made use of playback music or one-man Casio bands, under Qasemi’s leadership, *Afghan Star* now has a professional house ensemble, the Barbud Music Group, with a full complement of Afghan and Western instruments.30 The musicians I spoke with saw this as a very positive change, and one that makes *Afghan Star* more local. Ali, for instance, made the following comments:

---

30. Barbud, a sister company of Tolo TV, is a record label that produces music for many of Afghanistan’s top stars and for contestants on *Afghan Star*. 
Right now, these last two years since Wahed Jan Qasemi has come to Barbud, all of the music is local. Only a little bit is pop or Western. Very little. Maybe ten percent is Western. It’s with rubab, tanbur, tabla, dambura, ghicak, all of these things…In the past, one hundred or ninety-five percent was Western—Casio keyboard, drumkit. Now all of the music is local. Only a little bit is pop or Western. Very little. Maybe five percent is Western, but the ninety-five percent is local.

From these comments, it seemed that the conceptual category which differentiates “Western” and “Afghan” is the instruments used. Some evidence for this view comes from Baily (2015, 27) who notes that the Arkestar-e-Jaz, which played on National Radio, was not a Jazz ensemble, but an Afghan ensemble that used Western instruments.

Ali elaborated on these ideas further, explaining that Afghan Star has sparked something of a folk revival:

Currently, these past two years, it has been very traditional, especially these composers, Wahid Qasemi, Zahir Bakhtari, Amir Jan Saboori. These people have worked hard to preserve the genuine music of Afghanistan. Now, if I, an Afghan young person, work hard to record a song and video, I would say the song needs to have rubab in it, a tanbur, a dhol. Now we don’t want to make use of Western music. Now only Afghan music is in the videos of young Afghan singers that you see on TV. They all have rubab and dhol. It’s had a big effect on music. We’ve turned back towards the traditional music of Afghanistan.

The interesting thing about these comments is that structurally, the music used in early seasons of Afghan Star is not terribly different from what is performed today. The main difference is that the accompaniment has more Afghan instruments.

Wali seemed to have a more nuanced understanding of the term maheli. His definition went beyond the instruments used to the actual scales and rhythm.

The decision-makers and judges on Afghan Star are prominent musicians. So naturally they…there’s all styles: classical, kiliwali, maheli…in Afghanistan, maheli is predominant. Around 80% is maheli. Because if someone sings with Western instruments, their songs are still mostly maheli. If they sing on Afghan Star, most of their songs are still maheli, because maheli songs and music are from Afghanistan itself. Afghan people develop Afghan music.
In this view, even a song accompanied by Western instruments can be properly classed as Afghan. Wali went on to say that every culture should rely on its own creativity rather than borrowing from others:

People who sing kiliwali, qawali, or maheli—qawali, kiliwali, maheli—these are from Afghanistan. Western music is from the people of the West. Like if you learn something in the West, then come and teach it in Afghanistan, or if you learn something in Afghanistan, go to the West and teach it. This music that’s genuinely Afghan is agreeable, makes people happy, it has a wide reach, a lot of fans. If someone records something from the West, sings it in our own language, we become debtors to one place or students of another. The music, or the composition or the voice is borrowed. But maheli, kataghan, kiliwali, these are from Afghanistan’s own materials and own people. These are all very good. They have very good news for the people of Afghanistan.

These comments touch on an issue that is at the core of Afghan culture. Unlike many countries in the region, Afghanistan has never been colonized by Western powers. Afghans take pride in the fact that they repulsed both the British and the Soviets. Likewise, Afghan music remains strikingly unique, despite the popularity of American movies and the English language. Cultural colonialism is a global phenomenon, but so far it has had little impact on the music of Afghanistan. Granted, Afghan Star has seen some very Western performances, such as a cover of The Beatles’ song Yesterday by Arash Barez in Season 9 (Top 3 Performance, March 7, 2014). Such performances, however, simply coexist alongside more traditional forms and have come nowhere near to replacing them.

Other interviewees also commented on the value of traditional music in Afghan Star. Jamshed noted that the show helps maheli traditions to progress. He also commented that recent seasons of Afghan Star have showcased traditional music more than modern: “These days, maheli music has really made progress. It’s grown 95% in Afghanistan. These days, people are resurrecting ancient music. These young artists on Afghan Star, they’re reviving old music and singing it again.” Likewise, Hamid felt that the show is good because it is mostly traditional:
“The people of Afghanistan don’t really have an interest in pop. Mostly, the people of Afghanistan know maheli. There’s not much of an interest in people singing pop. It’s sung—people sing pop. There are fans. But mostly, people are interested in maheli in Afghanistan.”

Hussain acknowledged the regional varieties of music that different contestants bring to the table:

In every province, in every village, there is a unique style. If you go north maybe they use a lot of qushqarcha in the music. In other provinces, I don’t really know, maybe they use harmonium, guitar, piano. In the Hazarajat, we use dambura and zirbagheli. We are most interested in these styles. So in Afghan Star it comes down to the individual tastes of the performer. They say “I’ll sing my own local style.” Maybe they’ve been given permission to go and sing music from their own locale. It’s like this.

This variety is what keeps the show exciting. Different singers bring their own local traditions to the table. Hence the show continues to offer surprises even in its twelfth year.

Mohammad, despite reservations about the quality of contestants, felt that the judges were generally good, acceptable musicians. He credited Afghan Star with bringing regional styles of music into the popular arena: “Since the arrival of Afghan Star, the style of Herat, Mazar, Takhar, and Hazaragi, Uzbeki became available. Now every locale enjoys every style of music.” Likewise, Rahmat, despite thinking that the show had gone on for far too long and finding the contestants unacceptable, spoke positively of the musical accompaniment in recent seasons of Afghan Star:

In the past, other cultures had a lot of influence. But these three to four recent years, more local music has been used, like tabla, ghicak, dholak, dambura...rubab. The genuine music of Afghanistan—rubab, tanbur, these things—get used and mixed with Western music. Now it’s a mix. It’s good.

Hence, while Western commentators look at Afghan Star and think it is just like Idol, my findings indicate that Afghans do not perceive it this way. If they thought of it as a foreign show, I suspect the competition would be far less successful.
Economic Effects

Something most of the interviewees agreed on was that *Afghan Star* has led to a proliferation of musicians in Afghanistan. For most of them, this was a negative thing, because it results in degradation of the craft. It has also led to fiercer competition, meaning less work. My research was consistent with interviews presented in Baily’s recent work. According to the famed singer Abdul Wahab Madadi, “Amongst millions of Afghans, we can say we have about 10 great musicians in the new generation...10 singers is not enough” (Baily 2015, 173). Further, “There are many singers from Afghanistan, hundreds of them. There are many singers in Hamburg. But they have some problems” (Baily 2015, 174). Afghanistan is full of musicians, but many of them lack professional skills. At weddings, it is now common to see a one-man-band using a keyboard and a microphone. Such music requires little training, because the keyboards are preprogrammed.

Given his other negative comments, it was unsurprising that Rahmat, in particular, saw this as problematic.

The styles of music have changed. Because the music of the past was very professional, very good poetry was sung, and the playing was very beautiful. Now incorrect poetry is used, the compositions are not very great. In the past, the music that was used was great. Now, not so much, in my opinion.

Further, he felt that life was now harder for career musicians, due to a proliferation of people working in the field:

For musicians who are vocational (maslaki), it was good in the past, equal. After *Afghan Star*, we’ve multiplied, and the value of our profession is decreasing. Music has increased, musicians have increased, but the quality has decreased compared to the vocational musicians of the past. In the past, there was lots of money. Because the people on *Afghan Star* aren’t career musicians, they go around with sponsors who have money, collecting votes from everywhere. They try really hard to get votes. It’s commercial, they get famous, and it has an effect on the genuine artists. A negative effect. When artists increased, the value decreased.
Not only are there too many musicians now, but they face opposition from conservative elements in society, and the audience lacks discernment.

The good musicians of the part are decreasing daily. There’s also the issue that because of traditionalists, there are a lot of people who aren’t happy to follow music…I’m a vocational musician and it’s had a negative effect on our work. Most people aren’t discerning about music. Lots of people who have a lot of songs and go to perform at weddings are just DJs, not musicians. They just play music from a computer and that’s how the wedding proceeds. It’s about money, and also because of Afghan Star, there are a lot of musicians, and people are getting bored. The enjoyment that was there eight, nine, ten years ago is gone. The quality has decreased.

In the field of music, quantity of musicians does not necessarily translate into quality. The accessibility of music instead cheapens it.

The other interviewees were more positive about Afghan Star, but also felt its negative effects. Ali noted that each year, twelve new singers come out of Afghan Star:

Believe it, the show has birthed a hundred musicians then! Every year, twelve are born. When they get in the top twelve, then they all say “I’m a singer.” Then they all record videos, sing at parties—$1005 is their rate. There’s a lot, but thankfully, there’s also work. There are a lot of singers. It’s had a big effect. Especially—here we’re in a province—the capital has a lot of musicians. Kabul. There are a lot of singers there.

Positively, this has led to greater recognition of music and musicians, but it has also to inflation and fiercer competition for gigs.

Jamshed also pointed to a do-it-yourself attitude as one negative effect of the show: “In the past it was only musicians who performed at wedding parties. After Afghan Star, a lot of people now just play a sound system for themselves and work has decreased.” Hamid also commented on the use of playback music in recent years, observing that there is more enjoyment in live music. Hamid stated that earlier seasons of Afghan Star were better for this reason. This

---

31 I have no idea where the number $1005 comes from, but a random figure like this does not surprise me in an Afghan context. I have often been asked “what percentage of Dari do you speak?” or been told proudly “I speak seventy-four percent of English.” Such figures appear to be made up on the spot.
comment may have been rooted in nostalgia, because Hamid would have been a young child during the early years of *Afghan Star*.

In fairness to the show, *Afghan Star* does involve live performances. Massood Sanjer told me that each show is prerecorded on the day of the broadcast. The show takes place at 2 PM Thursday and Friday in front of a studio audience. It is recorded and edited, then broadcast at 9 PM the same day. While some seasons have used pre-recorded instrumental track, most years have made use of a live band with the singers. Contestants are required to sing live without the use of any special effects. This is not always true of the special guests, and in Seasons 10 and 11, the blend of singers in choral songs was so precise that I am doubtful they were truly natural. However, I do believe that the majority of songs on *Afghan Star* are performed live, because it is obvious when a singer makes a mistake.\(^{32}\)

In any case, it was clear that for urban musicians, a cultural shift in favor of music and musicians did not necessarily translate into more work and better artistry. Instead, it led to fiercer competition. Increased skill also did not necessarily translate into more work. At weddings, music is a must, but many clients would be happy to hire an amateur musician at a lower cost than pay for the skills of an experienced artist. Further, if someone can afford it, they might choose to hire someone known from TV over a less-recognizable but more experienced performer.

**Educational Aspects**

According to my informants, *Afghan Star* not only helps young people to develop by honing their talents, but it also serves as an educational tool for the viewing public, introducing

\(^{32}\) In Season 12, there were very few guest performers on *Afghan Star*. Host Omid Nezami and Judge Aryana Sayeed explained that this was because they were now insisting that all performers sing live, and many professional singers would not agree to these terms (Talk Show, March 16, 2017).
them to new styles and showing the positive role music can play in their lives. This was in many ways a positive thing for musicians, a group of people who would normally live on the fringes of society. Hussain, a rural amateur musician, shared that *Afghan Star* has helped his family to understand why he plays music: “At first, my family did not consent. They said it was not a good thing, and would lead to unemployment. But when they started watching *Afghan Star*, they became a bit interested.” *Afghan Star*, therefore, has shown people the value of music.

Massood Sanjer felt that the perception of musicians has changed in the last ten years, as people become more familiar with music in their daily lives.

Afghans love music! *Star* is bringing every Afghan house music. If you go to the family, if you go to the shops, if you go to offices… it’s not from now, it’s from I would say a long time…music has been a part of Afghan culture. So, uh, that’s why *Afghan Star* is very popular because first you have music… giving a platform to the artists who were not found and who were having very good talents, uh, and giving people a chance to choose the best star by voting. That’s why it’s very popular. Because it’s the people’s show and if the musicians on the *Star* who they want to see, it’s by voting so changing the culture of music and choose what you want, that’s why it makes it more successful.

In other words, *Afghan Star* has removed music from the control of a select few professionals, and placed it into the hands of the people. By voting for their favorite contestants, people feel a sense of ownership over the music. This, in turn, reduces the stigma associated with musicianship.

Ali shared that in the past, there was no recognition of *Afghan Star*, but now everyone knows of it, and all of the successful contestants are famous. He said that if he were to audition, that would be the main reason:

Everyone wants their children, their brothers, their nephews, to develop and succeed. Succeed—meaning, become famous. Myself, I’ll also go to *Afghan Star* if it’s God’s will. If I go, brother, my videos will be famous. Everywhere people become your sponsors, you record good videos, everyone (wants to see you). Right now, I’m just a man. Me, you, all of us. If you go on *Afghan Star* and become fifth, third, or fourth place, people recognize you and know you. “Look, brother, in God’s name, check out this clip.” Brother, *Afghan Star* is like this, that everyone gets excited about it. You say “come, let’s
show something to the people.” A day is coming when your mother and father will be so proud of you: “Wow, what a son I have, who has worked so hard and brought our names fresh life.”

Afghan Star has mainstreamed the process of music-making, showing that anyone can participate.

Mohammad also told me that Afghan Star has played a positive role in changing people’s attitudes toward music and musicians.

There have been a number of people who were antagonistic to music and opposed it. They said music is bad or haram, and called our dear musicians by different names. But now, after the arrival of Afghan Star, every ethnicity or people has their favorite special singers, lots of beloved singers arrived, and music has become natural for people.

Furthermore, by passing informed judgment on each performance, the judges of Afghan Star educate the audience, teaching them the difference between acceptable and weak performances.

Mohammad felt that, on the whole, Afghan Star had done positive things for Afghanistan because it gave back what was lost during the Taliban times: namely, an interest in local music. Under the Taliban, music was banned completely, but even at the height of their power (between 1998-2001), Afghanistan always had a black-market for cassettes. Most of these came from India and Pakistan, so the result was a generation of young people who grew up listening mainly to foreign music and songs from the “golden age.” Afghan Star helped to restore interest in creative culture and gave people something to look forward to each week.

Mohammad also credited Afghan Star with bringing regional styles of music into the popular arena: “Since the arrival of Afghan Star, the styles of Herat, Mazar, Takhar, and Hazaragi, Uzbeki became available. Now every locale enjoys every style of music.” This comment is reminiscent of the way Danielson describes Egypt in the early twentieth century:

As the mass media proliferated in Egypt, beginning with commercial recording in about 1904 and radio in the 1920s, listeners could exercise greater choice in what to hear. The behavior of choosing became a part of musical practice. The discourse of listeners is
constituted by listening behaviors and also by speech about music. This discourse helps to produce the musical style as a cultural conception and identifies its place in social life. Musical meaning resides in the process of the production of sound, the subsequent interpretation of the sound, and the ensuing re-production of sound and interpretation. (Danielson 1998, 6)

In contemporary Afghanistan, musical choice initially came in the form of Afghan Star, which paved the way for other programs, including radio and television shows where viewers can call to request their favorite song. More recently, Afghans have gained access to smart phones and the internet. This has turned them into more selective consumers. However, my perception is that the musical tastes of most Afghans are still largely shaped by radio and television.

Wali also commended Afghan Star for its educational functions. He felt that its most important contribution to the culture was that it brought music to people who would otherwise know nothing about it.

 Afghan Star is a light because it gives young people opportunities, because it teaches about pitch and rhythm and instruments. Mainly because many people didn’t know about music, they were unaware of its flavor or enjoyment. They became listeners by way of television. People didn’t know about pitch and rhythm and music before. For this reason, Afghan Star is very famous.

Nonetheless, he stated that Afghan Star is not very significant in terms of its overall effect on music. It is but a small part of what is going on in the country.

 Afghan Star will not make or break the music of Afghanistan. Why? Because we have very skilled, distinguished, and active musicians. We have energetic singers and composers in Afghanistan. This music that’s on Afghan Star…the singers on Afghan Star might know five or six pieces of music. Maybe they don’t know any other songs. But we have other musicians in Afghanistan who know hundreds of pieces or hundreds of compositions. This—it has no effect on the music of Afghanistan.

For Wali, then, Afghan Star is a useful introduction, but not the most substantial part of the music culture. Just as scholars sometimes write simplified popular literature to introduce their more serious work to the general public, Afghan Star is a stepping stone into the meatier depths of Afghan music.
In contrast to the positive statements of the other interviewees, Rahmat was quite negative about the impact of *Afghan Star*:

In my opinion, it hasn’t done much for the musical heritage of Afghanistan. In my personal opinion. Because the songs that they sing are all old songs from past musicians. Ahmad Zahir, Shad Kam, Arbad Nekzad, Farhad Darya. They sing the songs of these musicians without adding anything special. There’s no benefit. There’s nothing good about that.

Although he did not see the value in it, Rahmat’s comments give insight into a significant contribution *Afghan Star* makes. Namely, *Afghan Star* teaches viewers about their musical heritage by reviving songs from the past.

**A Voice for Women**

The examples of Setara Hussainzada and Lema Sahar have already been discussed above. Their stories illustrate the hardships and discrimination women in Afghanistan face. *Afghan Star*, while it is open to female competitors, is a product of a male-dominated society. Each year, only one or two women make it into the Top 12. As discussed earlier, I believe this is not an intentional decision from Tolo TV or the judges on *Afghan Star*. Rather, Afghan society prevents women from receiving training in music or from auditioning for the show. In some seasons, the judges on *Afghan Star* have given preferential treatment to female performers, occasionally to the point of seeming insincere or condescending.

A perfect example of this is the case of Latifa Azizy, a Turkmen contestant from Season 8. During her audition, the judges were about to reject her. However, she began to cry, leading the panel to accept her (November 9, 2012). Interestingly, they decided to create a Top 13 performance instead of a Top 12, with two contestants being voted off during the first performance round. Though it was not stated, perhaps this was with the expectation that Latifa would be voted off early. She consistently sang simple songs using only three or four notes, yet
even so was unable to maintain the pitch or sing in rhythm. Initially, the judges graded her on a simpler scale than the other contestants, commenting on improvements and glossing over errors. However, week by week they grew uncomfortable with this pretense.

Eventually, during the Top 6 performance round (February 1, 2013), judge Shahla Zahland admitted that she was completely unhappy with Latifa’s performances. She said that they had accepted Latifa onto the show because of her tears and personality, expecting her to improve over time. However, she had not improved as expected—each week, the performances were the same, lacking in interest, and out of tune. The other judges agreed that Latifa’s performances were weak, but praised her courage for continuing to sing week after week. Despite this negative feedback, Latifa reached the fourth place, going further than any other female contestant before her except Lema Sahar.

During my fieldwork, I heard many people cite the example of Latifa as a reason why *Afghan Star* is unfair. People stated that she was successful simply because she had wealthy sponsors. I cannot verify this statement, but her story does show that *Afghan Star* is not exclusively a talent competition. There are many reasons why people may have voted for Latifa, even if she did not sing well: her personality, her physical appearance, her ethnicity (she was Turkmen—a minority ethnic group that has been underrepresented), or the simple fact that she was a woman. Interestingly, Latifa has gone on to have modest success in the Afghan music industry. I have seen her on television several times, and she has many videos on YouTube. Her videos are well-produced, and she always sings in tune. Presumably, she has either had some vocal coaching, or her producers do a lot of pitch correction (maybe both of these are true).³³

³³ On March 21, 2017 (Nao Roz—Persian New Year), I paid 500 Afghanis (about $7) to attend a concert in Mazar-e-Sharif featuring three different music groups. The hall was packed with around three-hundred men. Latifa Azizy was advertised as the headline event, but she never showed up. At the end of the concert, everyone began
Other women on *Afghan Star* have been better singers. Elaha Soroor from Season 4 and Anahita Ulfat from Season 9 both stand out for their exceptional vocals. Incidentally, both are Hazara. Elaha Soroor had a sizeable following before being eliminated in the eighth position. She now lives in London and has a trans-national fan base among the Afghan diaspora (SOAS Afghan Society 2015). Anahita Ulfat, an outgoing athlete, made it to the Top 5 before being eliminated. She was reinstated during the Wild Card show (February 20, 2014), but then withdrew from the competition for unstated reasons.

In terms of women’s liberation, *Afghan Star* has progressed enormously from Season 1 to the present. Whereas Setara Hussainzada received death threats for dancing on stage, female contestants in recent years have not only danced on stage, but have sometimes appeared with no head covering and wearing Western clothes. Beginning with Shahla Zahland in Season 8, and continuing with Aryana Sayeed, the female judges do not dress conservatively by Afghan standards (except during Kandahar auditions). This is a huge cultural shift, and something that not all Afghans are happy about. Nonetheless, Season 12 proved to be a big year for women on *Afghan Star*. For the first time in history, a woman claimed the title of second place (March 21, 2017), breaking the record of Lema Sahar, who received third place in Season 3. Interestingly, both women were Pashtun, dressed modestly, and did not move about on stage. I suspect that Afghan viewers appreciated their restraint and respect for traditional culture.

The interviewees had mixed opinions about female performers. Ali acknowledged that women do not have equal opportunities. He claimed that only literate people from educated families would allow their daughters to perform. “Afghanistan is very traditional. Traditional because people don’t want their family to go and perform on Afghan Star. Very few. Out of 100

---

demanding their money back, as they had all come to see Latifa! I did not stick around to see the outcome, but I heard the following day that some windows had been broken before the police dispersed the crowd.
percent, maybe if 10 percent of the women participate, 90 percent don’t. It’s bad, they say. People will talk badly about them.” This is consistent with findings from the questionnaire. The stigma is that women should not sing because to do so is immodest.

Rahmat was open to the idea of women singing. However, he felt that women did not have sufficient opportunities to learn music, and as a result the women on Afghan Star did not have actual talent. “They succeed because of people’s votes, but they don’t have a lot of talent. They don’t have advanced talent.” By contrast, Jamshed and Hussain did not have strong opinions about women singing, but felt that they had an equal chance of winning Afghan Star.

Regarding female performers, Mohammad had only this to say: “The Afghan people have incredible respect for women and mothers. The Islamic culture of Afghanistan doesn’t accept that a woman or girl would engage in unsavory music, or wear inappropriate clothing, or behave in an illicit way.” This is consistent with the views of many Afghans I have spoken to. They believe women must be guarded and protected from shame, and the best way to do this is to keep them from the public arena.

Wali spoke about the relationship between music and religion. He told me that during Taliban times, the Taliban had commissioned musicians to sing tarana (religious chants without instrumental accompaniment). I asked him why the Taliban forbade music, and he replied that the acceptability of music depends on the situation. During Taliban times it was forbidden, so he sang chants without music. Now it is accepted, so he sings maheli music with Afghan instruments. However, he said he would never perform music that goes against the way of God—namely, music for dancing, or with videos that have girls.34

Musicians must try not to sing nonsense, falsehoods, dirty things, compose or sing duets with girls, don’t make video clips. Instead sing maheli music, sing about your homeland, sing about the way God and mother wish.

---

34. Ironically, Wali’s office had a large TV, often tuned to videos of women singing and dancing. As discussed in Chapter Four, it is possible for someone to enjoy activities that they oppose in principal.
and everybody likes it. Even the Taliban like clean music about their homeland. Clean songs about the relationship with your country. About the persecution people have faced. Talk about the peace of Afghanistan. People also love that.

Therefore, in Wali’s view, Afghan Star, while it has positive points, is also contrary to the laws of Islam because women participate in the singing competition and also sometimes dance on stage. Wali stated that women should not perform. He used some very harsh words to speak of women who appear on television, sing, and dance, claiming that they have broken their honor and lost their womanhood.

**Political Aspects**

Since Western media coverage of the show has sometimes focused on Afghan Star as a harbinger of democracy and freedom (France 24 2009; Goldstein and Rainey 2009) I asked the interviewees about the impact of Afghan Star on people’s views of democracy and political elections. Not all of the interviewees answered these questions. Of those who did, none of them thought that Afghan Star was political, but most recognized the fact that it was shaped by ethnic, geographic, and sometimes political processes. Only two of the interviewees felt that the show was divisive. This probably reflects the culture of Mazar-e-Sharif, which is more cosmopolitan than many parts of the country.

Massood Sanjer acknowledged that Afghan Star is a democratic process, like any election. Therefore, it may help people accept the idea of voting. However, the show itself is not political. Massood did not elaborate on this further, but a very clear example of how Afghan Star may affect politics come from Season 9, which took place during the 2014 presidential election. Throughout the season, presenters and on-stage advertisements told viewers to make a difference and vote for their next leader. This may very well have had an influence on the high voter turnout that year. According to Al Jazeera news, of twelve million eligible voters, seven million
people turned out to vote in the 2014 election, compared to only four and a half-million in 2009 (Al Jazeera 2014). While this cannot be attributed to any one factor, television most certainly played a role in educating voters about their responsibilities as citizens of a democracy.

Afghan Star frequently is accused of being unfair, because people can vote multiple times for their favorite contestant (incidentally, this is also true of American Idol). Massood responded to this critique by pointing to the new rules, whereby one vote is counted per SIM card. In other words, Tolo has heard the complaint and responded. It remains to be seen whether this will improve people’s confidence in the results. Massood felt strongly that Afghan Star has broken down ethnic divisions in Afghanistan. He pointed to the fact that on stage you have male and female singers from Kandahar, Herat, Jalalabad, Mazar, and Kabul, and that the winners come from different provinces each year. This, in his opinion, was a good symbol of national unity and evidence that people are not thinking along ethnic lines.

Ali brushed over my questions about political elections, saying that he was not proud of Afghan politics. However, he responded positively to the idea that Afghan Star breaks down divisions. He cited the example of Kawa Akbari, a contestant who came to Season 11 from Germany: “It’s a show for all of Afghanistan. Foreigners can also perform. It’s not just from one ethnic group.” Therefore, in his opinion, ethnicity does not matter. Ali is not Pashtun, but “love[s] to listen to Latif Nangrahary sing in Pashto. Maybe Pashtuns also like his Farsi songs. If you like the singer, you’ll like their Pashto songs as well.” Enjoyment, then, comes from the music itself—not because of who sings it.

Wali rejected the idea that music could have anything to do with politics:

Music is not about politics. Music is a special domain. Music is an independent sector that people really like. It doesn’t serve politics. If someone is a singer and they sing for politics, that’s a free choice. Music is something that’s agreeable to everyone. Everyone likes it and is interested in it.
Further, he felt that the show had nothing to do with ethnic differences. People just vote for the singer they like without thinking about ethnicity.

Hamid did not have an opinion about Afghan Star and politics. He felt that the show does divide people, but not along ethnic lines. Rather, it divides people into groups of fans and supporters of a particular singer and his sound. By contrast, Rahmat, felt that rather than uniting people, Afghan Star is quite divisive:

It hasn’t broken down divisions, and it makes some issues bigger. For example, there’s an Uzbek faction who backs the Uzbeks and votes for them, or a Turkmen, or if it’s a Hazara—Hazaras will vote for him, Afghans—Pashtuns—Pashtuns vote for them. People divide into factions. It hasn’t united the different tribes. It hasn’t helped to build acceptance of different ethnicities. It hasn’t benefited this cause.

These comments were echoed by Hussain, although in more positive terms. Hussain felt that Afghan Star causes divisions rather than bringing people together. He believed that everyone votes according to their own ethnic group, province, or city. Hussain agreed with me that Hazaras are the most enthusiastic supporters of the series and noted that other ethnic groups become upset when a Hazara wins. He believes that ethnic, regional, and national pride all play a role in inspiring young people to compete. Whoever wins becomes the pride of the nation—but even more so, the pride of their hometown.

Hussain also felt that Afghan Star absolutely affects politics, because viewers see the commercials and propaganda that goes along with it. Hussain was the only interviewee to make this connection. I expected other informants to pick up on this, because Tolo TV runs many overtly political advertisements. During the 2014 election, they strongly encouraged people to exercise their right to vote, and they frequently run pro-military and anti-Taliban campaigns. Afghan Star is not a political show, but other programs on Tolo are. For instance, the popular
comedy show, *Shabake Khanda*, which airs just prior to *Afghan Star*, often pokes fun at corruption in government.

**A Voice for Minorities**

Closely related to the themes of politics, education, and youth development, the role of minorities in *Afghan Star* is quite significant, for *Afghan Star* quietly reverses the power structures that dominate Afghan life. As discussed earlier, the interviewees noted that, thanks to *Afghan Star*, everyone now enjoys music from every locale. When I asked them directly if women and minorities were treated fairly on *Afghan Star*, most of the interviewees responded in the affirmative, but did not elaborate on the subject. However, it seems clear that minorities have the most to gain from public recognition of their cultural achievements. A quick look at the role of Pashtun and Hazara culture on *Afghan Star* will serve to illustrate the point.

Despite being the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, official government recognition of their language, and dominance in politics, Pashtun culture takes a back seat on *Afghan Star*. No Pashto-speaker has won the competition yet. As mentioned earlier, Pashtun viewers may be less likely to support *Afghan Star* than other groups. However, Tolo TV has made a strong effort to keep *Afghan Star* as inclusive as possible. While most of their programming is in Dari, *Afghan Star* is often bilingual, acknowledging the importance of Pashto as one of Afghanistan’s official languages. The title of the show appears in both Dari and Pashto. From the very first season, at least one of the four judges has been Pashtun and given all comments in the Pashto language. Ustad Gulzaman occupied this chair for the first six seasons. He was temporarily replaced by Master Ali Haider for a few episodes in Season 7. For a few years, various Persian speakers filled the position, leaving the Pashto seat empty until Season 11, when Ustad Saida Gul Mena
came to *Afghan Star*. The role of a Pashto-speaking judge has been significant, because it makes a strong statement that Dari and Pashto have equal status and all Afghans are equal.

Another nod to Pashtun culture takes place during the final stages of the competition. Normally, towards the end of the series, all contestants are required to sing a song in Pashto during a results show. Contestants may also sing Pashto songs of their own choice throughout the competition—whether or not it is their first language. Singing in different languages is a way to show versatility as an artist, but also to recognize the importance of the Pashto language in Afghan culture. Some performers have sung polyglot poetry, alternating between lines in Hazaragi, Pashto, Uzbeki, and Persian.\(^{35}\) Such songs make a strong statement for national unity. Yet despite these efforts, Pashtuns remain underrepresented on the show.

Some of the reasons for this have already been mentioned. Pashtuns may espouse more conservative values than other ethnic groups. They may choose not to watch Tolo TV because they don’t understand the language. Further, the majority of Pashtun people live in the southern provinces, in which fighting is ongoing and musicians are more likely to face death threats if they become publicly recognized. It may be that many more would like to participate in *Afghan Star* but cannot do so because of what other people think. Obtaining answers to these questions would require detailed fieldwork in Pashtun areas.

*Afghan Star* has showcased some excellent Pashtun singers, although none have made it to first place. Lema Sahar has already been mentioned. Other examples include Habibullah Shubab (Season 5, Second Place) and Zarghotay Helmandi (Season 7, Eleventh Place). *Afghan Star* places Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and all ethnic groups on an equal playing field. However, the language barrier may prove a bridge too far for most voters. Whereas Hazaragi can easily be

---

\(^{35}\) Compositions combining more than one language are common enough to warrant a special name. The Dari word for this type of music is “*shir wa shakar*” (milk and sugar).
understood by Persian speakers, Pashto is completely different. I suspect this may play into the results of the competition. *Afghan Star*, therefore, subtly challenges Pashtun hegemony, even as it asserts that there is no difference between ethnic groups.

By contrast, Hazaras, a people traditionally marginalized in Afghans society, have been disproportionately represented on *Afghan Star*, with six of the eleven winners being from this minority ethnic group. During the first season (2005-2006), ethnicity was a major topic of discussion. Shekib Hamdard, a young Hazara from Kabul, took the nation by storm with his renditions of Hindi and Dari songs. Eventually, he was crowned the winner. Hamdard’s success was perhaps made possible by the fact that he was not a performer of traditional Hazara music. He sang mainly popular songs that everyone across the nation could relate to. This set the scene for a culture of national unity in the decade to come.

Two years later, in Season 3 (2007-2008), ethnicity was once again a topic of discussion. The Top Three consisted of Rafi Naabzada, a Tajik from Mazar, Hamid Sakhizada, a Hazara from Maidan Wardak, and Lema Sahar, a Pashtun woman from Kandahar. Each had their own unique style. Rafi was a true pop singer, Hamid was trained in traditional Hazara music, and Lema sang Pashtun folk songs. On Marking’s documentary, Hamid states: “If you want to sing traditional Hazara songs, you have to study the classical style for ten years,” to which Rafi replies, “people just want a good voice” (Marking 2009, 1:22:30). However, earlier (Marking 2009, 12:00), Hamid had admitted that he sings pop music because it is what the people want. While Sakhizada clearly represented Hazara culture and sang some Hazaragi songs, his choice of pop as a primary genre made him appear a man for all Afghanistan. This decision brought him all the way to second place, where he lost very narrowly to Rafi Naabzada.
By the seventh season, it seems Hazara culture had become more mainstream, because two very popular Hazara competitors progressed towards the finals. Reza Rezayee, a young Hazara tailor from a very poor family, wooed the nation with distinctive Hazara melodies in Hazaragi. Most of the time, he accompanied himself on the dambura, a two-stringed instrument highly associated with Hazara culture. On a few occasions, he sang Dari pop songs, but the judges typically criticized these choices saying he would be better off sticking to his own identity. Abbas Neshat also played the dambura and sang Hazaragi songs, yet presented himself as a more modern pop singer, performing in a variety of different styles. Abbas was eliminated in the Top 5 round (February 3, 2012), while Reza went on to claim the winning title.

Reza Rezayee, unlike previous Hazara competitors, used his ethnicity as a strong advantage. Personally, I found his story and his mannerisms highly endearing. There was nothing ethnocentric about his behavior or song choices—rather, he exuded sincerity and a clear understanding of his own identity. Rezayee knew his abilities as an artist and worked within his own skill set rather than attempting to be someone else. As someone who knew poverty, the case of Rezayee contradicts claims that *Afghan Star* is just about money. He also shows either that Afghans of all ethnicities are willing to rally around a talented singer from another ethnic group, or that Hazaras are avid fans and willing to invest in their own culture. I suspect that both of these statements are true to a degree.

The following year (2012-2013), the winner of *Afghan Star* was also Hazara. However, Sajid Jannaty took a very different approach to the competition. Auditioning in Kandahar, he showed himself to be a man for all people, able to perform well in Pashto, Dari, and Hazaragi. Sajid’s nationalistic approach worked. He won the competition, defeating a popular Uzbeki singer, Haroon Andeshwar, and a very gifted classically-trained singer, Jamshed Sakhi, who
came from a hereditary musician family (March 21, 2013). The 2017 winner, rapper Syed Jamal Mubarez, was also Hazara.

Other minorities also fare well on *Afghan Star*. In fact, the Grand Finale of Season 12 (March 21, 2017) included a patriotic song sung in a wide variety of languages and styles by people from different ethnic groups. The performance even included Hindus and Sikhs, who comprise a tiny religious minority in Afghanistan. Such promotion of unity in diversity is typical of compositions that Wahed Qasemi (who was praised highly by several interviewees) has brought to the series over the past few years.

**Concluding Remarks**

The interviews provided clear confirmation that professional and amateur musicians alike recognize the significance of *Afghan Star*. Young people, in particular, see it as a positive force, while older musicians understandably have reservations about its value. They feel that it bypasses the traditional methods of teaching, and that contestants lack the discipline and virtuosity of professional musicians. This indicates that *Afghan Star* may lack some of the intergenerational appeal that artists like Ahmad Zahir were able to garner in the past.

Even the critics appreciated the fact that *Afghan Star* has brought music to the common people, showing them its importance. However, particularly for more traditional singers, the economic effects have been felt negatively, because more amateur singers mean more competition for work. Most of the interviewees felt that *Afghan Star* is a unifying force for the country, although one told me that the show is divisive. Perhaps both statements have validity in different contexts.
Chapter 6: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Given all that has been said, Afghan Star is much more than just an entertainment show. Rather, it represents the struggle of a very traditional nation seeking to redefine itself in a modern world. Afghan Star forces viewers to ask themselves what it means to be Afghan. Does “Afghan-ness” require gender segregation, ethnic division, and strict observance of social hierarchy, or is it something more? Can it include democracy, men and women singing together on stage, and the latest Western fashions?

Afghan Star provides a model for what Afghanistan could look like in the future. It suggests that there is a way for the nation to modernize without losing itself in the process. Keyboards, saxophones, guitars, and drum machines need not replace the rubab, dambura, tanbur, and tabla. They can rather be welcomed into the fold. Nationalism need not preclude ethnic pride. Instead, the different ethnic groups can support one another. Preserve that which is good—music, poetry, respect for authority, and hospitality—yet root out war, oppression, corruption, and ethnic discrimination. By introducing styles like rap, Afghan Star asks viewers to be open to new ideas, all the while remembering that they are Afghan: whether Tajik, Uzbek, Turkmen, Pashtun, or Hazara. Throughout Season 12, host Omid Nezami frequently commented that Afghan Star is like a “miniature world”—a place where a Pashtun woman can stand proudly alongside a Hazara man and both say “I am Afghan.”

This study found that Afghan Star, though it may not have the same following it did ten years ago, remains an important voice in Afghan culture. Many people still watch it, talk about it, and cast their vote for their favorite singer. Most viewers do not think about the political and cultural ramifications of the show, but I believe it has a subconscious effect. Whether it be Hazara folk music, kataghani dance melodies, rap, or rock n’ roll, the music presented on Afghan
Star makes people happy, and that is what keeps them watching. The entertainment value alone is enough to endow the show with meaning. In a nation where entertainment is sparse and people are familiar with hardship, a series like Afghan Star is a bright spot, bringing happiness to people of all generations.

It seems what people like best about Afghan Star is that it helps the youth to develop and discovers hidden talent. Afghan Star brings local styles of music to a national stage and promotes traditional culture, yet also encourages Afghan musicians to take their art in new directions. Further, it provides a forum where ethnic, gender, and class distinctions do not matter. In so doing, it promotes national unity. Each year, families across the nation and around the world gather together to witness the creation of a new superstar.

Despite these positive points, Afghan Star has its critics. Some accuse the show of being divisive, because people vote along ethnic and regional lines. Religious fundamentalists see it as un-Islamic, particularly because men and women share a stage, and women sing in front of men. Further, a number of people do not see the value in entertainment television. They believe it distracts people from things that really matter, such as education. For some musicians, Afghan Star represents a degradation of their craft due to oversaturation in the field of music. They would like music to remain the domain of a few professionals. Still others have lost interest in the show because it follows the same pattern each year. Whether valid or not, these criticisms show that Afghan Star is causing people to think about music in new ways.

So how does Afghan Star maintain continuity with Afghan heritage? During Season 10, a young Uzbek musician, Majid Andkhoyi, auditioned in Mazar-e-Sharif (November 7, 2014). After he had played and sung, the judges were impressed and asked him who his teacher was. He replied that he was self-taught, but a few moments later, through a slip of the tongue, he
contradicted himself and revealed that he did indeed have a teacher. The judges roundly rebuked him, insisting that he give proper credit to the man who had taught him music. Discipline, respect for authority, honor, and hospitality. These are Afghan values which the series upholds through its traditional performances. Folk ensembles from Badakhshan, Nuristan, Badghis, and Herat have all found their way into the lineup of guest performers. By inviting these performers to the stage, *Afghan Star* proclaims that Afghanistan has a heritage of which it can rightly be proud.

At the same time, *Afghan Star* has gradually introduced changes to Afghan culture. It was the first program to feature Afghan men and women singing together. It was among the first reality television shows. *Afghan Star* has been called a rehearsal of the election process, a voice for national unity, and a platform for young people to grow and develop. It may even be credited with popularizing the cellphone—now a ubiquitous accessory for young and old alike. Like any popular TV show, *Afghan Star*'s influence has waned over time as other shows gain in popularity, yet it continues to stay at the cutting edge of the music industry, introducing genres like rap, and innovations like Western harmony and modulation to its broad viewership. Whether the show continues for one more year or ten, it has already had an impact that will outlast the competition itself.

*Afghan Star* also has potential to bring Afghan culture to the rest of the world. Comments on its YouTube videos show that it has a following in Tajikistan, Iran, and even among people who do not speak Dari or Pashto. In Season 10, an Indonesian man named Augus Protama submitted an online audition. He was not allowed to participate in the competition, but did receive an invitation to perform as a special guest (December 26, 2014). Augus had been an avid fan of Afghan music for several years, and had learned how to sing in Pashto and Dari. Such
international collaborations are likely to increase as Afghanistan becomes more and more connected to the world through the Internet.

So, where next? I believe recent developments on Afghan Star will guarantee its success in the next few years. A return to a one vote per SIM card system will help restore confidence in the process. Season 12 extended the possibilities by allowing viewers to vote through their Facebook profile. An active social media presence will keep younger audiences engaged. From Season 8 onwards, results episodes have been shortened. This improves the pace of the show (previous seasons had a tendency to drag). Another positive development in Season 12 was an insistence that all singers, including guests, perform live. While this resulted in fewer guest performances than previous years, it improved the show’s authenticity. Ongoing musical direction from Wahed Qasemi (or someone equally qualified) will ensure that the series stays true to its cultural roots.

A few other measures would help to keep Afghan Star on the air in years to come. To counteract the voices of the critics, I would recommend that Tolo TV provide informative programming regarding the benefits of music in cognitive development, education, mental health, and trauma healing. Afghanistan’s schools do not offer music education, so TV stations like Tolo should take on this responsibility. I would also suggest occasional changes in the rules of Afghan Star. On American Idol, judges had the chance to save a contestant of their choosing who had been voted off. An innovation like this would help to keep viewer interest high.

I have attempted a rather broad study of Afghan Star and its effect on Afghan culture. However, this study has barely scratched the surface of the topic. Hopefully, research on Afghan music will continue—both in regard to popular culture and traditional performances. This study took place primarily in one region. However, the survey and interview questions could easily be
modified and taken to other cities and rural areas across Afghanistan. An entire wealth of data awaits any researcher who is up for the challenge of analyzing it.

It would be particularly useful to collect data from predominantly Pashto-speaking regions, as people likely hold more conservative views than they do in Mazar-e-Sharif. Another approach would be to focus in on a specific performer or style of music. For instance, the original rap songs of Syed Jamal Mubarez provide insight into the situation of Afghanistan in 2017. Analysis of his lyrics would shed light on the viewpoints of young people. On the other end of the musical spectrum, a comparison of ghazals on *Afghan Star* with other performances of the same songs would reveal if any significant innovation is taking place because of the show.

While *Afghan Star* is not the only venue for music in Afghanistan, it is one of the best-known. As the presenters frequently say, it is “the biggest stage for music in Afghanistan” and a “miniature world.” While the representation is not perfect or complete, *Afghan Star* shows something of what Afghanistan was in the past, what it is today, and what it could be in the future. Hence, it seems an appropriate starting point for any investigation into the nation’s music culture.
Sources Consulted


http://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Creference_article%7C1000227523.


Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval

January 4, 2016

Timothy A. Olson
IRB Approval 2329.010416: "Only the Name is New:" Identity, Modernity, and Continuity in *Afghan Star*

Dear Tim,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

Q. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971
Appendix B: Informed Consent Documents
The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 1/4/16 to 1/3/17 Protocol # 2329.010416

CONSENT FORM (INTERVIEW WITH PUBLIC FIGURES)
“Only the Name is New:” Identity, Modernity, and Continuity in Afghan Star
Timothy Olson
Liberty University
Department of Multi-Ethnic Music Studies

You are invited to be in a research study of the cultural impact of Afghan Star. You were selected as a possible participant because of your association with the show. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Timothy Olson, a graduate student in Liberty’s Department of Multi-Ethnic Music Studies.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to analyze the impact of Afghan Star on contemporary culture in Afghanistan. In particular, I am interested in themes of modernity, ethnic and gender identity, and history.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to participate in an interview that will last roughly one hour and be recorded. I will also ask if you agree to be identified by name.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:
The risks of participating in this study are minimal. However, it may be dangerous for you to be identified with me, a foreigner.
You will not benefit directly from the study, but it will help people in the West to understand Afghanistan better and appreciate local culture.

Compensation:
You will not receive any payment or compensation for participating.

Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. I will store all the data on my encrypted laptop that only I can access. If you agree that your name may be published, please tick the box below to certify your agreement. If you tick “No,” I will use your answers, but write the final report in such a way that you cannot be identified.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University, myself, or any other institution I am connected with. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships. If you wish to withdraw, simply contact me at the e-mail address provided below. I will then securely destroy the data.
Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Timothy Olson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at taolson2@liberty.edu. My faculty advisor is Dr. Katherine Morehouse and may be reached through email at khmorehouse@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Carter 134, Lynchburg, VA, 24502 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

*You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

*I agree that this interview may be recorded.* Yes ☐ No ☐

*I agree that I may be identified by my real name in the final report.* Yes ☐ No ☐

Signature: ___________________________________________ Date: ______________

Signature of Investigator: ___________________________________________ Date: ______________
CONSENT FORM (INTERVIEW)

“Only the Name is New:” Identity, Modernity, and Continuity in *Afghan Star*

Timothy Olson

Liberty University

Department of Multi-Ethnic Music Studies

You are invited to be in a research study of the cultural impact of *Afghan Star*. You were selected as a possible participant because of your knowledge about music. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Timothy Olson, a graduate student in Liberty’s Department of Multi-Ethnic Music Studies.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to analyze the impact of *Afghan Star* on contemporary culture in Afghanistan. In particular, I am interested in themes of modernity, ethnic and gender identity, and history.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to participate in an interview that will last roughly one hour and be recorded.

**Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:**

The risks of participating in this study are minimal. However, it may be dangerous for you to be identified with me, a foreigner.

You will not benefit directly from the study, but it will help people in the West to understand Afghanistan better and appreciate local culture.

**Compensation:**

You will not receive any payment or compensation for participating.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. I will store all the data on my encrypted laptop that only I can access.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University, myself, or any other institution I am connected with. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships. If you wish to withdraw, simply contact me at the e-mail address provided below. I will then securely destroy the data.
Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Timothy Olson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at taolson2@liberty.edu. My faculty advisor is Dr. Katherine Morehouse and may be reached through email at khmorehouse@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Carter 134, Lynchburg, VA, 24502 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ I agree that this interview may be recorded.

Signature: ________________________________ Date: ________________

Signature of Investigator: ________________________________ Date: ________________
CONSENT FORM (SURVEY)
“Only the Name is New:” Identity, Modernity, and Continuity in Afghan Star
Timothy Olson
Liberty University
Department of Multi-Ethnic Music Studies

You are invited to be in a research study of the cultural impact of Afghan Star. You were selected as a possible participant because you represent the people of Afghanistan who view the show. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Timothy Olson, a graduate student in Liberty’s Department of Multi-Ethnic Music Studies.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to analyze the impact of Afghan Star on contemporary culture in Afghanistan. In particular, I am interested in themes of modernity, ethnic and gender identity, and history.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to participate in a short survey. It will take roughly ten to fifteen minutes. You will either write your answers, or tell me and I will write them down for you.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:
The risks of participating in this study are minimal. However, it may be dangerous for you to be identified with me, a foreigner.

You will not benefit directly from the study, but it may help people in the West to understand Afghanistan better and appreciate local culture.

Compensation:
You will not receive any payment or compensation for participating.

Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. I will store all the data on my encrypted laptop that only I can access.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University, myself, or any other institution I am connected with. If
you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Timothy Olson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at taolson2@liberty.edu. My faculty advisor is Dr. Katherine Morehouse and may be reached through email at khmorehouse@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Carter 134, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

If you wish, you may have a copy of this information to keep for your records.
Short Form Consent to Participate in Research

“Only the Name is New:” Identity, Modernity, and Continuity in *Afghan Star*
Timothy Olson
Liberty University
Department of Multi-Ethnic Music Studies

You are being asked to participate in a research study.

Before you agree, the investigator must tell you about (i) the purposes, procedures, and duration of the research; (ii) any procedures which are experimental; (iii) any reasonably foreseeable risks, discomforts, and benefits of the research; (iv) any potentially beneficial alternative procedures or treatments; and (v) how confidentiality will be maintained.

You may contact Timothy Olson at taolson2@liberty.edu any time you have questions about the research. The researcher’s faculty mentor is Katherine Morehouse, and you may contact her at khmorehouse@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Carter 134, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you will not be penalized or lose benefits if you refuse to participate or decide to stop.

Signing this document means that the research study, including the above information, has been described to you orally, and that you voluntarily agree to participate.

___________________________________________
signature of participant  date

___________________________________________
signature of witness  date
Appendix C: Questionnaire

Survey About Afghan Star

Gender (please circle one): M/F

Ethnicity (please circle one): Pashtun/Tajik/Hazara/Uzbek/Other_______

1. How often do you watch Afghan Star:
   a) Once a week
   b) Twice a week
   c) Sometimes (please explain) ________________
   d) Never

2. How many years have you been watching it?
   1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10  11

3. Do you vote for your favorite contestants? Yes/No
   How often?_____

4. Do you think the competition on Afghan Star is fair? Yes/No

5. Is your ethnic group fairly represented on the show? Yes/No

6. Are you happy with the results of Season 11? Yes/No

7. Do you think Afghan Star has a positive or negative impact on society?
   Positive/Negative

8. What qualities do you think are most important for an Afghan Star:
   a) Talent
   b) Nice personality
   c) Good looks
   d) The right ethnic group

9. Would you be happy if someone from your family competed on Afghan Star?
   Yes/No

10. Is it good that women compete in Afghan Star? Yes/No

   Please add any other comments you would like to make:
بپررسی در باره ستاره افغان:

لطفاً یکی از خانه‌های خالی زیر را پر نمایید.

جنسیت: □ زن   □ مرد

قومیت: لطفاً یکی از اقوام ذکر شده را حلقه نمایید.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>پشتون</th>
<th>تاجک</th>
<th>هزاره</th>
<th>ازبک</th>
<th>و غیره</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. اکثر از چند بار است ستاره افغان را می‌بینید؟
  الف) هفته یک بار
   بی) دوبار در هفته
   ج) بعضی اوقات (لطفاً توضیح دهید)
   دال) هیچ‌گاه

2. چند سال است که این برنامه را می‌بینید؟

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>یک سال</th>
<th>دو سال</th>
<th>سه سال</th>
<th>چهار سال</th>
<th>پنچ سال</th>
<th>شش سال</th>
<th>هفت سال</th>
<th>هشت سال</th>
<th>نه سال</th>
<th>ده سال</th>
<th>یازده سال</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

3. آیا شما به ستاره دلخواه خود رای داده‌اید؟ □ بله □ نه

4. آیا شما فکر می‌کنید رقابت ستاره افغان عادلانه است؟ □ بله □ نه

5. آیا قوم خود را در ستاره افغان می‌شمرده‌اید؟ □ بله □ نه

6. آیا شما با نتیجه دوره یازدهم ستاره افغان موافق هستید؟ □ بله □ نه

7. به نظر شما ستاره افغان تاثیر مثبت و یا منفی بالای جامعه داشته است؟ □ مثبت □ منفی

8. کدام ویژگی‌ها برای ستاره افغان مهم است؟
  الف) استعداد (بی) شخصیت خوب (ج) ظاهرخوب (دال) قومیت

9. اگر کسی از قوام‌های در ستاره افغان اشتباه نماید خوش‌خواهی بوده؟ □ بله □ نه

10. آیا خوب است که زنان در ستاره افغان اجرای امکان کنند؟ □ بله □ نه

لطفاً هرگونه نظر دیگری که می‌خواهید به را اضافه کنید.