

**The following interview with
HIROMI LORRAINE SAKATA
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on May 1, 2020**



Hiromi Lorraine Sakata

Library of Congress: What originally drew you to Afghanistan and its sounds?

Hiromi Lorraine Sakata: I was born in Walnut Grove, a small California town situated on the east bank of the Sacramento River some 30 miles south of Sacramento. As a young girl, I found an escape from small town living in our county library where I eagerly sought out fairy tales and adventure stories of faraway places. One of the places that captured my imagination was Mongolia, the Mongolia of Genghis Khan. I felt an affinity to the Mongolians who had Asian features like mine, but their nomadic lifestyle on the Central Asian steppes, traveling by horse and sleeping in yurts, was exotic and far different from mine. Their leader, Genghis Khan, was a strong military tactician and a hero to his people. Since there were no Asian American heroes during my youth (pre-Bruce Lee), and unaware of his reprehensible reputation in the West, I adopted Genghis Khan as my hero.

My fascination with him and the Mongolians remained dormant within me until, as an ethnomusicology student, I dared to consider Mongolia as my research area. Unfortunately, it was the Cold War era and Mongolia, China and Central Asia were closed to US researchers. However, neighboring Afghanistan had diplomatic relations with the US, welcomed Peace Corps Volunteers and supported a Fulbright exchange program, and most importantly, the Hazaras, an ethnic group reputed to be descendants of the armies of Genghis Khan, inhabited the mountainous region of central Afghanistan.

I first heard the music of Afghanistan on an old Barenreiter vinyl recording (now digitally released by Rounder Records as “Anthology of World Music: Afghanistan”). The sounds and

songs that I couldn't quite place caught my fancy and Beltun's beautiful and melancholic voice (track #10) captivated me, convincing me to go to Afghanistan to find out more about its music.

LOC: What surprised you the most about the people of Afghanistan? And what surprised you most about their sound culture?

HLS: I was surprised at how little Afghans outside of big cities like Kabul and Herat knew or cared about Americans. We could have been visitors from Mars for all they cared, but they still thought of and treated us as "guests." It was the kindness of Afghans who looked after us and passed along messages ahead of us or sent along travel companions to make sure we reached our next destination that enabled us to travel safely in remote areas of the country.

Speaking of travels, I was totally amazed and impressed with the resourcefulness of Afghan drivers who could fix any mechanical problem in an emergency by using whatever was on hand, e.g. a rope to fix a broken axle-spring, or a pocket knife, match and a used piece of chewing gum to fix a blown-out tire.

The original purpose of my first Afghanistan research project was to study the music of the Hazaras who live in the central mountains of Afghanistan. Fully nine months after I first stepped foot on Afghan soil and only one month before my 10-month scholarship period was over, I finally had the opportunity to travel into the Hazarajat. At the first of a number of small villages I had planned to visit, I asked permission to record their music. Looking perplexed, they responded, "Oh, we have no music here." Stunned and alarmed, I had to think fast and asked them if mothers did not sing to their children in the Hazarajat. They answered, "of course they do, but that (singing lullabies) is not considered music." The point of contention was my thinking that the word "musiqi" was a cognate for our word "music." For the Hazaras musiqi implies music performed by a professional class of musicians whose songs are accompanied by musical instruments, and what they meant was that there was no professional class of musicians in the Hazarajat.

From that point, I kept the term musiqi tucked away in my mind and used their terms such as "lalu" or "lalai" for lullaby and bait for song verse and started recording women and children. I soon learned that men also sang stylized lullabies or played stylized lullabies on musical instruments and only later did I realize that lullabies and children's songs contained basic musical characteristics that were inherent in and identified as Hazara music.

LOC: Do you have a particular favorite from these recordings?

HLS: It's difficult for me to think about having favorites among the hundreds of recordings I made in different regions of the country; of different ethnic groups; by men, women and children; and from professional and folk musicians alike. Of all my recordings, I am perhaps most gratified by the children's songs I collected because they are often overlooked as serious music and, for the most part, remain unrecorded. Their short songs or play/game songs often

included environmental sounds, adding a special dimension to their musical vocabulary and vocal styles.

LOC: Is there something central--a theme, a sound--that seems to characterize all (or most) of the Afghan music that you collected?

HLS: So much of Afghan music depends on the musical styles shared across international borders that one is hard-put to choose a particular element that characterizes the sound of Afghan music in general. I can more-or-less identify regional music by its language, instruments, and melody-types. Its classical genres (which emanated from the tastes of the royal courts) and popular styles (which emanate from their television sets or their mobile phones) are closely aligned with the classical traditions of North India/Pakistan and the popular styles of the West, respectively. There is one musical instrument, the rabab (a short-neck, plucked lute with a membrane covered body), which seems to have transcended the boundaries of regions, genres and styles. Its deep and powerful sound has become emblematic of Afghan music when it is played in the classical style or as part of a folk or traditional ensemble.

LOC: You made two recording trips to Afghanistan: what were the major changes that you noticed between your two visits?

HLS: The two major recording trips to Afghanistan were five-years apart, time enough (I thought) for me to observe the musical changes that would likely be effected by technological advancements. For example, the availability of cheaper radios and tape cassette recorders/players would make State-run radio music or Indian film songs accessible to everyone in Afghanistan, and was bound to dramatically change the musical cultures of the country. Instead, the opposite happened. The State-run radio station (Radio Kabul or Radio Afghanistan) opened up many regional stations in the local language or languages and played popular regional songs as well as those from Kabul. The popular cassettes sold in local bazaars were often of local production, featuring local musicians playing and singing familiar genres.

In fact, I myself did not go along with the development of the cassette recorder, but rather, I kept my small portable reel-to-reel tape recorder (Uher) and added another reel-to-reel recorder (Nagra) as well as an 8mm movie camera (Beaulieu) thereby encumbering myself with more and heavier equipment requiring even more batteries, tapes and film. Realizing that I had become less mobile, I was inspired to set up a home base within the community in which I lived and worked (Herat, Faizabad and Khadir). My residence provided me with more access to the local community, thereby allowing me to get a glimpse of an insider's perspective. It was reassuring to me that Afghan regional music remained popular and continued to play an important part in establishing one's local identity. The big changes, of course, came after 1978. As long as the Afghans, even after years of fighting and turmoil, still maintain their ethnic or regional identity, their music will reflect that identity.