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Transactions of hope at the Afghanistan National Institute of Music

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Abstract:

Hope is a recurring motif at the Afghanistan National Institute of Music, a vocational music high school in Kabul. In an urban context where citizens navigate the combined impacts of war, poverty, aid, random spectacular violence, and aggressive contestation around cultural practices such as music, ANIM's narratives of hope provide meaning for its students, and help them reconcile present-day challenges with future aspirations. However, hope at ANIM is not just for students; it is one of the school's most cited 'deliverables' to its high-powered international community of supporters, including the World Bank and the US State Department. This implicitly connects ANIM's work to the broader political objectives of those players, and renders hope central to the students' and the school's survival.

Through mapping transactions of hope, this presentation illuminates the nested quality of the social impacts of music-making in conflicted, aid-dependent contexts. Intercultural interests, political objectives, and donor dependence may draw the espoused set of beneficial impacts into the service of more powerful actors. The research for this presentation draws upon fieldwork interviews with students and staff of ANIM, and media sources about the school and its work. It forms part of PhD research into music schools in conflict-affected countries.

The Afghanistan National Institute of Music opened in 2009. It's a government school for grades 4 to 14, funded by international donors (predominantly the World Bank, the US Embassy, and various European cultural institutions). This multi-year funding comes as part of a broader context of international aid in Afghanistan that helps the Afghan government fight the Taliban and bring stability to the country and hopefully the region.

It's the relationship between the school and their international donors against the backdrop of this wider agenda that I want to focus on today, and to do that I'll look at **hope** as a significant social impact.

Hope is a powerful force in conflict-affected areas. Encouraging people to move from a state of hopelessness to one of hope has implications for the continuation or cessation of conflict. Hopelessness is not just a *result* of conflict, it also *feeds* conflict. When there's no hope for peace, the motivation to act in constructive ways towards resolving the conflict is diminished, which means the situation remains unchanged, which in turn fuels further hopelessness. In contrast, hopefulness is fed and maintained through faith in possible change, and self-agency within that—the sense that one's actions matter and can contribute to a better future. This mindset helps people to cope with the difficult present.

In particular, hope is closely tied to the provision of education in conflict-affected areas. Young people living in war zones often connect their present to the possible future through the lens of education. Education opens up possibilities, desires, and aspirations, particularly for those whose opportunities for formal learning have been severely disrupted or constrained (Dryden-Peterson, 2011).

At ANIM, hope is strategically cultivated. There is consistent messaging that highlights local victories around cultural change, and reinforces reasons to be

hopeful about the future. Students describe the way their ANIM experiences open up new pathways and keep them motivated to work hard and stay focused on this future possible world. Many of ANIM's students come from very disadvantaged backgrounds, and their lives have been transformed through enrolment in ANIM, going from selling chewing gum and plastic bags on the streets to performing internationally, from no access to schooling to speaking English and aspiring towards university. Even for those students from more middle class, less disadvantaged backgrounds, ANIM offers a unique education opportunity with many modern reforms and access to quality facilities and teaching.

As part of their learning program, ANIM students give many performances, sometimes as many as one a week. These are primarily to members of the international expat community in Kabul and Afghan people closely associated with this community, as there are security challenges around giving public performances. ANIM ensembles also tour internationally, in a role described on the school's website as "cultural diplomacy". Many of these tours are to high-income donor countries, such as their tour to USA in 2013, or their performances at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2017.

Hope is also attributed to these performances, but in this case, the hope is experienced by the international audience members, suggesting a second set of social impacts of the music-making.

What is the significance of hope for the audiences, who are the consumers rather than the makers of the music? In general, hope for non-Afghan audiences goes in hand with reassurance. The performances demonstrate how much has changed in Afghanistan since the military intervention, and that a more progressive and stable country is possible and emerging. This confirmation gives the expat workers in Afghanistan an emotion-stirring and symbolic demonstration of the meaning and value of their work since 2001. For the public audiences in donor countries, the performances offer an alternative image of Afghanistan beyond that of war, one that offers a more positive portrayal of the country's national culture to that of the beige, fanatical Taliban. It also works to persuade a war-weary audience of the value and achievements of the intervention at a time when its public support is waning.

Hopeful and reassured audiences are more likely to support continued military and aid engagement in Afghanistan. Continued aid and engagement benefits the Afghan government in its fight against the Taliban, and this is the overall objective of the international community in Afghanistan (Burde, 2014). The last few years have seen a huge deterioration in public confidence in the Afghan government (Asia Foundation, 2016), and considerable assistance is needed for that confidence and legitimacy to be rebuilt.

ANIM's *music* is not necessarily central to the student experience of hope—because the student experience is inseparable from the provision of a high-quality, rights-based education. But for the audiences, music is essential to this communication of hope.

This occurs through what Christopher Small would call a paralanguage of gesture: in ANIM's performances, key messages are communicated to and experienced by the audience in metaphoric form. To quote Small, the performances use the "language of gesture to explore, affirm and celebrate one's concepts of ideal relationships" (Small, 1998, p. 98).

They do this through the visual language, and the musical sounds. ANIM's ensembles feature players of both Afghan and Western instruments, dressed in colourful Afghan costumes, performing arrangements of Afghan traditional music and works from the Western canon.

This music integrates two cultural worlds that are currently unequal and often at odds. It blends familiar and unfamiliar elements with the reassurance of tonal harmony, notated sounds, orchestra-like formations, and conductors at the helm. The inclusion of girls alongside boys—including as conductors—represents the changing status of women (and a challenge to the traditionally restricted social roles). The youth and demeanour of the players is a metaphor for a future Afghanistan that is attractive, understandable, and ready for intercultural cooperation. Musically and visually, these can be interpreted as representations of ideal relationships between Afghanistan and the West.

The power and emotion of these metaphors is enhanced when placed in the recent historical context of the Taliban’s ban on music and the invisibility of women during Taliban rule.

The layers of hopefulness that the performances create return to ANIM in the form of international funding for its continued existence. Given ANIM’s dependence on this external funding, this creates a somewhat transactional loop. Audiences may not perceive ANIM’s performances as ‘transactional’, but the power differential between the international community members—who are connected to financial resources—and a music school that depends upon external funding for its existence, means that for ANIM at least, there is a sense of obligation to *perform hope* in order to secure future funds. Hope is essential to ANIM’s continued existence.

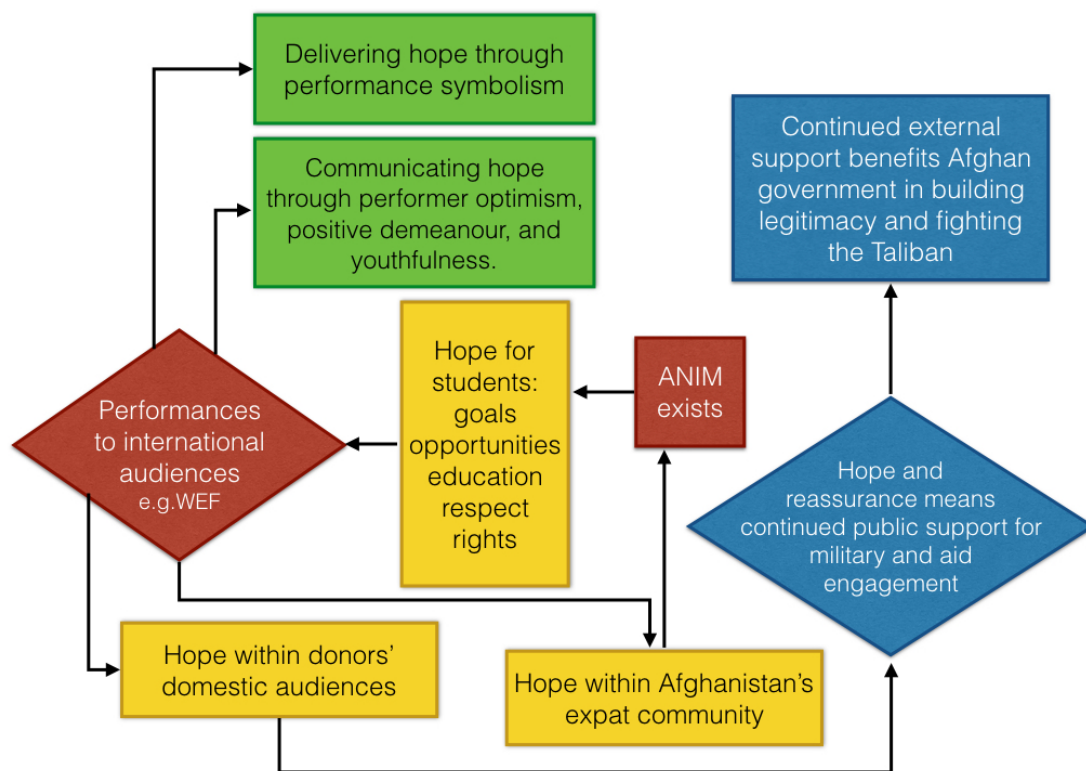


Figure 1: Performances as transactions of hope at ANIM

Having established the existence of a wider set of social impacts of the music making at ANIM, the provocation I want to raise is in the tensions surrounding the student experience and the potential vulnerability of the young learners within these transactions and performances of hope. *How might the harnessing of music-making for political goals transform the social and personal benefits of music making for the students?*

There are some Afghan realities about music and politicisation that need to be acknowledged. Afghan music scholar John Baily observes that in an environment where music has been the subject of extreme political control, any act of music-making becomes political (Baily, 2015). Therefore, it may well be impossible for music to transcend politics in Afghanistan.

Additionally, many of the ANIM students that I have spoken to are politically-engaged, some highly so. They draw great personal meaning from seeing their music work as contributing to Afghanistan's development and through seeing themselves as agents of progressive change. Furthermore, they support the international community's broad agenda of defeating the Taliban, because this supports their desire to live in a freer, more globally-connected Afghanistan.

However, as ANIM's role in the fight against the Taliban becomes more unambiguous—such as at the World Economic Forum, where “Fighting the Taliban with Music” was the name of one of their sessions—it makes the school and the students more visible. This is happening in a broader international military and aid context where education is increasingly positioned as a ‘soft power’, or a ‘hearts and minds’ tool for fighting the war on terror, linking its delivery to a foreign military presence and foreign military goals (Novelli, 2011). It corresponds with a pattern established during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan when USAID funds produced and distributed educational materials with unambiguous *jihadi* messaging, as part of the fight against communism (Burde, 2014).

Troublingly, in countries like Afghanistan where there is already ideological opposition to education, when education projects are discursively positioned as *justifications* for the intervention *and* demonstrations of its success, they can become perceived as partisan and connected to the organ of Western power, and therefore a target (Winthrop & Kirk, 2011).

Indeed, ANIM has already been targeted for attack. In December 2014, a young suicide bomber detonated himself during a performance involving ANIM students. The school's founder and director, Dr Ahmad Sarmast, was severely injured. Later statements from the insurgents indicated he had been the target. Since the attack, Sarmast acknowledges that he has become more outspoken politically, seeing his work as part of the fight against terrorism and terrorists' desire to silence Afghan culture once again (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2015).

This more overt political message makes the ANIM students vulnerable in ways that are different to the vulnerabilities they already face as powerless young people in a dangerous country that offers few options for their development. They know this, and navigate the options available to them, in the way that all recipients of aid do, to make the choices that best enable them to follow their interests and maintain hope.

However, their interests are also in the service of more powerful interests. They might enroll as music students, but they are simultaneously *being enrolled* as “revolutionaries”, and “pioneers in a mission” (Watkins, 2012). They need to bravely face their opponents, and be fighters for a cause that stretches some way beyond their desire to play music and have a better future. It isn't clear if it is possible for students to extract themselves from this obligation.

The social impacts of making music can therefore be far reaching. However, I will close with consideration of a further impact, that of the way that the potential *exposure* that politicisation of music learning produces might override, undermine, or subsume the *solace and asylum* that music learning hopefully also provides the learners. I'm thinking here of young cellist Nazeera, who broke down when she tried to talk about her family's political challenges, but who spoke about her music learning with ease, saying that when she is playing she can forget everything (Stewart, 2014).

If there *is* a transformation of the social and personal benefits of making music, might it take place here? To what extent can this solace and asylum be protected when music learning serves additional political goals? This is not to imply a lack of care on the part of ANIM's organisers or donors, nor to suggest the primary goals are anything other than revival of music education. Rather, my intention is to point out that the social impacts of making music in politicised contexts such as those of war-affected countries are felt beyond those making the music, and benefits to more powerful interests need to be examined alongside benefits to those making the music if we are to understand music's value in these contexts.

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