

Chapter 7

Culture, Theatre and Justice: Examples from Afghanistan

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In Afghanistan we live in the streets of the dead, and we die in the streets of life.

Poet, Afghanistan.

Introduction

After over 30 years of conflict, people in Afghanistan have learned to survive violence and endure hardship, but reaching beyond survival to lasting, positive social and political change—living in the streets of life, as it were—has proved difficult if not impossible for many in the country. That a poet captured this sentiment of the people is not surprising given the important role poetry has played in Afghanistan in elucidating and disseminating stories and narratives, attuned to what is actually happening in society.

This role is a distillation of why storytelling and cultural expression (including oral, written, visual and performative practices) in ongoing and post-conflict settings are crucial. Opportunities for portraying the truth about war and war-related experiences are not only important for individual healing, but they can also serve an important function in restoring collective memory and repairing the social fabric in which individuals are embedded.¹ Arts-based mechanisms for remembering and truth-telling may allow people to collectively share their stories and

¹ Shanee Stepakoff, “Telling and Showing: Witnesses Represent Sierra Leone’s War Atrocities in Court and Onstage”, *The Drama Review* 52, no. 1 (2008): 26.

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create “meaning about what happened in the community”.² In contexts like Afghanistan where human rights frameworks and transitional justice measures are nascent and contested by powerful national—and international—elites, grass-roots cultural expressions are among the only spaces for debating conflict and justice and in this sense may be a place for cultural as well as political change. Artists then not only help to tell what has happened and is happening, but can provide communities an outlet to develop solutions—to help people live rather than simply survive.

In examining post-conflict and transitional contexts through a frame of cultural expression, artists and activists are seeking to uncover “what would we know that we do not know now? Whose stories, memories and struggles might become visible? What tensions might performance behaviours show that would not be recognized in texts and documents?”³ and perhaps more importantly help lay the bedrock in communities on which the social trust needed for dealing with legacies of conflict must stand. This chapter aims to situate cultural practices, in particular participatory theatre, within the context of arts-based and memory-related efforts to promote transitional justice, specifically truth-seeking, in Afghanistan. The text will explore the potential benefits and dangers of the use of these methodologies to promote transitional justice in societies during and after conflict.

While dressed in an academic form, this article draws on the practical work of the three authors. Sari Kouvo has followed Afghanistan and its transitional justice process for the European Union, the International Centre for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) and the Afghanistan Analysts Network.⁴ Hadi Marifat is an Afghan human rights activist who has worked for the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and Human Rights Watch. He is also a co-founder and current director of the Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization (AHRDO), an all-Afghan led and run civil society organization whose aim is to develop a participatory theatre and arts-based transitional justice and gender platform in Afghanistan. Nadia Siddiqui was a member of the International Centre for Transitional Justice’s Afghanistan and International Policy Relations teams. She worked closely to help research and develop ICTJ’s early engagement with theatre in Afghanistan and develop and organize AHRDO’s first international

² Beatrice Pouligny, “Understanding Situations of Post-Mass Crime by Mobilizing Different Forms of Cultural Endeavors” (panel contribution, 19th IPSA World Congress, Durban, South Africa, July 1, 2003).

³ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), xviii.

⁴ This chapter builds in part on Kouvo’s previous publications including Sari Kouvo and Dallas Mazoori, “Reconciliation, Justice and Mobilization of War Victims in Afghanistan”, *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 5, no. 3 (2011): 492–503; Sari Kouvo, “Transitional Justice in the Context of Ongoing Conflict: the Case of Afghanistan”, ICTJ Briefing Report (New York: ICTJ, 2009); Fatima Ayub, Sari Kouvo, and Rachel Wareham, *Security Sector Reform in Afghanistan*, Initiative for Peacebuilding Report (Brussels: IFP, 2009); and Fatima Ayub, Sari Kouvo, and Yasmin Sooka, *Addressing Gender-Specific Violations in Afghanistan* (New York: ICTJ, 2009).

theatre and policy tour of the US and Europe. She also develops and directs art and design events around New York City.⁵ The authors then are participant-observers and as such despite best efforts at distancing our personal engagement from the work, certain biases may remain. At the same time, our analysis benefits from the strength of our understanding not only of the theoretical frameworks of transitional justice in peacebuilding contexts, but also the practical complexities of using alternative methods for transitional justice in difficult conflict environments.

Cultural Expression and Transitional Justice

Catastrophes can pull societies apart; they can also shatter the ordinary divides and patterns that separate people. In these circumstances, new communities can emerge, where people in coming together find purposefulness and connectedness amid death, chaos, fear and loss.⁶ Rebecca Solnit argues that in the aftermath of disaster, be it hurricane or bombing, the demolished status quo can create space “in which we are who we hope to be, do the work we desire, and are each our sister’s and brother’s keeper”.⁷ In contexts of prolonged conflict, however, as abuses and violence compound, survivors often find that their experiences are open-ended; they live with an event that “has no ending... no closure and therefore... continues into the present”.⁸ Performative arts in conflict and transitional settings can provide a bridge to “who we hope to be” by engaging with the “moral imagination”, the capacity for individuals to stay grounded in the troubles of the real world, while simultaneously remain open to the possibilities of a better one.⁹

Theatre in particular as an art form serves a deeper purpose than storytelling alone: it functions as a vital act of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated behaviours.¹⁰ Performance can play a role in giving voice to the marginalized and in demanding the right to speak

⁵ This chapter also builds in part on Siddiqui’s previous publications including Nadia Siddiqui, “Theatre and Transitional Justice in Afghanistan”, ICTJ Briefing Report (New York: ICTJ, 2010); and Nadia Siddiqui and Hjalmar Joffre-Eichhorn, “From Tears to Energy: Early Uses of Participatory Theatre in Afghanistan”, in *Transitional Justice, Culture, and Society*, ed. Clara Ramirez-Barat (New York: Social Science Research Council, forthcoming).

⁶ Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 3.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Shoshana Feldman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 62.

⁹ Cynthia E. Cohen, Roberto Gutierrez Varea, and Polly O. Walker, eds., *Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict*, vol. 1, *Resistance and Reconciliation in Regions of Violence* (Oakland, CA: New Village Press, 2011), 11.

¹⁰ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 2.

publicly without fear.¹¹ It encourages present and forward looking understanding by making relationships central and acknowledging interdependence among people and societies; cultivating paradoxical curiosity through inquiry about identities, values and beliefs leading to understanding that is above simple dualities; making space for the creative act in contexts where political violence would make it seem that there are no options for cultural action and response; and finally, enabling risk-taking to allow people to examine possibilities of what a peaceful society could look like.¹²

Theatre then can be thought to work at the “interface between the creative and the political, calling together audiences of citizens to contemplate their society or its ways”.¹³ Framing theatre as an active and collective process connects it to the notion that “compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers”.¹⁴ The idea here being to create a disequilibrium inside the spectator not only to empathize with the protagonist on stage, but also to prepare the way for concrete actions to address injustices and bring about transformation.

Having audiences actively participate in the transformation process is a central principle of community-based theatre. It offers participants an aesthetic instrument to analyse their past in the context of the present and to invent and shape their futures according to their needs, determined through participatory theatre exercises and games, without having solutions imposed on them by experts.¹⁵ The underlying assumption is that people are all equipped to be actors and to take centre stage. The main theatrical focus is on dialogue, with the explicit aim of allowing participants to take control of situations rather than simply having things happen to them.

Community-based theatre is most closely identified with Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal and his Theatre of the Oppressed, which became an international movement using his techniques as vehicles for participatory social change in the mid-twentieth century.¹⁶ For Boal, many ordinary citizens feel powerless and are in fact blocked in the face of oppression and injustice. To

¹¹ Jonathan Neelands, “Acting Together: Ensemble as Democratic Process in Art and Life”, *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 14, no. 2 (2009): 180.

¹² Cohen et al., *Acting Together*, 11–12.

¹³ John McGrath, “Theatre and Democracy”, *New Theatre Quarterly* 18 (2002): 137–138.

¹⁴ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 101.

¹⁵ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), “*Tears into Energy: Community-based Theatre and Transitional Justice*”, unpublished report, April 2008.

¹⁶ Boal developed the Theatre of the Oppressed based on his own experiences with dramatic performance and was heavily influenced in the pedagogical and political principles espoused by Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, namely that the situation lived by participants should be understood, including its root causes, and that changing the situation should follow the precepts of social justice. The Theatre of the Oppressed is a form of popular, participatory and democratic theatre of, by, and for people engaged in a struggle for liberation. For more details see, Arvind Singhal, “Empowering the Oppressed through Participatory Theatre”, *Investigación y Desarrollo* 12, no. 1 (2004): 138–163.

address this, he developed the Theatre of the Oppressed process whereby audience members, so-called spect-actors, can stop a performance and assume a protagonist role onstage to change the dramatic action, propose various solutions, discuss plans for change, and train themselves for social action.¹⁷ The theatrical act itself becomes a conscious intervention and a rehearsal for social action, based on collective analysis.¹⁸

Among the components of Boal's approach are (1) Image Theatre, a basis for other participatory theatre work that asks participants to transform their own or others' bodies into representations of particular situations, emotions or ideas; and (2) Forum Theatre, which allows audience members to stop a scene or play showing a conflict that the characters do not know how to resolve/transform and suggest and try out possible solutions. "Joker" characters serve as neutral moderators between the actors and the spect-actors, setting up the rules of the event for the audience, facilitating the spect-actors' replacement of the protagonist on stage and summing up the essence of each proposed solution in the intervention. The term itself derives from the joker or wild card in a deck of playing cards, where that card is not tied to a specific suit or value, neither is the Theatre of the Oppressed joker tied to an allegiance to any one performer, spect-actor, or interpretation of events.¹⁹

Playback Theatre is another widely used technique in community-based theatre. Developed in the United States in 1975 by Jonathon Fox and Jo Salas, this method enables an audience member to tell a story from his or her life and then watch as actors and musicians immediately re-create the scene, giving it artistic shape and coherence.²⁰ Its main tenet is that human beings need to tell their stories in order to construct meaning. Any story that is significant to the teller, whether happy or sad, mundane or transcendental, can be a part of a performance. Playback Theatre celebrates individual experience and the connections between people through their stories. Similar to Theatre of the Oppressed, this methodology is open to both professional actors and those with no acting experience, promoting the idea that artistic expression is the domain of all people.

A Playback Theatre performance usually includes a variety of short and long forms to respond to audience input, with the three most common being "fluid sculptures", short, abstract sounds and movements expressing the spectators' emotional states; "pairs", an improvisation based on spectators' experiences of simultaneously occurring conflicting emotions; and "stories", in which audience members share longer personal stories of their pasts. Improvised music is an essential element as well and an array of different instruments are usually available for the performers to experiment with. Finally, there is a conductor, playing the

¹⁷ UNAMA, "*Tears into Energy*".

¹⁸ Singhal, "Empowering the Oppressed", 146.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

²⁰ Bev Hosking and Christian Penny, "Playback Theatre as a Methodology for Social Change" (paper presented at the DevNet Conference, Wellington, New Zealand, December 2000).

role of host and interviewer, who helps to frame and shape the stories told by the audience, thereby effectively co-creating them.

Unlike Theatre of the Oppressed, Playback Theatre was not originally devised with an explicit political agenda in mind, but both methodologies have in recent years been utilized to raise social justice concerns in post-conflict and transitional contexts, including Burundi,²¹ the Democratic Republic of Congo,²² Kosovo²³ and, recently, Afghanistan. The use of these theatre forms within these contexts is not entirely surprising as the connection between cultural expression and transitional justice is inherent given that a central tenet of transitional justice is to give voice to the victims of trauma and human rights violations.

Transitional justice measures—from trials to truth-seeking—aim to provide forums for testimony in an effort to bring accountability and uncover truth in violent contexts where both have been absent. As such, these mechanisms require voices from communities that have in many cases had their means of expression silenced. Catherine M. Cole argues, for instance, that the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) live public hearings were in effect performances and were *effective*; however, imperfectly, in facilitating transition from a racist, totalitarian state to a nonracial democracy because they were *affective*.²⁴

Despite this, official transitional justice initiatives, through mandate and resources, can only include a select and limited number of victims to participate, leaving a larger number individuals and groups to feel excluded and thus certain truths to remain taboo.²⁵ Furthermore, in criminal justice settings, participants are constrained in their responses given the structures of formal proceedings and may face adversarial questioning of their experiences. Rather than set the scene and express themselves freely, victims must confine their explanations to the questions asked as their testimonies are requested to demonstrate culpability (or not) of the accused.

At the same time, in the absence of any formal processes for justice and truth, communities will seek their own means for remembering conflict and violations of the past. Recent research in Colombia indicates, for instance, that a number of arts-based initiatives have been endeavoured locally by members of conflict affected

²¹ Search for Common Ground, "Burundi Update", June 2008 http://www.sfcg.org/programmes/burundi/burundi_update.html.

²² Search for Common Ground, "Centre Lokole/Search for Common Ground's Participatory Theatre for Conflict Transformation", http://www.ceri-sciencespo.com/themes/re-imaginingpeace/va/base/Congo_1173192498.pdf; and Search for Common Ground, *Participatory Theatre for Conflict Transformation: Training Manual* (Kinshasa: Search for Common Ground, n.d.).

²³ Jonathan Chadwick, "Working in Kosovo on a Participatory Theatre Project on Missing Persons", AZ Theatre, <http://www.aztheatre.org.uk/index.php?page=war-stories-kosovo>.

²⁴ Catherine M. Cole, "Performance, Transitional Justice, and the Law: South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission", *Theater Journal* no. 2 (2007): 179.

²⁵ Ksenija Bilbija and others, eds., *The Art of Truth Telling About Authoritarian Rule* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 3.

regions in the absence of a formal, national process.²⁶ These unofficial and alternative truth-seeking initiatives serve to “repudiate past violence... demand remembrance... and insist that violence not be repeated”.²⁷ While these unofficial processes can present stories about specific communities or groups, they cannot alone guarantee political enlightenment, but rather they lay the groundwork for bonding and interactivity within the community.²⁸ This is still important in bringing divided communities together and in helping to activate what William Ury terms the “third side”, that is, the surrounding community within a conflict which can serve as a container for escalating violence.²⁹ As people contribute to a process of dialogue and remembrance, an impulse arises from the relationships linking each member and every other member in the community.³⁰ Thus, in utilizing their own forms of expression and traditions for commemoration and mourning, tellers of truths form in effect informal networks of “watchdogs against new encroachments... speak[ing] their truths to power, to themselves, to their compatriots, to anyone who might be listening”.³¹

These networks can begin grass-roots processes for justice and accountability, but cannot in and of themselves capture the “complex truths” inherent in a broader historical narrative of a given conflict—a narrative necessary for rebuilding a more just society.³² Cultural expression outside of formal proceedings informs transitional justice processes aimed at capturing a national record because they are densely packed with meaning, having been “polished” by centuries of transmission from one generation to the next.³³ This meaning may not be apparent in literary or historic documents or straightforward testimony alone, but rather found in performed, expressive behaviours. Examples of the use of performative input into formal processes can be found particularly within official truth-seeking efforts. This was evident within the South African TRC, where “some truths could be contained within the commission’s mandate and procedures [and] other truths constantly erupted in the live, embodied experience” of its public hearings.³⁴ Officials in charge of Peru’s TRC enlisted the Lima-based theatre collective,

²⁶ See Marcela Briceño-Donn and others, eds., *Recordar en conflicto: Iniciativas no oficiales de memoria en Colombia* (Bogotá: ICTJ, 2009).

²⁷ Bilbija and others, eds., *The Art of Truth Telling About Authoritarian Rule*, 3.

²⁸ Rustom Bharucha, “Between Truth and Reconciliation: Experiments in Theatre and Public Culture”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 36, no. 39 (2001): 3767.

²⁹ William Ury, *The Third Side: Why We Fight and How We Can Stop* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

³¹ Bilbija and others, eds., *The Art of Truth Telling About Authoritarian Rule*, 3.

³² Judy Barsalou, *Trauma and Transitional Justice in Divided Societies*, Special Report (Washington, D.C.: USIP, 2005), 1.

³³ Cynthia E. Cohen, “Creative Approaches to Reconciliation,” in *The Psychology of Resolving Global Conflicts: From War to Peace*, ed. Mari Fitzduff and Christopher E. Stout (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2005), 3: 72.

³⁴ Cole, “Performance, Transitional Justice, and Law”, 186.

Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani, to help with outreach. The Yuyachkani collective had been performing in Peru for 30 years prior to partnering with the TRC, with the aim of “imagining Peru”³⁵ as a coherent nation despite the pervasive violence of the civil war through “cultural engagement with the indigenous and *mestizo* populations and with complex, transcultured (Andean-Spanish) ways of knowing, thinking, remembering”.³⁶ Yuyachkani’s goal was to serve as a mediator and conduit to the public hearings between the government-operated TRC and rural populations—for whom until recently, the state was seen as an enemy of the people. The theatre group not only acted out the TRC’s itinerary, but also used the performances to transform ordinary public spaces temporarily into places for ritual and reflection. This not only highlighted the transition from previous periods of conflict to the new democracy, but did so in a manner that was “participatory for the community”³⁷ and sought to foster individual transformation.

Taken together then, creative expression, in particular theatre practices, can serve a variety of functions in transitioning contexts including: as a way of providing some modicum of individual and/or collective healing (if it is appropriately connected to and followed up with psychosocial counselling); as a complement to and outreach tool for formal transitional justice mechanisms; and as an informal, independent documentation and truth-seeking device in the absence of any formal transitional justice processes. With this in mind, we will explore further the complex context of Afghanistan, with a special focus on uses of participatory theatre methodologies as part of a fragile grass-roots transitional justice movement.

Conflict and the Nascent Transitional Justice Process in Afghanistan

As a result of over three decades of conflict, most Afghans have lived with conflict, violence and predatory political leaderships all their lives or have been forced to flee their country because of these factors. Hopes that grew in the country after the United States-led military intervention in 2001 for a more peaceful and just future have been shattered with the re-emergence of abusive leaders, corrupt institutional structures, and recurrent violent conflict. Lack of accountability has enabled warlords—politico-military leaders with continued links to illegal armed groups—to become part of the new national and community elite. Many of these leaders are alleged perpetrators of war crimes or other serious human rights violations and their continued access to power contributes to an atmosphere of fear. As a consequence, transitional justice issues are politicized and highly sensitive in

³⁵ Francine A’ness, “Resisting Amnesia: Yuyachkani, Performance, and the Postwar Reconstruction of Peru”, *Theatre Journal* 56, no. 3 (2004): 400.

³⁶ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 192; A’ness, 399.

³⁷ A’ness, 399.

Afghanistan.³⁸ Opportunities for expressing opinions about past and present violations are diminishing by the day and public space in which to talk about the legacies of war or other issues that may challenge country elites is fast disappearing.

The effort to promote justice and accountability for past—and present—war crimes and human rights violations has been fraught with challenges. In 2004, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) published its report *A Call for Justice: A National Consultation on Past Human Rights Violations in Afghanistan*, which presented the findings of how Afghans wanted to deal with the legacies of past abuse in the country.³⁹ In an effort to bolster and support the AIHRC's work, *A Call to Justice* was originally slated to be released in conjunction with a United Nations (UN) prepared report documenting war crimes in Afghanistan. This, however, did not happen as the UN decided to suppress the release of their own report, claiming that the information detailed within it would risk destabilizing the political situation in Afghanistan and pose security threats to UN staff in the country.⁴⁰

Even without the UN's supporting report, the AIHRC's national consultation sent a very strong message to both the Afghan government and the international community that Afghans wanted accountability for war crimes or at the very least that known perpetrators of war crimes be removed from official positions of power. It also resulted in the drafting of an action plan for Peace, Justice and Reconciliation, popularly called the Transitional Justice Action Plan, by a commission comprised of representatives from the office of President Hamid Karzai, the AIHRC and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), with support from European diplomatic missions. The action plan outlined a five-point strategy focusing on symbolic measures (memorialization), documentation and truth-seeking, institutional reform, vetting and accountability based on recommendations from the AIHRC national consultation. Although the President's office participated in drafting the plan, it was by no means easy to ensure its passage in the Afghan Cabinet. The action plan was approved in December 2005, but only after references to criminal accountability for war crimes had been watered down. The final version does, however, include references to accountability in the preamble and calls, as one of its final action points, for the

³⁸ For a more in depth analysis of transitional justice in Afghanistan, see Ahmad Nader Nadery, "Peace or Justice? Transitional Justice in Afghanistan", *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 1, no. 1 (2007): 173–179; and Patricia Gossman, Gossman Patricia, "Disarmament and Transitional Justice in Afghanistan", ICTJ Case Study (New York: ICTJ, 2009).

³⁹ Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), *A Call for Justice: A National Consultation on Past Human Rights Violations in Afghanistan* (Kabul: AIHRC, 2004).

⁴⁰ See, Angélique Mounier-Kuhn, "Le «mapping report» sur l'Afghanistan: histoire d'un dossier escamoté", *Le Temps*, October 2, 2010, http://m.letemps.ch/Page/Uuid/aadd4d4e-cd9b-11df-a30b-a70320d5cebf/Le_mapping_report_sur_lAfghanistan_histoire_dun_dossier_escamoté; and Sari Kouvo, "Facts for Reconciliation: Human Rights Documentation Needed", *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, October 10, 2010, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=1217>.

establishment of a commission to make recommendations to the President about how to approach accountability. To date, only a few of the action points have been implemented. The action plan has been publicly launched (though it took one year for the President to do so), a national day for victims of war crimes was announced and has been celebrated annually, a Presidential advisory panel on senior political appointments has been established, and the AIHRC recently finalized a massive war crimes documentation and mapping exercise in Afghanistan, though has not yet released the report.⁴¹

This minimal implementation of the action plan has still resulted in backlash in the country including counter-action against its launch by some of the former warlords elected to Parliament. In the name of national reconciliation, an ad hoc parliamentary commission drafted a law that provided blanket amnesty for all those involved in the last two and a half decades of Afghan conflict crimes. The law effectively also amounted to self-amnesty for its drafters. After only a few changes, the law was adopted by the President's office and it was published in the Official Gazette in December 2008.

The adoption of the National Stability and Reconciliation Law, often called the Afghan Amnesty Law, was in many ways a death-blow to the formal transitional justice process in Afghanistan. It solidified the power of warlords, and particularly, the factional commanders from the Civil War era within the Afghan government structures. It did so without any forceful reactions by the United Nations or the wider international community, suggesting that while there *in general* can be no amnesty for war crimes under international law, *exceptions* are possible and Afghanistan is one of them. While there was not broad international condemnation of the Afghan Amnesty Law, Afghan civil society, especially Kabul-based civil society networks, spoke out against it. The key argument raised was that it is not the role of the government to forgive, but that citizens, especially victims, need to make this decision.⁴²

Afghan civil society has remained largely reactive in its approach to political and security developments; however, the past few years have seen a new form of engagement for transitional justice increasingly adapted to the Afghan context and less internationally driven. In early 2009, the Transitional Justice Coordination Group (TJCG), a loose network of 25 Afghan and international civil society organizations, was established and it has been a driving force in the efforts to establish a national network for war victims in Afghanistan.⁴³ The Civil Society and Human Rights Network developed a training manual for transitional justice published in 2011, the first such manual to have been drafted in Dari and not

⁴¹ See, Patricia Gossman, "Kabul's Stealth Attack on Human Rights", *New York Times/International Herald Tribune*, December 26, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/27/opinion/kabuls-stealth-attack-on-human-rights.html>.

⁴² Similar sentiments were expressed in the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit's field research on Afghan opinions about justice and reconciliation, see: <http://www.areu.org.af/ResearchProjectDetails.aspx?contentid=2&ParentId=2&ResearchProjectId=27&Lang=en-US>.

⁴³ For further analysis see, Kouvo and Mazoori, "Justice, Reconciliation and Mobilization".

translated from English, and has conducted regional trainings about transitional justice. The Afghan Civil Society Forum Organization conducted and published a research on Afghans' opinions about and definitions of violence and justice covering a 60-year period of Afghan history (1958–2008).⁴⁴ The last few years have also seen several new organizations picking up subjects relating to the links between ending the conflict and justice.

The declining security situation and increasing attention to both local- and national-level reintegrations have also resulted in civil society refocusing its attention from advocating for—or expecting—the establishment of a formal transitional justice process to focusing on how justice elements can be integrated in conflict-resolution at the local levels and in the nascent peace process. There is then an increasing focus on consultation, community-based dialogues and—what will be discussed below—cultural and theatre initiatives. The TJCG, for example, organized a photo exhibition focusing on conflict and justice for National Victims' Day in 2010, and a number of groups have held several short-story competitions focusing on issues of peace and conflict.

Cultural Expressions and Theatre as a Means to Discuss Conflict and Justice

Afghanistan has a long-existing tradition of poetry, oral storytelling and performance. Poetry and oral storytelling have for centuries reflected the history, tradition, myths, religious epics, daily lives, emotions and pride of landscape in Afghanistan. They also reflect a love in Afghan culture for stories and the rituals around performing, listening and remembering details. These forms also served as a medium for sharing ideas about societal change. Some of the very first poems written in Persian Dari in the ninth century had a political bent, and modern political poetry in Afghanistan dates back to the early twentieth century where it was connected with the “Constitutional” movement of the time led by intellectuals, writers, poets, and social activists with an aim to ensure complete political freedom and a constitutional system in Afghanistan.⁴⁵ Following this, in the so-called democracy decade (1963–1973), political poetry was incorporated into left and right wing ideologies and into the workings of newly established Communist and Islamic political organizations and political parties.⁴⁶

Modern Afghan theatre, also borne out as a practice in the early twentieth century, was started by a few men who had studied in Europe in the 1930s and

⁴⁴ Afghan Civil Society Forum Organization, *A First Step on a Long Journey: How People Define Violence and Justice in Afghanistan (1958–2008)*, (Kabul: ACSFO, 2011).

⁴⁵ Partaw Naderi, “Poetry and Politics” (lecture, Iowa City Public Library, Iowa City, IA, October 27, 2006).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

returned to Afghanistan to make translations of the Western canon; train actors in romantic acting styles; direct and produce these plays; and spread their work to other cities.⁴⁷ Over the course of 20 years since starting this work, the group had interested other prominent Afghans on the importance of theatre enough to have developed about a dozen playwrights whose works dealt with relevant social, political, economic, domestic and religious problems facing society.⁴⁸ By 1960, Kabul housed two public theatres subsidized by the Ministry of Press, Information and Culture and by the municipality.

As political unrest escalated through the later 1970s in Afghanistan, left-wing Communist movements utilized creative expression, in particular poetry, to introduce concepts of proletarian revolution, the peasant, socialism and Lenin for the first time.⁴⁹ It was the Communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, who rose to power through coup in 1978, that most closely linked creative expression to political and ideological structures than ever before in the country. Opposition mujahideen groups followed suit, using arts to frame their own narratives. As such, artists were persecuted depending on their political beliefs (or lack thereof) under the Communist regime as well as by the competing mujahideen groups who fought for power in the 1980s. As a result, artists, like many other Afghan citizens fled the country. Despite this, so-called resistance poetry was still being written by Afghan poets in exile in Pakistan and Iran during this period. The final death knell for cultural production in Afghanistan came with the ascendancy of the Taliban in the 1990s who made clear through the destruction of cultural sites and execution of traditional storytellers, Sufis, poets, artists and musicians that Afghanistan was not a place for any kind of expression beyond the religious.⁵⁰

The fall of the Taliban has seen the gradual reemergence of cultural production and expression, though arts practices do not hold the importance they once had, superseded by practical aspects of individual and national survival.⁵¹ Traditional storytelling is a rare commodity and storytellers even more so—the great stories of Afghanistan's past are not entirely forgotten, but additional themes of war, terror, loss and small gains, are now part of the repertoire.⁵² While these new themes are realities far removed from the magic of fairy tales traditionally told, they do serve as “safety valves to relieve tensions caused by oppression and venting a society's animosities as well as expressing its aspirations”.⁵³

⁴⁷ George H. Quimby, “Theatre in Iran and Afghanistan”, *Educational Theatre Journal* 12, no. 3 (1960): 203.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Naderi, “Poetry and Politics”.

⁵⁰ Wahid Omar, “From Storytelling to Community Development”, in *Telling Stories to Change the World: Global Voices on the Power of Narrative to Build Community and Make Social Justice Claims*, eds. Rickie Solinger, Madeline Fox, and Kayhan Irani (New York: Routledge, 2008), 194.

⁵¹ Naderi, “Poetry and Politics”.

⁵² Omar, “From Storytelling to Community Development”, 194.

⁵³ Ibid.

Few traditional storytellers remain in Afghanistan, but the need to tell long silenced stories may explain the resurgence of theatre, despite its being a relatively newer arts practice in the country, particularly in its participatory forms. There have been a number of advancements in theatre including: the reopening of the destroyed Kabul Theatre in 2002; the establishment of the Afghan Theatre Festival in 2004 in conjunction with Kabul Theatre, Kabul University, the Afghan Ministry of Culture and other international institutions; and the growing number of women's theatre groups. The theatre practices in Afghanistan cover a range of styles, including staged works and participatory exercises, and topics, such as social justice and public health concerns.⁵⁴ They offer windows to explore experience as well as serving as subtle mechanisms for change.

Given Afghanistan's low levels of literacy, theatre and other unwritten means of outreach are useful for communication and interaction that can foster public understanding, engagement and participation around justice related topics. While the use of participatory theatre techniques to broach legacies of war and accountability specifically is a recent innovation, it has already helped create positive impulses for peacebuilding and promotion of transitional justice in Afghanistan.

Theatre processes oriented around transitional justice began in earnest in Kabul in 2008, first initiated jointly by the AIHRC and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and followed up with support from ICTJ. The work consisted of introducing both traditional and participatory theatre techniques, including Theatre of the Oppressed and Playback Theatre, to Afghan human rights activists interested in developing cultural approaches to transitional justice in country. In 2009, this group of activists went on to formally establish AHRDO whose aim is to build a theatre and arts-based transitional justice and gender platform in Afghanistan.

AHRDO has been a driving force behind a series of war victims-centred theatre endeavours that included Theatre of the Oppressed and Playback Theatre initiatives with different war victim communities around the country as a means of documenting experiences of conflict. The overarching goal of this work is to use theatre to create a space for war victims of Afghanistan to come together and analyse the past, in the context of the present in order to initiate grass-roots strategies for how to deal with the truth of the past and become active protagonists in shaping a more peaceful and just society. One recent project, the development of a new theatre piece called *Infinite Incompleteness*, sought to better connect the disparate stories of victims and bring them to a wider audience in Afghanistan and abroad. The point was to have these experiences and stories acknowledged as part of the culture of Afghanistan and be included as part of ongoing discussions for national stability.

Infinite incompleteness was developed based in part on the request from victims' groups involved in AHRDO-run participatory theatre workshops that a theatrical work be created based on their own experiences. This provided the perfect

⁵⁴ Nicole Estvanik, "Global Spotlight", *American Theatre Magazine*, February 2012.

opportunity for AHRDO to recognize its own goal to produce and stage a nonfiction performance piece using real words and stories from war victims in Afghanistan. In order to collect these stories and develop a script, AHRDO utilized different participatory methods including Playback Theatre and Documentary Theatre in which pre-existing documentary material serves as a basis for performance and is most often based on people's actual words and experiences, with victims' groups from across Afghanistan. The AHRDO team invited victims' groups to participate in a total of 20 workshops in different parts of the country. With consent, 120 stories were told and a total of 10 were carefully selected, edited and arranged in a basic storyline. The piece was written with consideration to Afghanistan's ethnic and linguistic diversity (three local languages are utilized in the script); different phases of conflict (1978–present); and the equal promotion of both men and women's experiences. These real stories were complemented by a parallel storyline consisting of a series of fictional actions and events carried out by the characters in order to create a narrative that is set in the past, present and, ultimately, future of the country. Contemporary Afghan and Iranian poetry and music were incorporated into the piece in an effort to promote an atmosphere that would resonate with the original target audience, the countless victims of war in Afghanistan.

Infinite incompleteness premiered in December 2010 at the French Cultural Center in Kabul for an audience of nearly 250 Afghans and included a post-performance discussion in honour of Human Rights Day and Afghanistan's National Victim's Day. The piece was also performed at the National Victims' Conference organized by the TJCG in March and in December 2011. The fact that the play covers violations from all three phases of the conflict and is performed in all the local languages resonated well with the audience of the National Victims' Conference and resulted in a spontaneous sharing of testimonies wherein people from different parts of the country came forward to make known what had happened to them and their families. The piece has been staged several more times in Afghanistan and toured the United States to promote victims' concerns around justice issues in Afghanistan.

AHRDO also completed another larger-scale project using participatory theatre techniques to engage women on the creation of legislation from the community level up to help promote women's rights in Afghanistan. The purpose was to collect information on how to increase women's political participation, strengthen women's participation in law making, and identify and categorise legal problems women face. This programme was conducted in Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Jalalabad, Bamiyan, and Herat. AHRDO staff analysed the findings from the theatre initiatives and based on major trends and recommendations identified by the women participants, drafted a final report, *Afghan Women after the Taliban: Will History Repeat Itself?* which was released to coincide with International Women's Day in March 2012.⁵⁵ The report was also distributed and discussed with Afghan parliamentarians, local officials and the international community.

⁵⁵ AHRDO, *Afghan Women After the Taliban: Will History Repeat Itself?* (Kabul: AHRDO, 2012).

While this work in Afghanistan signals, in a small, targeted way, that participatory theatre has the capacity to explore the legacies of conflict and to establish spaces for discussion for grass-roots action, there are a number of challenges Afghan practitioners face when carrying out this work. One of the most practical challenges is gaining access to theatre participants and spaces to conduct workshops. Many of the communities in which AHRDO works are very poor, and for some local authorities, partners and participants, their “support” to theatre projects is contingent on receiving funds. AHRDO is an officially registered NGO in Afghanistan and because of the influx of international funding for human rights and justice initiatives, it is not lost on victim communities that there could or should be monetary incentive for their participation beyond what AHRDO can provide. This makes it difficult to get to conversations about the true objectives of the processes for grass-roots, participatory, and transformative action.

Further complicating matters is the international community’s rush to co-opt and fund any burgeoning creative practice for their own programming agendas.⁵⁶ As one Afghan artist noted, “I was trying to generate some genuine street art, but before it had even taken root I was contacted by a contractor for the American government working on a gender awareness project who wanted to use graffiti to raise consciousness of women’s rights”.⁵⁷ Newer practices like theatre or even street art are not indigenous to the context and take time to develop organically, to “Afghanize”. Participatory theatre methodology seems to resonate as a practice within the communities AHRDO has worked with and has begun the process of Afghanizing, as evidenced by theatre participants requesting that their own stories be developed into a stage play, incorporating traditional Afghan symbols and poetry; women participating in a Theatre of the Oppressed workshop of their own accord developing and altering theatre games to better reflect the Afghan context; and perhaps most tellingly, people in Yakowlang in Bamiyan Province organizing themselves more formally in a victims’ shura or council within their community.

Without this process, using these creative forms for political, human rights or development campaigns may not be particularly effective as the community at large may not know how to engage with them. Exploiting these processes without letting them take hold within the culture also undermines Afghan creative collaboration as it forces civil society to compete for funds rather than work together to develop a community of practice. The victims’ group in Yakowlang is a stark example of this. The group came together organically around an idea, but then very quickly worked to attract donors and project funding, rather than build slowly and connect to a broader community.

This leads to perhaps the crux of the challenge in using participatory theatre methodologies in Afghanistan: the existing community itself. This presents itself

⁵⁶ This is in some ways inevitable as Afghanistan remains a very poor country and like others who are able to work, local activists need to make money (in some cases by capitalizing on donor ideas) to support large extended families.

⁵⁷ Jason Burke, “Kabul’s Graffiti Guerrillas Put the Writing on the Walls”, *The Guardian*, June 12, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/12/kabul-graffiti-guerrillas-walls>.

in difficulties in engaging men and women together within theatre initiatives, developing language and conceptual constructs that make sense to largely illiterate and uneducated populations, and in such a divided context bringing members of different ethnic groups together.

In an effort to start grappling with the idea of Afghanistan as a coherent nation, a requirement of each AHRDO theatre initiative is the inclusion of individuals from differing social and ethnic groups, who have lived through different periods of conflict and comprised of both men and women. This goes for the AHRDO staff that facilitates the initiatives as well. That a group of Playback Theatre actors, for example, who performed a variety of stories together consisted of diverse representations of Afghanistan and had men and women sharing the stage had considerable symbolic value, with many audience members expressing approving astonishment that something they thought “impossible” was actually happening in their community. At the same time, AHRDO staff may have to endure abuse and derision when first entering into a community because of their approach, introducing members of different groups to each other. This, coupled with the difficult personal narratives presented and other nonperformance-related duties within AHRDO, can take a physical and emotional toll on theatre staff.

The biggest hurdle for AHRDO practitioners, however, stems from the legacy war victims carry of decades of exclusion and deprivation of space to participate within the public sphere. Despite acknowledging the importance of empowerment, participation and learning—benefits participants feel theatre begins to provide—many war victims do not really believe in the idea of grass-roots, peaceful, people-led change in general or the transformative potential of theatre in particular.

Theatre allows them to communicate about the past often for the first time in a space where all experiences matter. This in particular creates impetus to participate; however, most war victims have yet to see anything in their country change through these actions and thus do not think that anything can or rather that they themselves can be the catalysts for such change. In Afghanistan, as in other contexts, the marginalized and excluded have lengthy grievances, but rarely if ever get “mad together... hopes and grievances [are] narrowly conceived, which blunt[s] a sense of common predicament”.⁵⁸ In a context where there is no political will from either the international community or national government for transitional justice, the people themselves are going to have to come together to demand it. This is perhaps where participatory theatre best fits within the realm of grass-roots movements in Afghanistan—in helping chip away at a narrowly conceived community to a view to common predicament across divides and eventually to getting mad together to bring positive, lasting change.

These cultural shifts take time, and the very fact that people in the end are willing to engage in these creative processes indicates that having a space to share experiences and ideas is important and serves as a first step towards action. While

⁵⁸ Katherine Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* (New York: Random House, 2012), 237.

many theatre participants initially are unable to imagine an Afghanistan in the future—free of conflict and injustice in a broad sense—they are able to engage in games and create short performances based on their own immediate situations that required both actors and audience to take on new roles and attempt different solutions to resolve conflicts. This was seen in the process using theatre to develop legislative strategies to improve women’s rights: women did have concrete recommendations for how their rights could be better protected. These workshops and performances then, being participatory in nature, perhaps have allowed those involved to begin to awaken from what Diana Taylor terms “percepticide”, the metaphorical (and sometimes all too literal) blinding of the population on behalf of those, usually members of abusive political regimes, who have an interest in hiding the truth from view.⁵⁹ In Afghanistan, percepticide means being “too busy surviving” to consider what a future without impunity could look like or to demand one’s rights.

In order for this consciousness to have more lasting effect, and potentially turn into positive social action, it needs to be sustained and supported outside of the theatre context and in communities at large. As one theatre activist reported, “Participatory theatre... is a very useful and effective means which would need to be accompanied by complementary means in order to mobilize civil society on transitional justice”.⁶⁰ This view recognizes that participatory theatre is but one method of raising transitional justice issues and unless accompanied by other initiatives is unlikely to trigger significant change. It also underscores the importance of various human rights and justice networks working closely with each other and with artistic communities as well.

Individual theatre practices may not in and of themselves provide more permanent healing, but they can help lead to renewed cultural production and community life which can foster and sustain agency and closure. Through this sustained cultural production, through continuous questioning of the status quo, artists and activists can begin to breakdown the barriers and hierarchy that stifle innovation and prevent active engagement in issues concerning the community. Helping to reclaim, re-evaluate, and re-appropriate the cultural means of production can be a way to develop new norms for rights and justice at a local level, to allow individuals the ability to “feel recognized once more as people, not only as victims”.⁶¹

In serving as conduits to other isolated, indigenous justice movements in the country connecting communities to one another, theatre and arts practitioners can in effect help to propel a third side from the ground up. Creating and upholding a continuum of this nature in a context that is marked by constant violent ruptures is

⁵⁹ Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s ‘Dirty War’* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 72.

⁶⁰ ICTJ Assessment, “Transitional Justice Theatre Training of Trainers Project”, unpublished report, August 2009.

⁶¹ Pouligny, “Understanding Situations of Post-Mass Crime”. See note 3.

not an easy task and can result in positive cultural initiatives being short-lived as both institutions and individual's burn out without strong community support and collaboration. To combat this then, just as artists and activists before them, AH-RDO and other members of the human rights and creative sectors in Afghanistan need to not only start conversations within and between communities, but help them get angry together, and work to a common goal.

Conclusions

Context is important when considering judicial and artistic/theatrical methods for truth-seeking and accountability: if one approach is relatively weak, the other may become more central to national healing.⁶² This is certainly the case in Afghanistan, where impunity is rampant and the space for accountability continues to shrink. Formal transitional justice mechanisms, beyond documentation, seem a long way off, but an arts-based approach may be suitable even when large-scale, public discussion about the past is not yet possible. Theatre provides for the expression, both verbal and embodied, of collective feelings in the public realm. In a repressive environment, self-articulation is itself an act of defiance aimed at the established order, a rebellion against official attempts at silencing alternative accounts of history. Performance in this type of setting can serve not only to denounce but to defamiliarize the violence people live with every day, exposing its absurd and dehumanizing effects in a way that is coherent.⁶³

Participatory theatre methodologies can be seen as possible tools for enriching grass-roots efforts to deal with the painful truth of the past because they can create spaces for discussion and allow for local ownership of the process of remembering, by taking into account its religious, ethical, cultural, social, and psychological dimensions, addressing individual and collective needs.⁶⁴ This is important as approaches to memory that privilege the individual fail to do justice to the cumulative and collective nature of trauma suffered by communities, literate or not.⁶⁵

The work in Afghanistan thus far using participatory theatre methodologies has created fragile spaces for discussion about legacies of conflict, has begun to connect these discussions to higher level policy arenas, and has provided a start to building networks of victims. It has also allowed for female participation, providing a modicum of agency to victims in general and women in particular. These

⁶² Cambodia is one place where the arts served as the main vehicle for victims of the genocide to communicate their experiences, because the tribunal was slow to start. See Stepakoff, "Telling and Showing", 23–24. Colombia is another context where the arts are used as a main vehicle for truth and memory, see note 24.

⁶³ A'ness, "Resisting Amnesia", 400.

⁶⁴ Ly Daravuth, "Notes on Pchum Ben" (working paper, Recasting Reconciliation through Culture and the Arts, Coexistence International, Waltham/Boston: Brandeis University, 2005), 4.

⁶⁵ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 193.

are small, fragile gains and worth building on, even if their sustainability is far from certain.

One of the biggest challenges comes in sustaining momentum and developing agency for change within communities that for too long have felt themselves powerless in the face of oppression and conflict. Those that do let theatre in have no real means of supporting it on their own, and practitioners run the risk of raising hopes they are certainly unable to fulfil. Building a truly grass-roots movement will require even deeper engagement with communities all over Afghanistan, putting further burden on theatre practitioners. A possible way to alleviate this while still continuously engaging communities would be to link participatory theatre work more closely with activities of other civil society networks as well as other arts initiatives, allowing for communities to understand the full scope of a justice movement and participate in different ways, both locally and in a broader national fora. It could also build a more robust and proactive civil society.

Rather than focus only on sending messages from communities directly to government and international audiences, it may also be useful to work laterally to connect more citizens to each other. Indeed, the actions of those closest to us, rather than government policy or expert opinion, are what most influence behaviours.⁶⁶

Attempting to bring people together in this way may help to capture the power latent in communities but repressed because of prolonged conflict and corrupt regimes, breaking the silence on injustice “through a thousand acts of construction to build a better world, a thousand acts that declare that there is a much, much better way of organizing and deciding our lives together”.⁶⁷

In urging ordinary Afghans to begin organizing together, civil society needs to do the same, collaborating to develop a proactive network of citizens working for justice. This is fragile work in Afghanistan and can be easily taken apart or politicized along religious or ethnic lines. The arts serve as a way to begin pushing the bounds of what is deemed possible and the use of a largely symbolic tool—the production of a play—in place of more traditional transitional justice approaches can crucially preserve safety for activists who would otherwise be at risk. The fact that, at least in Afghanistan, the transformative potential of theatre in all its forms is for the most part underestimated and sometimes even ridiculed may be a comparative advantage. It may empower people, particularly women, to participate in the creation of an outlet where what happened to them individually and collectively can be dealt with openly and respectfully, and it may consequently keep their struggle for justice alive creatively.

⁶⁶ Carne Ross, *The Leaderless Revolution: How Ordinary People Will Take Power and Change Politics in the 21st Century* (New York: Blue Rider Press, 2011), xviii.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, xxvi.

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