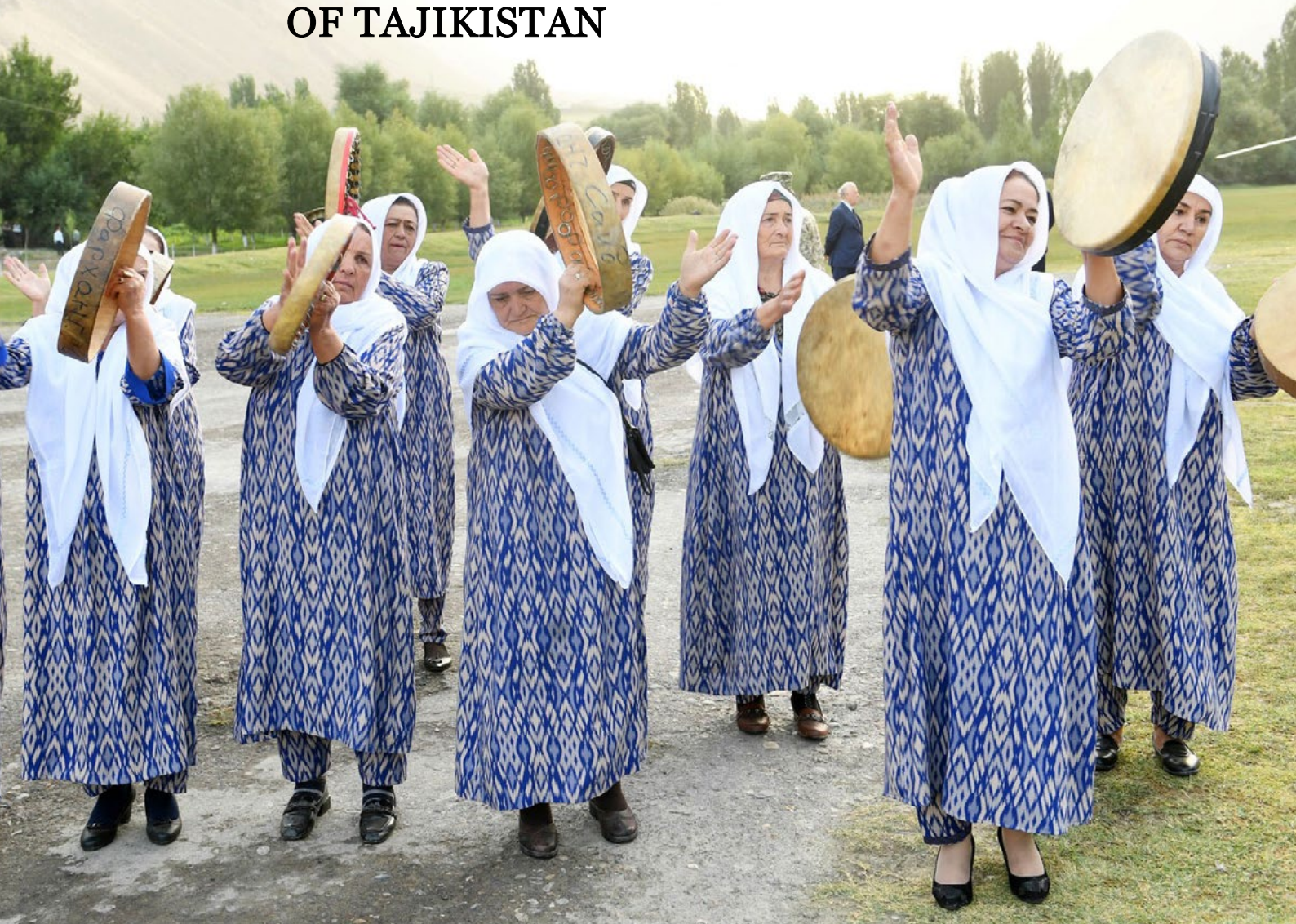




## THE *DAF* AND ITS ROLE IN THE BADAKHSAN REGION OF TAJIKISTAN





## Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit's Research Paper #20

### The *Daf* and Its Role in the Badakhshan Region of Tajikistan

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#### Abstract:

Musical instruments have played significant roles in the life of human beings. They are part of everyday activities, accompany many life cycle events, and are utilized symbolically to support various aspects of culture and impact regional and national cultural development. They acquire meaning and value in the interaction between social and cultural situations in which they occur and have become symbols of tradition and identity for nations, sub-national regions, and ethnic groups. Frame drums are one of the essential musical instruments with their simple structure that have acquired specific cultural meanings related to many aspects of cultural relations and local musical traditions. This paper discusses a percussion instrument known as the *daf* in the Badakhshan region of Tajikistan. The *daf* is a frame drum that has great significance in Badakhshan, is played in many events, and is connected to various social and cultural life of the people in the region. By providing an overview of the *daf* as a musical instrument, the author discusses the significant role this musical instrument plays in Central Asian culture and specifically examines the *daf* in the social and cultural life of the people in Badakhshan of Tajikistan.

**Keywords:** frame drum, the *daf*, Badakhshan, musical instrument.

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The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the University of Central Asia. The text and sources of the article should be referenced in this format: Goibnazarov Ch. (2023). The *Daf* and Its Role in the Badakhshan Region of Tajikistan. Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit of UCA, Research Paper #20, 18 p.



## Introduction

Each instrument is a unique product of the culture of its making and is shaped and developed by generations of musicians and artisans to meet the needs of the people who interact with it and to perform a specific function in the community. Instruments are pieces of cultural information, and their status, the process of making, and the meanings attached to them can reveal some of a community's ingrained traditions and ways of thinking. They are part of everyday activities, accompany many life events, often symbolize various aspects of culture, and impact regional and national cultural development. They acquire their meaning and value from the social and cultural situations in which they occur and have become symbols of tradition and identity for nations, sub-national regions, and ethnic groups.

The frame drum is an essential, popular musical instrument with a simple structure. It has specific cultural meanings related to many aspects of cultural relations and local musical traditions. In this paper, I discuss a percussion instrument known as the *daf*, which is found in the Badakhshan region of Tajikistan. The *daf* is a frame drum with great significance and status in Badakhshan. It is played at many events and is connected to the social and cultural lifestyle of many people in the region. It is by far the most common instrument and is played by the largest variety of performers, including women, men, and children. It is the principal instrument played during marriage ceremonies—to announce the arrival of the groom and bridal processions and welcome guests—and many other special festivities. By providing an overview of the *daf* as a musical instrument, this study aims to evaluate the significant role this musical instrument plays in Central Asian culture and specifically examine the role of the *daf* in the social and cultural life of the people of Badakhshan, Tajikistan.

## The *Daf*: Historical Background

Frame drums are considered one of the most ancient, simple, popular, and powerful musical instruments, historically and geographically. Each geographical location has its own variation of the frame drum, often with a simple structure but different sizes, patterns, playing styles, and techniques utilized in various social and ritual practices. The instrument is usually covered with animal skin and may or may not be tied with jingles. According to historians and ethnomusicologists, the instrument originated in the ancient Middle East, India, and Rome, reaching medieval Europe through Islamic culture, and acquiring different names on its journey. It is known in the Middle East and Turkey as *duff*, *daff*, *def*, *daireh*, *daira*, or *tar*.<sup>1</sup> In some regions, it is famous as *riq*, *tof*, *ghirbal*, and *bendir*.<sup>2</sup> Other versions of the frame drum, which are double-headed, are primarily found in India and the Tibet Autonomous Region of China.<sup>3</sup> Not only do their names vary, but they also have different shapes (round, octagonal, or square) and are used in various cultural practices. The *daf* is also common in Iran and in many other countries, such as Afghanistan and Pakistan; it has spiritual significance in many Sufi orders in these areas. It is believed to have healing properties and is often used in religious rituals and ceremonies.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the *daf* is present in the musical culture in Azerbaijan, Georgia,

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1 Doubleday Veronica, "The Frame Drum in the Middle East: Women, Musical Instruments and Power," *Ethnomusicology* 43, No. 1 (1999): 102.

2 For detailed accounts of the terminologies' geographical and historical aspects of the drum, see, Christian Poche, "Mazhar," "Riqq," and "Tar." In *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, edited by Stanley Sadie. (London: Macmillan Press, 1984).

3 Marcuse, S. and Bowles, Edmund Addison. "Percussion instrument." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, September 13, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/art/percussion-instrument>.

4 Emami S. F, "Acoustic Sensitivity of the Sacculle and *Daf* Music," *Iranian Journal of Otorhinolaryngology* 26, No. 75 (2014): 105–110.

parts of India, and Russia.<sup>5</sup> It can also be seen in the musical culture of the Balkans, Kurds, and Macedonians.<sup>6</sup>

In the context of the Muslim culture, the history of the frame drum can be traced back to the pre-Islamic Arab culture; it was later incorporated into Islamic music and rituals such as Sufi gatherings, where its rhythmic beats induced a trance-like state and facilitated the spiritual experience. Henry George Farmer, a British musicologist, and Arabist, noted that the *duff*, an Arabic term for the frame drum, was used in devotional singing and in the dance known as *tahlil*, which is performed by pilgrims during the circumambulation of the Ka'aba at Mecca and other cultic centers devoted principally to goddess worship.<sup>7</sup>

In Prophet Mohammad's time, women, girls, and slaves used frame drums when singing improvised blessings to honor an eminent person's arrival. Several instances have been cited in the Islamic Traditions of the Prophet (*hadith*) as reported by Roy Choudhury that "some girls in the streets of Medina greeted the Prophet, singing with the *duff*: 'We are girls of the tribe of Najjar; what a blessing it is to be a neighbor of the Prophet!' and the Prophet congratulated them on their performance."<sup>8</sup> On another occasion, women were reported to have celebrated the prophet's arrival with singing and drumming from the rooftops,<sup>9</sup> and a slave promised to welcome him home with drumming.<sup>10</sup> We observe similar rites in Tajikistan today, especially in Badakhshan when women play the *daf* to welcome distinguished guests such as their Imam of the Time, and the president of the country. The use of the frame drum continued in Islam, and consequently, it became associated with religion and was later used during Sufi rites in the 15th century because it produced complex and robust rhythms that induced trances and a spiritually exalted mood. It is perhaps due to the efforts of Iranian Sufis that the art of *daf* playing has survived to this day in Kurdistan and other parts of Iran<sup>11</sup> and continues to exist among other Eastern Iranian people and cultures, such as those in the Badakhshan region of Tajikistan, Afghanistan, as well as Northern area of Pakistan and the Xinjiang region of China.

In Central Asia, this instrument is also known by names such as *dap*, *doira*, *dayereh*, *childirma*, *charmand*, and *daf*. The similarity of the terms used to describe the frame drum and its role in various rituals and social practices in these regions shows the shared history of the musical instrument. It is more prevalent today in Central Asia's sedentary culture and is considered one of the oldest percussion instruments in this region. It is a lightweight musical instrument with a round wooden frame made of apricot or walnut trees. The outer part of the instrument is usually covered with the tanned skin of a calf, horse, goat, or snake. Inside the drum, there are metal rings which contribute to the music it produces. The sound is made by using both hands to hit the top of the animal skin, and the drum is used as an accompaniment in solo performances and various national musical ensembles. It is often played by men and women, mainly during traditional and popular musical performances as well as wedding and funeral ceremonies.

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5 Mehdi Setayeshgar, *Vazhe-Name-ye-Musighi-ye-Iran Zamin*, Tehran, Vol. I (1995) & Vol. II (1996).

6 Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Tambourine." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 2, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/art/tambourine>.

7 George Henry, Farmer, *A History of Arabian Music*, (London: Luzac, 1929), xiv; Abdel - Hamid Hamam, "Bedouin Music," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Vol. 3, ed. Stanley Sadie, Second edition (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 2001), 60–63.

8 Choudhury, M. L. Roy, "Music in Islam" *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, 23, No.2 (1957): 66.

9 George Henry, Farmer, *A History of Arabian Music*, (London: Luzac, 1929), 27.

10 Christian Poche, "Mazhar," "Riqq," and "Tar." In *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, edited by Stanley Sadie. (London: Macmillan Press, 1984), 617.

11 Ahmed Shaheen, "The Magical Instrument," *The Victor Magazine* (2021), accessed April 16, 2023, <https://www.victormagazine.net/the-magical-instrument/>.

Historically, it is linked to Shamanism as well as the pre-Islamic culture and religion and was used in religious ceremonies by shamans to cure the sick, divine the hidden, and control events. The shamans in Central Asia are believed to communicate with spirits and journey to “spirit worlds” or “lower worlds” through drumming, chanting, dancing, and the use of various ritual objects, including the frame drums, during their ceremonies.<sup>12</sup> As for the use of the frame drum in the shamanistic practices in Siberia and Central Asia, Anna Leena Siikala mentioned in her article that “the drum may be claimed to be the central symbol of shamanism, and without it, the shaman is not a shaman.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Lauri Honko considered the drum “the liturgical handbook of shamanism.”<sup>14</sup> In this context, the instrument’s function was to induce the shamanic trance and the shaman’s experiences in the moment of the trance. Some scholarly works have focused on the intersection of shamanism and Islam and discussed Central Asian shamanistic traditions within the context of Islam and Sufism.<sup>15</sup> The shamanistic elements in the use of the *daf* can also be observed in Badakhshan, which will be discussed further in this paper.

### The Invention of the Central Asian Frame Drum

The frame drum is known in Tajikistan as *doira* or *daf*. It is a portable musical instrument played with bare hands and featured in various social and cultural occasions involving music. Information regarding the *daf*’s origin in Tajikistan, particularly in Badakhshan, is scarce. There are no written records about this instrument’s origin in the region. Since the culture of Tajikistan has its roots in ancient Iranian culture, both linguistically and culturally, the antiquity of the *daf* could be related to the pre-Islamic ages, perhaps with the Pahlavi name *dap*.

Hakimov, a Tajik musicologist, narrates the following in a hagiographic account:

The invention of the musical instrument *daf* and its rhythms is attributed to Laron Trailasi, a scientist from the reign of Zahhak the Snake Shoulder (*Zahaki Moron*), an evil figure in Persian mythology. Having hollowed out a large stone in the middle, the scientist rounded and covered it with donkey skin. From playing the *daf* and the stone castanets (*qayraq*), Zahhak’s headaches seemed to stop.<sup>16</sup>

There is also a story among Muslims that the first frame drum was made by the itinerant and endogamous community of artisans and petty traders. Their ancestors made it for the Prophet’s daughter, Bibi Fatima, in Medina for use at a wedding.<sup>17</sup> These stories highlight the importance and positive value of the frame drum. Playing the drum in the lawful context of marriage invokes its magical powers as well as the sanctity and prestige of the Prophet and his daughter. In the Pamirs, there are legends about the origins of the *daf* and its value. In a newspaper article, Kurbon Alamshoev, a journalist and historian from Badakhshan, Tajikistan, quoted one of his informants, Mohjon Nazardodova, a legendary folk singer, on the origin of the *daf*. Nazardodova was quoted as saying the following:

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12 For more information on Shamanism and its various practices see Merete Demant Jakobsen, *Shamanism: Traditional and Contemporary Approaches to the Mastery of Spirits and Healing* (Berghahn Books, 1999).

13 Anna-Leena Siikala, *The rite technique of the Siberian shaman* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1978), 45.

14 Lauri Honko. “Glaubenswelt Und Folklore Der Sibirischen Völker, Hrsg. Von V. Diószegi”. *Finnisch-Ugrische Forschungen* 35, (1964): 169; Vladimir N. Basilov, “The shaman drum among the peoples of Siberia,” in *Traces of the Central Asian culture in the North*, ed. Ildikó Lehtinen (Helsinki : Suomalais-ugrilainen Seura, 1986), 35–51.

15 Zarcone, Thierry, and Angela Hobart. *Shamanism and Islam* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017); Razia Sultanova, *From Shamanism to Sufism* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011).

16 Naim Hakimov. *Muzikal'naya kultura tadzhikov*. (Khujand: Khudjandskiy Gosudarstveniy Universitet, 2001), 53.

17 Apurna Rao, *Les Gorbat d'Afghanistan: Aspects économiques d'un groupe itinerant* “Jat.” (Paris: Institut Français d'Iranologie de Teheran, 1982), 67.

The Pamir region was inhabited by hunters in ancient times. A hunter stumbled over a discarded dried skin that made strange noises. Initially, the hunter was frightened, but then he started hitting the dried skin. The sound that came out was pleasant for the hunter. The hunter then continued to strike the skin with his hand, palms, and fingers daily to summon noble spirits and ask gods for successful hunting. Nevertheless, soon, the hunter got tired of carrying the dried skin and became uninterested in hearing the monotonous rustling sound. One day, early in the morning, he raised his hands to the sky and began to pray to the Sun: “O the Sun, grant me such a thing that would be like you and be able to warm my soul and body.” This is where the *daf* appeared with a round shape and warm like the Sun. His body and soul warmed when the person started playing the *daf*.<sup>18</sup>

To some extent, the stories point to the *daf*'s magical powers. The skin of the sacrificial animal was believed to drive away diseases and the carriers of evil spirits. This belief is still prevalent among the people of Badakhshan. An example of this is the *dafi Muhammadi*, a frame drum that belonged to the people of Langar village in Wakhan. The people of this village used to only play it when the region had a severe disease outbreak. In many ways, the stories told about the origin of the *daf* emphasize the importance of the frame drum as an instrument with social and cultural functions. The stories indicate the vital role of instruments in the cult and ritual practices in the region, and this, in turn, indicates the ancient traditions of instrumental accompaniment of musical creativity. Therefore, in this study, we assessed the role of frame drums not only in antiquity but also in modern cultural practices in Central Asia, such as the rituals of shamans, Sufis, life events, and many other important social and musical practices.

### **The Process of Making the *Daf* in Badakhshan**

Making the *daf* is a long and painstaking process, requiring the maker to have considerable knowledge and skill. According to Salim Muborakaliev, a master *daf* maker with almost twenty years of experience, a selected piece of apricot, walnut, mulberry, or willow wood is carved vertically and horizontally until it reaches the required and desired thickness. Then, the wood is soaked in water for several days to soften, after which the master puts it on a manual machine to give it the shape of a circle and leaves it in this position for about four to five days. When the desired and required shape is ready, both sides are sheathed with leather or wire, and a goat's or calf's skin, devoid of the fleece, is pulled over the frame.

It should be noted that preparing the skin for the instrument is also a long and daunting process. The desired skin is soaked in a unique mud made of local bean flour for several weeks. Then, the fleece or wool is removed carefully from the skin using a knife or sharp object to avoid damaging the skin. Once the skin is hairless and smooth, it is rubbed for several days until it becomes soft. The soft skin is then pulled onto the round frame, glued to it using gummosis of the apricot tree, locally known as *shylmæk* or *noshnetz*, and then nailed. To ensure that it fits correctly and is tight, the master ties the skin with leather ropes and then dries the instrument. After four to five days, the string is untied, and the *daf* is ready.<sup>19</sup> Then, rings/jingles are attached to the instrument, and the sides of the instrument could be decorated.

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18 Kurbon Alamshoev, “Ekho dafa posredi Pamirskikh gor,” *Asia-Plus*, June 25, 2016, <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20160625/ekho-dafa-posredi-pamirskikh-gor>

19 It should be noted that masters of *daf* making have different ways and techniques of making the instrument. Nizom Nurdjanov and Faizullo Karomatov describe the process of *daf* making in their book differently. See. N. Nurdjanov and F. Karomatov, *Musikal'naya Iskusstvo Pamira*, Vol. 1. (Bishkek: V.R.S. Company, 2010), 8.



The structure of the *daf* is simple, and it usually consists of six parts: the frame, skin, pins, hooks, rings/jingles, and a leather band. The *daf* has various diameters, the largest being approximately 48 to 50 cm long and five to eight cm wide. Rings hang on hooks inside the instrument, and a band, usually made of leather or cloth, is tied to the rim for drummers to hold on to during their performance. In the Pamirs, two terms are used to describe the frame drum: the *daf* and the *doira*. Ethnomusicologists have different opinions regarding the differences between the two in the region. According to Jean During, the distinction between the *daf* and the *doira* has largely been lost.<sup>21</sup> However, in the Pamirs, the differences are made according to their dimensions, proportions, sound, and performance elements. *Dafs* in the Pamirs are usually round but could sometimes be slightly oval in shape. Compared to *doiras*, the membrane of *dafs* is generally thick, and the frames are usually wide and deep. Sometimes, the *daf* in the Pamirs has a hole on the frame instead of a leather band, where the performer puts his thumb to hold the *daf* during a performance. Also, *dafs* are only played on certain occasions and only while being held with bare hands. In contrast, the *doira* is used in various contexts of traditional and popular music and can be played while placed on the thigh and supported by the left forearm or gripped between the thighs.



*Daf*, from F. Karomatov and N. Nurdjanov.<sup>20</sup>

Concerning the instrument's name in Badakhshan, it appears to have come from the ancient Persian word *dap* or *dup*, and later, following Arab's conquest of the Persian territory, the Arab word *daf* became popular in the region. Due to the lack of resources, making a historical reference claim to the instrument's origin in the region is complex. The history of the *daf* is unclear as no written historical source provides substantial information about the instrument's evolution. Therefore, one must rely on the oral history told by musicians and instrument makers, which includes oral ambiguous legends and stories as well as some written ones, as noted earlier.

It is important to note that *daf* making is a century-old culture of the people of Badakhshan which indicates the presence and importance of music in the region and is a testament of the aesthetic and ethical feelings of the people and their respect for traditions, biodiversity, nature, and art. People in the region have tried to keep the tradition of making and playing the instrument alive by transferring their skills and knowledge to young generations. For instance, Shodikhon is a *daf* player who plays the *daf* on various occasions and makes a point of teaching this art to his three sons. In his own words:

The *daf* is a musical instrument that is part of our everyday life. We use it at weddings, funerals, concerts, and many other occasions. Therefore, I want my children to know how important this is for us. I want my sons to respect what we have. I would like them to learn the art of playing the *daf*. We have one excellent phrase in the Tajik language, and I always tell it to my children: *hunar beh az mulk-u ma'vo-yi padar!* [Artfulness is better than being endowed with one's father's wealth!]

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<sup>20</sup> *Muzikal'noye Iskustvo Pamira*, Vol. 1. (Bishkek: V.R.S. Company, 2010), 9.

<sup>21</sup> Jean During and Veronica Doubleday, "Daf(f) and Dayera," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online* (Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York, 2011), accessed August 9, 2023, [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_7945](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_7945)

## The *Daf* Performance by Women

Women play a significant role in music-making, performance, and the development of musical and poetic heritage in Tajikistan. They are very active in sharing their musical skills on various occasions and life events as well as during social and cultural celebrations. In some Muslim cultures, the participation of women in musical performances and activities is often discouraged and forbidden. However, female performers have become a voice for women in Islam, although musical performance is regarded as unlawful and condemned by various orthodox religious authorities in Islam, who often consider women's participation to be a deviation from the religious norm.

Women's status, rights, privileges, and powers vary greatly among Muslim cultures. In some cases, as noted by Farmer, they had a "commanding position" in music, had been active in music-making and performing, and had access to a broader range of musical instruments. As a profession, music, for the more significant part, was in the hands of the womenfolk and slave girls.<sup>22</sup> In her article, Doubleday indicated that women were notable performers; in many traditions, they played frame drums in the temple, at family gatherings, and during tribal rituals. They sang victory and battle songs, entertained at royal banquets, performed at shrines, and played frame drums in the context of marriage and other social and cultural settings.<sup>23</sup>

Regarding the connection of musical instruments, the ethnographic data collected from Badakhshan point out that the *daf* is considered to be a female instrument due to its cultural context. Examining the attitude of people towards both music and women, the culture of Badakhshan, which was historically shaped by Ismaili religious doctrines and re-shaped by Soviet anti-religious policies, provided the basis for the status and role of women in the performance, cultural, and musical life of contemporary Tajikistan.



Women playing the *daf* to welcome the president of Tajikistan in Vanj district of Badakhshan in August 2023. Photo of Muhabbat Rizvonov.

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22 George Henry, Farmer, *A History of Arabian Music*, (London: Luzac, 1929), 44.

23 Veronica Doubleday, "The Frame Drum in the Middle East: Women, Musical Instruments and Power," *Ethnomusicology*, 43, No. 1. (Winter 1999): 114.



*Dafthed* performers welcoming the president of Tajikistan in Khorog, August 2023.<sup>24</sup>

In the Pamirs, traditionally, the *daf* is played by both men and women. However, most rituals involving the *daf* are performed exclusively by women. In the Shughnan and Rushan districts of Badakhshan, women play the *daf* during wedding ceremonies to welcome and see off the groom and bride, welcome distinguished guests, and announce a celebration. This performance is usually called *dafthed* in Shughnan and Rushan, meaning “to play the *daf*.” *Dafthed* is generally performed by a group of women. In some parts of the Pamirs, the *daf* is played to announce the death of a community member. Therefore, the performance of the *daf* in the Pamirs is categorized as either *daf-i shodī* [*the daf* of happiness or joy] or *daf-i gham* [*the daf* of misfortune].

Nizom Nurjanov and Faizullo Karomatov, two ethnomusicologists who conducted fieldwork in the early 1950s in Badakhshan, noted that:

As for women, although they did not cover their faces from men and could attend musical and theatrical performances with them, they were not allowed to take part in dancing and singing. This is because the patriarchal traditions and religious beliefs of the inhabitants of the Pamirs required this. However, an exception was made for widows, who otherwise could sing and dance in public.<sup>25</sup>

This indicates that the scope of women’s participation in musical performances was still limited during the early Soviet era. However, this was not the case all over the region. The ethnographic account of Nurjanov and Karomatov showed that in a few remote villages in the upper Bartang, women, particularly the groom’s mother or sister, danced in front of people at a wedding.<sup>26</sup> This suggests that the restriction of women’s involvement in musical performances was not general and was, perhaps, only a familial restriction.

Nevertheless, public music-making by women was a unique activity in Badakhshan. The *daf* has long been considered a “female” musical instrument, as women play it during many life events, public celebrations, the announcement of a critical moment, and the welcoming of a distinguished

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<sup>24</sup> Photo is from <http://www.president.tj>

<sup>25</sup> N. Nurdjanov and F. Karomatov, *Musikalnaya Iskusstvo Pamira*, Vol. 1. (Bishkek: V.R.S. Company, 2010), 8.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

guest. They play it in groups of five while standing; they hold the *daf* by the side from inside the frame, with the resonator turned to the right, and create the rhythm using just their right hand. The *daf* performance has three rhythms, which the local women call *muqom*. These rhythms include the *garthen* or *garthenak*, *duhul* or *davul*, and *zibodaf*. It should be noted that due to the various customs and languages present in the Pamirs, there are variations in the name of the rhythms. For instance, *garthin* is called *vardostak* in Roshtqala, *pyrodaf* in Khorog, and *sawordaf* in Bartang. The *duhul/davul* is called *qum qumbak* in Ravmed, and in the Vanj district, it is called *gardotan*.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, Nurjonov and Karomatov, in their book, referred to these rhythms as *dafs*. The name of these rhythms seems to have originated from the instrument's name. However, during my fieldwork, my interlocutors referred to them as *muqoms*. Perhaps there used to be different *dafs* for each of these rhythms in the region in the past because Nurjonov and Karomatov described each *daf* separately in their book. For instance, they wrote, "The diameter of *zibodaf* is much smaller than the *gardinets*," and continued to explain how they should be played.<sup>28</sup> However, nowadays, most women have *dafs* identical in size and shape when playing together.

The performance starts with a woman who plays the first rhythm *garthenak/pirodaf*, followed by the second woman playing *zibodaf*, and then three women join in playing the *duhul/davul*. They hold the instrument high with their left hand and vigorously beat out the rhythm with their right. Usually, the group consists of five women, two playing the first and second rhythms each and three playing the third rhythm. However, if the group, for example, has ten performers, six women play the *duhul/davul*, three play the *zibodaf*, and one plays the *garthenak/pirodaf*.

This performance is usually done on the Nawruz holiday and other public celebrations and festivals, welcoming distinguished guests, or the groom, or bride at weddings. This practice seems to date back to Prophet Mohammad's time, as we have already noted above, where women, girls, and slaves used frame drums to honor distinguished guests' arrival.

It is important to note that the *daf* holds a significant place in the musical traditions of Badakhshan, particularly in relation to women and their involvement in music-making and performance. The *daf* seems to have been historically associated with women and is considered a feminine instrument. This association is rooted in both cultural and social traditions and demonstrates the significance of *daf* playing by women and women's involvement in various social and cultural activities, exemplifies women's empowerment, and challenges the patriarchal views on musical performances based on gender roles. Performance by women serves as a symbol of resistance and determination to celebrate their social and cultural roles and artistry while undermining gender stereotypes in society.

However, it is important to mention that in Badakhshan, Tajikistan, the *daf* is not limited by gender roles and is, instead, associated with both women and men. In the context of women's performance, it indicates women's social and cultural position in Badakhshan. It demonstrates how women challenge societal patriarchal expectations and views on music performance and reflects that women play a significant role in the region's artistic, social, and cultural life. Therefore, the *daf* plays an important role in demonstrating the empowerment of women and their significant presence in enriching and revitalizing culture and cultural production in traditional and contemporary contexts. Through their skillful playing, women have been able to challenge societal norms, assert their agency, and create a space for themselves within the musical realm.

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27 N. Nurdjanov and F. Karomatov, *Musikalnaya Iskusstvo Pamira*, Vol. 1. (Bishkek: V.R.S. Company, 2010), 9.

28 Ibid.



1  $\text{♩} = 114-116$

Гардинец  $\frac{4}{4}$

Зибодафф  $\frac{4}{4}$  *mf*

Давул  $\frac{4}{4}$

Кум-кум-бак)  $\frac{4}{4}$

Music notes of *dafthed*, from F. Karomatov and N. Nurdjanov.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *Muzikal'noye Iskustvo Pamira*, Vol. 1. (Bishkek: V. R. S. Company, 2010), 9.

### ***Dafsoz*, a Men's Musical Performance**

The association of musical instruments with gender has been observed in many cultures. The selection of musical instruments affects how people associate the musical genre with gender. In Badakhshan, certain instruments have traditionally been perceived as masculine, for instance, the *rubob*, even though women have played it in rare circumstances. However, the *daf* seems gender-neutral and is played by performers of both biological sexes. One of the most significant men's performances, where the *daf* is the only musical instrument played, is known as the *dafsoz*. This musical genre is performed exclusively by a group of men sitting in a circle, each holding and playing the *daf*. The *dafsoz* is usually performed during wedding ceremonies or happy occasions. It is also called the *hofizi* since many of the sung texts are related to the famous Persian poet of the 14<sup>th</sup> century Hafez Shirazī (1315–1390).

The *ghazals* of Hafez Shirazī are mainly used in the performance. *Dafsoz* is considered to be the oldest type of male music performance and is preserved and only performed in the Badakhshan region of Tajikistan. So far, no wedding ceremony in the area has occurred without the *dafsoz* performance. It begins on the first day of the wedding ceremony, called *sartaroshon* (haircut and heads of the groom), a tradition that involves preparing the groom for his wedding. During this time, an elderly married man with children is asked to dress the groom. This is done because it is believed to enable the groom to have a successful marriage and rear children. While the elderly man dresses the groom, four to five men, each holding the *daf*, sing special songs dedicated to the event. The performance starts with the lead singer singing the first and second lines of the song and then the rest of the group singing the same lines after him. This act of reciting this song is called *qoshiq*, which is the core of the *dafsoz* performance.

During this performance, the music usually starts with a slow tempo and gradually turns to a faster tempo, and at this time, the lead singer achieves a trance like state and begins to dance while singing. The beating of the *daf* gradually becomes louder and faster. Most of the songs performed during the *dafsoz* performance are related to the poetic genre of *ghazal*; folk songs are also performed at the end of each performance cycle. These genres of poetry are considered suitable for the performance, and the poems' content always expresses the theme of love, whether transcendental or worldly love.<sup>30</sup>



*Dafsoz* performers in the wedding ceremony in Khorog, 2021. Photo of Dilnawoz Ramazonov.

<sup>30</sup> For more information on the sung poetry in Badakhshan see Gabrielle Rachel van den Berg, *Minstrel Poetry from the Pamir Mountains: A Study on the Songs and Poems of the Ismā'ilis of Tajik Badakhshan*, (Reichert Verlag Wiesbaden, 2004).



The same performance occurs when the groom leaves for the bride's house, with the *dafsoz* performers singing folk songs describing the journey of the groom and his arrival at the bride's home. At the bride's house, the *dafsoz* is continued by the performers from the bride's side and folk songs are sung to welcome the groom and the guests accompanying him. Even though the *dafsoz* performance is considered a secular one, some of the elements and gestures of the performance resemble the practice of Sufis. For instance, when the performance changes from a slow tempo to a fast one, the lead singer starts dancing, and the rest of the group beat the *daf* harder and faster while swaying their heads. People in the house also shout or clap during this euphoric moment; some might even join the lead singer to dance.

The *dafsoz* enhances the joyful atmosphere in the house of the groom or bride and creates a social bond between the people as the participants share the happy moment with the groom, bride, and their family and friends. It also provides an opportunity for connection and commonality among various community groups and builds social-emotional assets. It brings joy to the groom and bride's family and friends and the participants' community. The rhythms produced generate a sense of communal dialogue through which people share their joy in the communicative nature of music and performance by dancing, singing, clapping, and shouting. This allows for the representation and marking of life and expression of joy. These artistic expressions are intended to entertain and function as social and cultural patterns in the context of a wedding or other joyful festivities. It is considered an obligatory custom that brings peace and joy and facilitates and maintains the community's well-being.

### **Religious and Sufi Rituals and the Sacredness of the *Daf***

Many musical instruments are used during religious occasions, which have come to be venerated and seen as having significance. For instance, the reed flute (*nay*)<sup>31</sup> is associated with the Mevlevi ritual,<sup>32</sup> and the *tanbur* is a musical instrument played in the sacred music repertoire of the Kurdish Ahl-i Haqq.<sup>33</sup> The frame drum is a universal musical instrument, and it is played in various contexts, whether religious or secular. It is played in Sufi religious gatherings, court settings, and during temple rituals. It acquired its sacredness from the Muslim cultural context, especially the Sufi ritual ceremonies, and is usually kept within sacred spaces. For instance, the large tambourine (*daf*) in Islam is considered to refer to the cycle of all created beings (*dā'ra akwān*).<sup>34</sup> In Iraq, the *daff* is a sacred instrument hung from the walls of the *takia* (a religious gathering place) when not in use, and it is used to bestow blessings and is highly protected. Members of the sect may not touch it except to kiss it in respect, and it is wrapped in cloth and carried by a "religious musician." Everyone seated in the cafe is expected to rise when this musician passes.<sup>35</sup> In the Arab culture, the *mazhar* "stays in the mosque and cannot be used outside religious ceremonies; each *mazhar* is dedicated (consecrated) to a saint and is reserved for religious music."<sup>36</sup>

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31 R. A. Nicholson, *Rumi: Poet and Mystic* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1978), 29.

32 Veronica Doubleday, "The Frame Drum in the Middle East: Women, Musical Instruments and Power," *Ethnomusicology*, 43, No. 1. (Winter 1999):104.

33 Partow Hooshmandrad, "Performing the Belief: Sacred Musical Practice of the Kurdish Ahl-i Haqq," (PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2004).

34 Leonard Lewishohn, "The Sacred Music of Islam: Sama' in Persian Sufi Tradition," *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 6, (1997): 13.

35 Qasim Scheherazade Hassan. *Les Instruments de Musique en Irak et leur role dans la societe traditionnelle*. (Paris-La Haye-New York: Mouton Editeur and Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1980), 183–84.

36 Hassan HabibTouma, *La Musique Arabe*. (Paris: Buchet/Castel, 1977), 108.



Community gathering in Shitkharv village of Wakhan. Photo of Nurjahon Imomnazarova.

The same notion of the sacredness of the frame drum is also observed in the Persian culture, and it is charged with rich symbolism. Its round shape symbolizes “the image of both the heavens and the assembled circle of mystics.”<sup>37</sup> It is also considered the cycle of existing things (*da'ira al-akwan*), and the skin fitted onto it refers to general existence (*al-wujud al-mutlaq*). The sound is believed to refer to the presence of divine revelations, and the jingles of the instruments are a reference to the prophetic and imamate ranks.<sup>38</sup> The technique of playing the frame drum is also perceived to mean calling upon subtle forces to transmit psychic energy.”<sup>39</sup>

Likewise, in Tajikistan, the frame drum is considered sacred in *baxshi* healing ceremony. To touch it, a person should perform ablution. During his fieldwork in northern Tajikistan, Levin touched a male *baxshi*'s frame drum, and the healer was unhappy because he touched the frame drum without performing ablution and saying a special prayer.<sup>40</sup> In the cultural context of Badakhshan, the *daf* and *rubob*, a local plucked fretless instrument, also have sacred meanings. People treat them with reverence and consider it a grace to have them at home. In a traditional Pamiri house, they are always hung up, and it is forbidden to place them on the ground. Women and men also play the *daf* during the lunar eclipse, as the locals believe that the dragon (*azhdahor*) has taken the Moon and hit various objects, including the *daf*, for hours to save the Moon.

Similarly, the *daf* is played to drive away sadness from a grieving family that has recently lost a member. For instance, in the Wakhan valley of Tajikistan, when somebody dies in a village where a wedding is happening, a member of the family that wishes to celebrate the wedding, together with the village leader, visits the bereaved family to ask their permission to proceed with the celebration and play music at the wedding. During the meeting, they invite relatives of the deceased to play the *daf*.

37 Jean During, “*Daff* and Dayera I.” In *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, edited by Ehsan Yarshater, Vol. 6, fasc 6 (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1993), 561.

38 James Robson, *Tracts on Listening to Music. Being Dharm Al-Malāhī by Ibn Abī 'l-Dunyā and Bawāriq Al-Ilmā' by Majd Al-Dīn Al-Tūsī Al-Ghazālī*. V. 34 (London: Oriental Translation Fund (New Series), 1938), 98-99.

39 During, Jean, and Doubleday, Veronica, “*Daff* and Dayera,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online* (Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York), accessed August 9, 2023, [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_7945](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_7945).

40 Theodore Levin, *The Hundred Thousand Fools of God: Musical Travels in Central Asia*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 243.

This custom of seeking permission has a dual role: it shows the visitors' respect for the family's grief while helping the bereaved family to break their mourning. The bereaved family's acceptance of the invitation to play the *daf* signifies their consent to the wedding arrangements and music performance. In this context, musical instruments "serve as an area of shared experience"<sup>41</sup> and help to delineate communal identity, social interaction, and solidarity. In the Rushan district, however, with the sound of the *daf*, the dead person is escorted on their last journey.

The *daf* is also used during various social occasions to illustrate its impressive range of divine power. For instance, the people of Langar village in the Wakhan valley narrate the story of a *daf*, known as *dafi Muhammadi* (associated with the Muslim prophet Muhammad), which was placed on a high mountain. According to them, it was only brought down from the mountain and played whenever there was calamity in the village. It is believed that many people died of the *vabo* (cholera) outbreak in the village and that when this instrument was brought from the mountain and played, the disease disappeared and the people were cured. The *dafi Muhammadi* is believed to have belonged to Shoh Qambari Oftob, a local saint who resided in the same village and was later inherited by his son Shohabdulkarim. According to Abdullojon Saidaliev, a local wise man from the Langar village whom I talked to during my fieldwork in 2018, the *daf* was lost due to a dispute over its ownership in the village. Originally, only members of one family in the village who had served in the court of Shoh Qambari Oftob had been allowed to touch and care for the *daf*. However, another family also claimed ownership, and there was a dispute between the two families which resulted in the destruction and disappearance of the *daf*.

It should be noted that as a musical instrument from the family of percussion instruments, the *daf* acquired social and cultural significance, and people attached meaning and power to it. Its power is often related to healing, physical strength, farming, hunting, safeguarding villages, helping with family and community problems, acting as a medium of communication between the seen and unseen worlds, and facilitating spirit possession during shamanic rituals.<sup>42</sup> We can see similar beliefs of sacredness and the possession of transcendental power by the *daf* in other cultural contexts in Central Asia.

As a musical instrument with social and ritual functions, the *daf* is also widely used in ceremonies related to life events and is considered to have supernatural powers. For instance, in his work *Musical Instrument*, Jenkins Jean considered it a "magical instrument," as it was used to frighten away spirits associated with death and disease, hurricanes, and drought. It was also played to animate good spirits to ensure a good harvest.<sup>43</sup> In Afghanistan, the *daf* is played to ward off *jinn* (malevolent spirits) during a childbirth festivity.<sup>44</sup> Similar practices involving the *daf* being a protective tool also exist in Badakhshan. For instance, Kurbon Alamshoev wrote, based on the information he gathered from the region, that "the *daf* had more of a protective and informing function than a musical one. The ancient hunters believed that the sound of the *daf* protected them from predators and evil spirits. They also hit the *daf* when they felt any danger from tribes, wild animals, or natural disasters to inform each other of the danger."<sup>45</sup>

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41 John Baily, "Recent Changes in the Dutar of heart," *Asian Music* 8, No. 1 (1976): 55.

42 DeVale, Sue Carole, "Power and Meaning in Musical Instruments," in *Music and the Experience of God*, ed. David Power, Mary Collins and Mellonee Burnim (Edinburgh: T & T Clark).

43 Jenkins, Jean, *Musical Instruments* (London: The Horniman, 1977), 41–42.

44 Veronica Doubleday, *Three Women of Herat* (Austin: University of Texas, 1990), 144–45.

45 Kurbon Alamshoev, "Ekho dafa posredi Pamirskikh gor," *Asia-Plus*, June 25, 2016, <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20160625/ekho-dafa-posredi-pamirskikh-gor>

## Conclusion

In short, musical instruments are used worldwide in most cultures with musical traditions. Each instrument is a unique product of a culture and is shaped and developed by generations of musicians and artisans to meet the needs of the people who interact with it and perform a specific function in the community. An instrument is a piece of cultural information, and the instrument's status and making process, and the meanings attached to it can reveal some of a community's ingrained traditions and ways of thinking. Besides being a musical instrument, the *daf* has social and cultural significance in many cultures. It has been vital in articulating and elaborating on ethnic, gender, religious, and musical senses.

I have attempted to discuss the *daf* in the broad context of various cultures to demonstrate the interconnections of the Badakhshani musical culture within the world's musical practices. As was observed in this paper, the *daf* represents a complex intermingling of spiritual practices, gender issues, and social and cultural practices, evolving from medieval Islamic origins while also becoming a tool for cultural and social expression in the local context. Through specific artistic performances and presentations, the sociocultural life of a region is understood. The *daf*, apart from producing musical sound, is useful as a form of individual and communal identity, entertainment, and group solidarity, as in the *dafthed* and *dafsoz* performances, where it shows appreciation and respect to members of the community by welcoming and seeing off guests, groom, and brides. Additionally, the *daf* helps bereaved family members to break their mourning and return to a joyful life. The *daf* also plays a significant role in crisis situations.

Moreover, the *daf* also helps us better understand the social and cultural lives of local communities, as well as their physical geographies and religious belief systems in which music plays a role. Most importantly, it facilitates our understanding of the music-making practice in Badakhshan. We know that the *daf* has many uses, whether played solo or in groups and whether in private or public performances of folk, popular, and religious music traditions. The *daf* has a somewhat particular status in Badakhshan and is played regardless of gender, age, and context.

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