

Oral History Interview

with

Omara Khan Masoudi

recorded at the National Museum of Asian Art

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by Azizullah Esfandiari

Interviewer

ESFANDIARI: Thank you, sir, and welcome to today's session. This marks our eighth interview. In our last conversation, we discussed the National Museum of Afghanistan during the Taliban's rise to power in the 1990s. Building on that, could you elaborate on whether the Taliban announced specific policies concerning the museum and archeological artifacts, considering their ideological and religious beliefs? Did they introduce any new laws or regulations in this regard?

MASOUDI: Thank you, Aziz. Unfortunately, the Taliban didn't have any policies to help museums or cultural preservation. Instead, they tragically destroyed numerous artifacts, which I will explain shortly. Following the April 1978 coup and the subsequent civil wars, Afghanistan's political landscape during the Taliban's initial rule was incredibly challenging. In Kabul, people were struggling just to survive. Despite these hardships, efforts were underway both within Afghanistan and among Afghan exiles to preserve cultural heritage and mitigate the ravages of war.

One notable initiative during the Taliban's early rule was the establishment of APHCHA [the Association for the Preservation of Historical and Cultural Heritage of Afghanistan] in Peshawar. Formed by Afghan refugees in Pakistan, APHCHA included prominent figures such as Engineer Mohammad Shakib Salek, the former head of Afghanistan's Historical Monuments; Abdullah Poyan, the head of the Arts Department of the Mujahideen Ministry of Information and Culture; Mir Haidar Motahar; Mir Ahmad Joyenda, the former head of Archaeology; Najibullah Popal, deputy director of the National Museum; and Engineer Mohammad Farid Haidari, from the Department of Preservation and Restoration of Historical Monuments of Afghanistan. The association aimed to address the chaotic cultural situation and collaborate with cultural stakeholders inside Afghanistan. They published materials, organized cultural events abroad, and distributed calendars to promote cultural awareness and preservation efforts during this challenging period.

In addition to APHCHA, the Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage (SPACH), founded in late 1994, also played a crucial role. SPACH worked closely with cultural institutions in Kabul, particularly the National Museum of Afghanistan, and made significant contributions to preserving the nation's heritage. Unfortunately, by 2000, a troubling trend emerged: a campaign to destroy cultural artifacts, particularly audio recordings and films involving women. The Taliban vehemently opposed any form of media featuring women, whether in the National Radio and Television, in the archive of Afghan Film, and sought to eradicate these recordings, tapes, and films entirely. This included popular audio tapes, such as those played on the widely used 530 tape recorders, which featured songs by female artists. The Taliban's directive aimed to eliminate any form of media that included women's voices or participation.

In 2000, these rumors were spreading, and later we saw their consequences. Paintings depicting humans and even animals were to be destroyed. It was rumored that the remaining historical and cultural artifacts in the National Museum of Afghanistan, those depicting human, should be destroyed. They claimed that preserving statues was idolatry and against Islamic law, arguing that the Quraysh tribe in Mecca was idol worshippers before Islam and that Muslims, after conquering Mecca, broke all their idols. They used this as justification, saying that idols should be broken because Islam allowed it, and Prophet Muhammad destroyed all the Quraysh tribe's idols after conquering Mecca. Therefore, they believed this action should also be carried out in the National Museum, as it contained cultural representations from different historical periods.

They decided that these artifacts should be destroyed, even though the conditions in twenty first century Afghanistan are completely different from the early Islamic period when the Muslims destroyed the idols of the Quraysh tribe during the conquest of Mecca. Undoubtedly, the people of the Quraysh tribe in Mecca at that time were idol worshippers and did not believe in one eternal God. It was a period of ignorance when they sought help from their man-made gods. However, the people of Afghanistan accepted Islam about fourteen centuries ago and have a firm belief in one God, the creator of the universe. No individual in Afghanistan worships a human statue as a deity. This is the best proof for preservation. All people are Muslim. In terms of Islamic faith, the people of Afghanistan are strong Muslims and know that an object they create themselves, which is lifeless and soulless and cannot help them in any way, should not be worshipped. Afghanistan is a country with a history of several thousand years, where archaeological research shows that humans lived more than a hundred thousand years ago and had various religious inclinations such as sun worship, moon worship, Brahmanism, Buddhism, Shaivism, etc. But with the arrival of Islam during the time of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, the people of Afghanistan turned to Islam and accepted it. Even now, one hundred percent of the people of Afghanistan believe in and adhere to the Islamic religion.

Numerous cultural institutions have been established in various societies whose sole duty is to preserve their historical and cultural past. Culture, in simple terms, includes all the material and spiritual possessions of a society. So, we can say that we, the people of Afghanistan, are Muslims.

We have a firm belief in Islam and, like other humans on Earth, we take pride in our distant past, its history, art, and culture, especially in our own land. We consider ourselves obligated to protect it and pass it on to future generations. There is a saying that a nation remains alive when it can keep its history and culture alive. The people of Afghanistan, especially its numerous cultural institutions, consider themselves obligated to preserve their various historical and cultural possessions.

In the last four decades, numerous mistakes have been made in our country, Afghanistan, and unfortunately, we have learned little from them. Due to the unnecessary grandiosity of our politicians, we are still moving towards disunity, exclusion, and elimination. Unity and empathy are better than discord.

During the first Taliban rule, the use of cameras was banned, even though there was an extreme need for cameras and taking pictures for various purposes and reasons. They did not allow cameras, even in cases of urgent need, such as taking photos of women for ID cards. Later, they allowed women's photos with burqas or in a very covered state. For men's photos, they used very old cameras in the form of a box on a tripod, with a sleeve that was worn on one hand. The person being photographed was placed in front of the camera, either standing or sitting on a chair, and with the other hand, while warning the person, they would remove the cover of the camera and capture the person's photo in a few seconds. After washing the photo in special water, they produced black and white photos. These photos were given to the person for a set price. Imagine if cameras are not allowed—what stage of life is a country in? They would search civilian cars and even some government employees' cars at checkpoints. If someone was found with a cassette of women singing, they would be questioned. The cassette would be destroyed, and the tape would be hung on tree branches. At every checkpoint, hundreds and thousands of cassette tapes could be seen. This was the cultural state of the people of Kabul and the far reaches of Afghanistan.

I remember clearly when we were assigned, along with Naqibullah Ahmadyar, the museum director, to transfer smuggled artifacts seized from Sharana, the center of Paktika province. On our return to Kabul, on the road from Sharana to Gardez, the center of Paktia province, we were using a Japanese Toyota Corolla Wagon. Throughout the journey, the driver was playing a beautiful song of a woman on a cassette, possibly recorded at a family celebration. As we approached the checkpoint entering Gardez, the driver hid the cassette in the car's trunk. When the car reached the checkpoint, the guard found the cassette. After playing it in the car's tape player, they not only destroyed the cassette but also took the driver away with threats and detained him.

This was the punishment for listening to a cassette. It shows how suffocating the cultural situation was in the capital and other parts of the country. Rumors of destroying museum statues, erasing audio tapes and songs by women from radio and television, and destroying Afghan Film's movies all increased the fear and dread of cultural destruction. Employees of cultural institutions such as the National Museum, National Gallery, Afghan Film, and National Radio and Television were all trying to figure out how to prevent the destruction and annihilation of these works or keep them safe in secure places. For example, Dr. Yusuf Asefi, a medical doctor, with the cooperation of

National Gallery staff, secretly painted over a number of old and valuable paintings in the National Gallery that depicted men and women. Using a combination of oil and water-based paint, they painted nature scenes over these paintings to save them from destruction. In this way, they preserved dozens of paintings. However, a limited number of paintings that couldn't be altered were destroyed by the Taliban's religious police.

Afghan Film also took preventive measures by placing a large number of valuable film reels in a room and sealing the door with bricks. After plastering, they painted it to blend with the hallway so no one could access it until the fall of the Taliban. This initiative to keep the action secret until the situation changed can be attributed to sound management and harmony among colleagues, and their love for their profession and sense of responsibility. If this action had been revealed, it could have had dire consequences, possibly even costing lives.

It's worth noting that in 1370 Hijri (1991-1992 CE), sixty six very exquisite and valuable paintings were transferred from the National Gallery to the National Archives of Afghanistan for safekeeping. Fortunately, they still exist, and this preventive action is commendable. According to available information, about two hundred paintings were looted from the gallery during the Mujahideen rule, and about two hundred and ten paintings were destroyed in the National Gallery during the first Taliban rule by their religious police.

The destruction of National Museum artifacts that began in early 2001 was a disaster. Some cultural circles feared that the destruction of museum artifacts was possible because before the Taliban captured Kabul, they had partially destroyed a number of artifacts, including a reclining Buddha in Nirvana state made of raw clay, at Tapa-i-Sardar in Ghazni. When Mullah Amir Khan Muttaqi was transferred from the Ministry of Information and Culture to the Ministry of Education, these threats became serious. Resistance against threats to cultural property was considered one of the high-level duties of [the Ministry of] Information and Culture in the country to prevent the destruction of cultural artifacts threatened by the Taliban's Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Despite the efforts of officials and employees of various cultural departments, the destruction continued.

In January 2001, a group of armed religious police entered the National Museum. Although the museum had no exhibitions except for a few large pieces installed on the wall in the entrance hall of the first floor, they began to destroy two half-bust statues of Kanishka and a Kushan prince without any orders or written instructions. A National Museum employee named Mohammad Tahir, who was watching the scene, shouted, "What sin have these committed? Why are you destroying them?" The armed men threatened him, saying, "If it weren't for your gray hair, I would have put a Kalashnikov bullet in your head." They destroyed these two pieces that day. These artifacts, made of limestone, belonged to the 2nd century CE and were discovered during excavations in Surkh Kotal, Baghlan. These religious police returned to the National Museum multiple times in January and February 2001 and destroyed visual arts in the museum's depots. Two beautiful pieces, a

Bodhisattva found at Tepe Maranjan in Kabul and two birds discovered at the fire temple of Surkh Kotal in Baghlan, both made of raw clay, were also destroyed.

It's worth noting that the National Museum staff also showed some counterfeit artifacts made of plaster, stored under the staircase of the eastern annex, to the Taliban, who subsequently destroyed them. These artifacts were fake copies previously intercepted by the customs authority and sent to the National Museum, where they were kept in a specific location as smuggled items. The museum staff knew these artifacts were not genuine but recently made from plaster. To gain the trust of the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice officials, they deliberately guided them to this location, leading the Taliban team to break these plaster artifacts. This act was intended to make the Taliban believe the museum staff were cooperating with them. In reality, the museum staff was hiding hundreds of original artifacts using various concealment methods, thereby preventing their destruction. Their actions are commendable.

It's important to mention that the museum staff, especially the professionals and those in leadership positions, continuously exchanged ideas and searched for ways to hide artifacts from the Taliban within various locations of the museum. They succeeded in saving a large number of artifacts from destruction. It is estimated that in the end, the Taliban destroyed more than twenty five hundred visual art pieces from the museum, belonging to different periods, including the Islamic era. This destruction took place in January and February 2001. Before the process was completed, museum staff, along with Kabul University professors and Academy of Sciences members, tried to prevent such actions. It was difficult to share this information with the media because journalists would mention their sources, which could cost lives. The Taliban attempted to keep their actions hidden from the media. We should acknowledge the active role of the SPACH organization, especially Mr. Mir Ahmad Joyenda, the deputy coordinator of SPACH in Kabul. From time to time, staff from the National Museum and the Institute of Archaeology would gather at the SPACH office to share information and explore ways of concealment, which yielded tangible results.

In February 2001, with SPACH's help, the museum director and deputy were invited to Pakistan. Mir Ahmad Joyenda was also present, and the SPACH leadership at the Greek Embassy in Islamabad, while expressing their deep sorrow over the destruction of the National Museum artifacts and the information they had received, promised that the Greek and Italian ambassadors would travel to Kabul with a check for \$200,000, provided that the Afghan Embassy in Islamabad issued visas for these two ambassadors. They planned to have comprehensive discussions with Afghan officials, particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Information and Culture, and the Deputy Minister of Culture, highlighting the importance of culture and the cultural relationships between Asian and European countries throughout history. They also intended to deliver the \$200,000 aid to the Ministry of Information and Culture for the reconstruction of the destroyed National Museum building.

Their travel plans were arranged, and after a few days, the Greek and Italian ambassadors traveled to Kabul. It's worth noting that the Greek ambassador was also the president of SPACH at

that time. Mir Ahmad Joyenda, the former head of archaeology, accompanied the Greek and Italian ambassadors as an interpreter. According to the schedule, on the first day at nine am, a meeting was arranged between the ambassadors and Mr. Haqqani, the Deputy Minister of Culture. While the Greek and Italian ambassadors expressed their concerns about preventing the destruction of museum artifacts, Mr. Haqqani denied this obvious truth and stated that no such action had taken place. Very unfortunate. On the same day, at ten am, the ambassadors were supposed to meet with the Minister of Information and Culture, but the minister was not present in his office. The ambassadors insisted on informing the minister so they could meet him and present the \$200,000 check. However, the Minister of Culture did not show up to meet these two ambassadors.

Around two pm, the mentioned ambassadors, accompanied by Joyenda, met with Mutawakkil, the Taliban's Foreign Minister. They expressed concerns about the destruction of artifacts in the National Museum and offered cooperation in cultural areas and rebuilding the museum. Mutawakkil assured them that the Taliban would not destroy the artifacts, despite evidence to the contrary. When the Minister of Information and Culture did not want to meet these two ambassadors, it was speculated he may have awaited permission from Amir al-Mu'minin [Commander of the Faithful]. At three pm, Amir al-Mu'minin's [Taliban's leader, Mullah Omar] order to destroy idols, including statues, was telegraphed from Kandahar to the Bakhtar News Agency in Kabul on plain paper. Abdul Wasi Ferozi, the former head of archaeology, learned of this order. Upon reading this directive, which lacked the status of a formal decree, he informed Mr. Joyenda. Learning of this order, the ambassadors departed Kabul for Islamabad that evening, disappointed. Efforts by Afghans and two countries had failed. The Ministry of Culture also lost \$200,000 earmarked for rebuilding the National Museum. Such was the situation.

Following the Taliban morality police's destruction of artifacts in the National Museum, they proceeded to destroy artifacts stored on the first floor of the ministry [of Information and Culture] in multiple sessions. Even pre-packaged artifacts from various historical periods were not spared. They were all destroyed in a single central location, with the shattered pieces left in piles. Fortunately, these fragments were later collected and categorized by material type by the restoration department after the Taliban regime fell.

During this period, I recall that Abdul Wasi Ferozi, the head of archaeology, and I visited Professor Abdul Shakoor Rashad's house in Hesa-e Awal, Khair Khana. We informed him about the destruction of museum artifacts. He was deeply saddened by this act and pledged to use his influence among the Taliban, particularly those from Kandahar, given his origins there and his respected academic stature among Afghans. Indeed, both the people of Kandahar and the Taliban held him in high regard. Professor Rashad promptly contacted the Taliban's Interior Minister, known as Khaksar, and passionately urged him to intervene and halt the destruction of cultural treasures. Furthermore, Professor Abdul Shakoor Rashad assured us of his intention to travel to Kandahar in two days' time to personally appeal to Amir al-Mu'minin Mullah Mohammad Omar Mujahid, seeking his intervention to preserve the visual arts.

The Taliban denied those happenings and attempted to conceal their activities. During that time, contacts with certain Taliban officials, directly or indirectly, revealed their regrets over the actions of the morality police from the Ministry of the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. However, they either could not or would not take necessary action. It became evident that such actions did not reflect the wishes of most Taliban members, but rather were enforced by specific groups aiming to instill fear and consolidate power. They showed little regard for the repercussions of their actions.

After the Taliban morality police destroyed artifacts on the first floor of the Ministry of Information and Culture, they moved to the fourth floor where artifacts had been relocated. Thankfully, all items were stored in wooden and metal boxes. Museum staff and trustees informed them there were no statues there, only ceramics and various other objects. At the request of the Taliban religious police, they opened two or three boxes as samples, containing artifacts from the Bronze Age Mundigak site, including clay and ceramic items. The museum staff skillfully deceived them, satisfying the inspectors and thus saving the most important artifacts from destruction. Their actions deserve praise.

The process of destroying the museum's visual arts lasted for about two months. In March 2001, they began demolishing the colossal Buddha statues in Bamiyan. These statues, carved into the mountain face in the second and fourth centuries CE, were monumental—one standing at thirty eight meters tall, and the other, known as the Western Buddha, towering at fifty five meters, among the world's largest statues. Initially, they used light weapons and even cannons but failed to fully dismantle them. Ultimately, explosives were brought from Kabul to Bamiyan. In the presence of a specially appointed twenty member committee, both the Eastern and Western Buddha statues were detonated. This was a tragic loss on a global scale—a profound cultural heritage of the Afghan people and humanity buried in history. A deeply regrettable act.

If I may draw a comparison, the discourteousness of the Taliban sharply contrasts with the conduct of Timur the conqueror. In his book "I, Timur the Conqueror," written by Timur himself and published in its 17th edition by Zabihullah Mansouri, Timur commented on the Bamiyan statues: "The idols carved there were so immense that destroying them would have taken a long time to accomplish. When I visited Bamiyan, there were no idol worshippers left, but the statues remained. I neither had the inclination nor the time to destroy the idols of Bamiyan." These are Timur's own words. "I have always fought against the living and never waged war against lifeless objects. I deem it beneath my dignity to battle with motionless stones. I have laid low hundreds of thousands of living beings, but never have I fought the dead, and any man who does so I consider unmanly." These are the words of Timur the conqueror. In contrast, the Taliban callously carried out the destruction.

During that period, another account I heard was that Osama bin Laden visited Bamiyan in August 2000 and closely inspected the Buddha statues. He arrived with twelve identical jeeps, toured the new city of Bamiyan by the river, and then departed. Another theory regarding the

destruction suggests that the order to destroy the Buddha statues and cultural artifacts in Afghanistan may have originated from foreign intelligence circles, with strong indications pointing towards Pakistan's ISI. Alternatively, it's possible that a small faction within the Taliban regime, holding extremist views and lacking appreciation for their country's art and history, issued such directives. Despite condemnation from the majority of Afghans, including some within the Taliban, this destruction of artifacts was viewed as an assault on culture. The psychological impact on the National Museum staff, especially the trustees, was profound. In particular, Abdullah Hakimzada, the curator or trustee of the National Museum, endured chronic stress. He was highly regarded for his restoration work at the museum. If I may, there's another intriguing story.

ESFANDIARI: Please go ahead.

MASOUDI: Interestingly, in early Hamal [March/April] 2001, I was busy renovating my home. Around noon, two employees from the Ministry of Information and Culture, Abdullah Jan, secretary of the deputy minister for Publications, and Mehrab al-Din, secretary of the deputy minister for Culture, knocked on my door. When I opened it, I warmly greeted those esteemed colleagues and invited them for lunch, but they politely declined. Instead, they informed me that the Minister of Culture had urgently summoned me to the ministry. I confess I was a bit alarmed, wondering what the minister wanted with me. Nevertheless, at the insistence of these long-serving cultural employees and friends, I accompanied them to the Ministry of Information and Culture.

Upon arriving at the ministry's secretariat office, I introduced myself to the person in charge. They promptly sought permission from the minister's office for my entry. Subsequently, I was escorted to the office of the Taliban's Minister of Culture, Mr. Qudratullah Jamal, around one pm. The minister greeted me and asked, "Mr. Masoudi, why don't you show up for work?" I explained, "Honorable Minister, I resigned from my position and am now self-employed." He inquired further about my current occupation, to which I replied that I sell vegetables at the market. Curious, he offered, "Come back to your job and I'll allocate one of the ministry-owned shops to you in Mandawi alley behind the Youth Deputy building at Pol-e-Bagh-e-Umumi - there are dozens of shops available, rent-free." I did not have a winning argument but thanked him, saying "as far as I know, such shops are typically rented to fabric retailers which require substantial capital, which I don't have".

He then revealed the reason for summoning me to the ministry. He said, "You are aware of the Taliban's actions in destroying museum artifacts and the large Buddha statues. I want you to support this Taliban action in an interview with Radio Shariat Afghanistan." I clarified that I was no longer an employee and suggested that current museum staff or officials should conduct such interviews. The minister insisted, emphasizing my experience and professionalism, saying, "You should be the one to give this interview." I firmly responded that without active employment, I couldn't comply. He proposed scheduling the interview during non-official hours, but I stood my ground, stating, "Important interviews are usually broadcast after the eight pm news on Radio Voice of Shariat, regardless of the time it was conducted."

It's noteworthy that during the first Taliban rule, national television broadcasts were completely banned, and Radio Afghanistan, renamed Radio Shariat, was the sole nationwide broadcaster. Thus, besides Radio Shariat, there were no other state or private radio stations or television channels at that time.

At that moment, around two pm, the minister's secretary entered and informed the minister about an Indian journalist who had arrived for an interview. The minister instructed them to admit him. The Indian journalist greeted the minister in Urdu, to which the Minister of Culture, Qudratullah Jamal responded fluently. Turning to me, the minister said, "Mr. Masoudi, I have an interview now. Please come tomorrow at six pm to the military room of the Bakhtar News Agency so we can continue our discussion." I left the minister's office and returned home, pondering why he expected me to endorse such actions. It contradicted my field of study and job responsibilities, leaving me with numerous unanswered questions.

The next day, I arrived at the military room of the Bakhtar [News] Agency at the appointed time. I asked the white-bearded man sitting outside the office if the Minister was present. He said yes. I told him to inform the Minister that Masoudi had arrived. I was granted permission to enter. When I stepped inside, several large books were placed on the desk. The Minister turned to the office guard and told him he could leave. A large book with a beautiful binding was placed on the table in front of me. He asked if I knew this book. When I looked closely at the title, it read "Al-Halal wal-Haram" [The Lawful and the Prohibited]. He asked who the author was. I saw the author's name written at the bottom, Mr. Zarqawi [Qaradawi]. He asked if I knew Zarqawi [Qaradawi]. I said yes, Zarqawi [Qaradawi] is one of the prominent scholars of the Islamic world and teaches at Al-Azhar University in Egypt. The Minister then opened a previously marked page of the book, read to me a section in Arabic, and translated Zarqawi's [Qaradawi's] fatwa regarding the prohibition of idols and their destruction.

It was a difficult situation. I said, "I agree that idol worship is polytheism, but I know that ninety nine percent of Afghan people are true Muslims, and there is no idol worship here. Before Islam came to Afghanistan, there were Buddhist monasteries, temples, and stupas in some areas, but when Islam arrived and the Afghan people accepted it, there was no longer any place for worshipping physical objects. Afghanistan has a history of several thousand years. We consider it our duty to preserve the cultural heritage of all our historical periods. This is one of the fundamental and historical responsibilities of the staff in this field. This practice exists in all Islamic countries, even in Egypt where the author of this book lives. They certainly take pride in the Pharaohs of Egypt, who have a history of thousands of years, and have never ordered the destruction of Egyptian Pharaonic artifacts." I gave another example: "I know that the Quraysh tribe was polytheistic before Islam, and each tribe had separate gods they worshipped. But when Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) conquered Mecca and destroyed the idols of the Quraysh's era of ignorance, the Quraysh people accepted Islam and believed in one God, seeking His help. We know that the Afghan people are Muslim, and there is no idol worship. It's a good thing to preserve the pre-Islamic glories of

Afghanistan. It should be emphasized how humans, who are the creators of these statues, could seek help and forgiveness from their own handiwork as a deity, while the Creator of the world is someone else in whom we all believe."

The discussion continued. Unconsciously, I said that the museum administration is responsible for preserving and introducing the country's historical and cultural possessions. There is another department that obtains artifacts through excavations and hands them over to the museum. This wasn't intentional; it just came to my mind. I mentioned this. The Minister asked, "Which department is this?" I said it was the Afghan Institute of Archaeology, which currently works under the Afghan Academy of Sciences. He asked, "The Afghan Academy of Sciences, where Mr. Khalilullah Ferozi is the president?" I said yes. He gave me a blank sheet of paper and a pen and told me to write down the name of the Institute's director and anyone else I deemed necessary. I took the pen and paper and first wrote the name of Abdul Wasi Ferozi, Director of the Institute of Archaeology, then Professor Abdul Rauf Zaker, Deputy of Archaeology, Qadir Rasouli, Academic Secretary of Archaeology, and Professor Nazar Mohammad Azizi, Head of the Kushan Center of the Institute. I handed it to him. He asked why I hadn't written my own name. I then wrote my name at the bottom of the list and asked if I should write anyone's name from the museum. He said that was enough. He told me he would call the Academy of Sciences tomorrow to summon these individuals and asked me to come to the ministry at ten am the next day.

I found myself in a tough test. The world seemed to close in on me. Strange questions flooded my mind about why I had involved these people with the Minister. What if they asked me why I had implicated them to save myself? This action wasn't intentional; it just came to my mind to mention these names to the Minister of Culture. At seven pm, I got my bicycle from the ministry parking and headed home. Dozens of questions raced through my mind, but my mind wouldn't allow me to give an interview approving the Taliban's action in destroying museum artifacts. I thought about leaving the city, wondering where I would go and what would happen to my family. If I left the city, how would these archaeology staff judge me? They might think, "The coward ran away and left us to deal with the Taliban." I pondered such questions, and with a very troubled mind, I didn't even realize how I was riding my bicycle. It occurred to me to seek advice from Abdul Wasi Ferozi, the Director of Archaeology, before making a decision.

I went directly to Abdul Wasi Ferozi's house in Parwan-e Se. I knocked on the door, and Ferozi himself came out and asked, "Is everything alright? Why have you come at this late hour?" He invited me inside, but I declined. I said I had come for advice and asked for his opinion on what to do. I recounted the entire two-day meeting with the Minister of Culture and apologized, asking him not to call me a coward. I also informed him that the next day at ten am, both he and I were summoned to the Minister's office to give an interview and approve the Taliban's actions. Mr. Ferozi paused briefly for a few moments and then told me I had done the right thing. He said he would stand with me. There was no need to run away, as our legal, logical, and professional responsibility was to protect historical and cultural artifacts. Why should we abandon this duty or fear it? We

would not approve the destruction of artifacts under any circumstances. Mr. Ferozi said that tomorrow, Tuesday, there was a meeting of the Academy of Sciences' board of directors, starting at nine am, and he would try to include this topic on the agenda for discussion. I requested him not to mention my name in this regard. He promised me that he would absolutely not mention my name. With Ferozi's statements, my expression changed, and a mountain of questions and confusion left my mind, replaced by a great and powerful spirit within me.

The next day, which was Tuesday, I went to the ministry. I parked my bicycle. A few minutes later, the staff of the Institute of Archaeology arrived at the ministry based on a phone call from the Minister of Information and Culture, Mr. Qudratullah Jamal. When the Minister's secretariat informed him of the archaeology staff's presence, he instructed that they be transported by car to his residence, which was located in the Radio Television compound, where we would meet. The five of us went together to the Minister's residence. The Minister arrived. In the meeting that convened, there were the five of us, the Minister, and Maulawi Ashrafi, who had served as the director of the Afghan Public Library during the first Taliban rule and had recently been transferred to the Afghan Academy of Sciences. The discussions began. The Minister of Culture explained the process of destroying museum artifacts in terms of Islamic Sharia principles. He requested the cultural specialists to approve that action per Islamic precepts.

The conversations were conducted in Pashto. Mr. Ferozi, the director of the Institute of Archaeology, spoke at length on the subject, considering professional responsibilities in line with the country's best interests and rejecting the Minister's request. He respectfully stated that we are not mullahs. He suggested that this matter should be addressed by religious scholars like Maulawi Ashrafi, who was present at the meeting, or others familiar with the translation and interpretation of the Quran and Prophetic hadiths, to provide religious justifications. We do not have this authority or responsibility. Mr. Ferozi's words also had the approval of the four of us and lengthy discussions took place on the subject. With one voice, we five clearly stated that we are in no way willing to approve this action by the Taliban. We accept dismissal from our duties, imprisonment, and exile. These arguments continued for several hours. It was time for the afternoon prayer. We performed the Asr prayer in congregation, led by Qudratullah Jamal, the Minister of Culture. After the prayer, the Minister said, "Give your final opinion." Mr. Ferozi stated that we had already expressed our clear position. Our opinion remains the same as before. Maulawi Ashrafi was still insisting on the matter. The Minister of Culture turned to Maulawi Ashrafi and said to him in Pashto: "Maulawi Sahib, be quiet. These are professional people. Even if you kill them, they won't listen to anything other than their own words."

Hearing these words from the Minister, fear and dread left our bodies. The Minister of Culture told Maulawi Ashrafi to discuss the matter on Radio Shariat with a few other mullahs. It's an interesting story. The Minister ordered that we be taken home in his car. We thanked him and said our bicycles were in the ministry parking lot. The Minister himself sat in the front of his car and drove us to the Information and Culture Ministry parking lot, where we said goodbye.

The discussion on this topic in the Academy of Sciences board meeting had both agreement and disagreement. While Ferozi and I were cycling, we encountered Professor Siddiq Afghan at the Bagh-e Zananah intersection. Mr. Siddiq Afghan asked us what had happened and what conclusions were reached. Mr. Ferozi briefly explained, and Professor Siddiq Afghan stated that we were true sons of this country and it was good that we did not approve the Taliban's action. Siddiq Afghan informed Mr. Ferozi and me about the discussions of that day at the Academy of Sciences and we returned to our homes. This fear subsided to some extent.

Interestingly, two days later in the eight pm news, Maulawi Khoddam, deputy director of Social Sciences at the Academy of Sciences, Maulawi Ashrafi, and Professor Siddiq Afghan approved the destruction of museum artifacts and the large Buddha statues in a roundtable discussion on Radio Shariat. From then on, this act was approved at both national and international levels.

The Taliban group, founded in 1994 as a spontaneous movement, stood up against the government of Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani. They began their struggle against the Islamic State, which they called the government of evil and corruption. In a short time, with the help of Nasirullah Babar, Pakistan's Interior Minister, they entered Kandahar through the Spin Boldak port and soon took control of the western and southern parts of Afghanistan, eventually capturing Kabul in 1996. Professional work at the museum was suspended as there was no ground for carrying out professional tasks. During the nearly six years of the first Taliban rule, schools and universities were closed to females. Female teachers received their salaries without attending school, and all women were required to wear burqas or full-body veils.

The situation continued this way until two major events occurred: September 9 and September 11. The United States government considered Osama bin Laden, leader of the Al-Qaeda group, to be involved in the September 11, 2001 incident. Osama bin Laden was residing in Afghanistan at that time. America wanted the Taliban to hand him over to the US or expel him from Afghanistan. The Taliban refused to hand over Osama.

It's worth noting that Osama bin Laden had moved from Sudan to Afghanistan during the Islamic government under the leadership of Burhanuddin Rabbani and was one of the supporters of the Afghan Mujahideen. The Taliban's refusal to hand over Osama bin Laden led to America taking military action against the Taliban, and in a short period, on November 12, 2001, the Taliban regime fell.

In summary, I can say that cultural institutions, with their sincere efforts, managed to prevent the destruction of many artifacts that were under threat from the ruling Taliban regime in 2001. Examples of this have been mentioned earlier. The National Museum staff also succeeded in saving extremely delicate and precious artifacts from Fandukistan and other ancient Buddhist-era artifacts in Afghanistan, which were kept on the fourth floor of the Ministry of Information and Culture, as well as delicate artifacts from various sites such as Hadda, Bagram, Bamyan, Kamadaka, and others that were stored in the Central Bank of the Arg (Presidential Palace). Considering the

conditions and circumstances prevailing at that time, they performed their duties excellently while taking great risks, and in my opinion, their services will be recorded in history. This was a glimpse into the first period of Taliban rule and their actions, which had no plans for cultural improvement but instead, unfortunately, destroyed artifacts both in the gallery and in the National Museum.

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Fortunately, a number of artifacts were preserved as a result of the efforts and endeavors of professional staff in cultural institutions.

ESFANDIARI: If you agree, let's take a short break and then discuss one or two more questions.

MASOUDI: Alright, I agree.

ESFANDIARI: Very good.

[recording paused]

ESFANDIARI: Thank you for the details. It was a very good, useful, and detailed discussion. Continuing our conversation, could you please tell us how the Taliban's takeover affected the normal activities of the museum, such as the preservation and restoration of artifacts, and the overall functioning and performance of the museum staff?

MASOUDI: Thank you. As mentioned earlier, after the museum was burned during the civil wars, the museum staff, displaced administratively, initially had offices in the ministry center, then in the National Archives, and finally at the Kabul Hotel. Even during the Taliban era, they were unable to make any changes to the building. All our departments were completely paralyzed. The restoration, museology, and photography departments had been looted during the civil wars, leaving them empty. During the Taliban's initial rule, UN-Habitat took two actions: they restored the museum's surrounding wall to its original state and repaired two rooms at the rear of the National Museum building.

They repaired those two rooms for us to use as an office, but there was no work—no restoration of artifacts, as we lacked both the materials and tools. It was a period of absolute inactivity. In 1998, when we transferred the artifacts from the Kabul Hotel to the ministry, the museum office also relocated there. Despite UN-Habitat's repairs to the museum's surrounding wall and those two rooms, they remained unused for any significant occupation until 2002.

In 2002, reconstruction of the building began slowly. Equipment and supplies were donated. After repairing and reconstructing the building, museum staff could focus on artifact restoration, preservation, and cleaning. This happened gradually, not all at once. By 2010, the museum had slowly regained stability and began offering services again. During the Taliban era, there was no activity whatsoever.

ESFANDIARI: You mentioned transferring artifacts in 1998. Were they transferred to the main museum building? Was the museum ready to receive them?

MASOUDI: In 1995, before the Taliban reached Kabul, we moved surviving artifacts from the National Museum to Kabul Hotel for safekeeping. In 1998, the Kabul Hotel administration wanted to renovate the hotel, pressuring the Ministry of Information and Culture to relocate the thirty-five hundred artifacts. We moved them to the Ministry, as the museum was destroyed. The first floor, now called the Press Hall, was renovated to house the artifacts. Unfortunately, the Taliban damaged artifacts there too. In 2003, during museum reconstruction, we transferred these artifacts from the Ministry to the museum building. That's when restoration work and activities began. After 2003, following the completion of the museum's reconstruction, specialized activities in various departments began to take shape day by day. Positive steps were taken, including expanding exhibitions, establishing departments, and as mentioned earlier, returning artifacts from both within and outside the country, as well as acquiring artifacts, gradually expanded.

ESFANDIARI: Alright. You mentioned earlier how the Taliban secretly and continuously destroyed artifacts away from the eyes of the media and the public. Were there any individuals within the Taliban government, like those in cultural institutions, who resisted or opposed this policy from within as members of the Taliban?

MASOUDI: No, the Taliban didn't resist at all. Instead, employees of cultural institutions would appeal to any authority they could, urging that this destructive action be halted. Thankfully, this effort yielded some results. But those who knew about these actions rejected it. They didn't endorse it, saying it was wrong and shouldn't happen. But who could challenge the Taliban and their higher-ups? It wasn't the role of lower-level employees. This should have been stopped at a higher level. They apparently expressed their regret. But why didn't they bring this to the press? For instance, if a museum employee had said, "Yes, I witnessed this—today they came and destroyed these artifacts," their life wouldn't be safe. They destroyed artifacts from galleries, museums, and even cassette tapes. Fortunately, these efforts [advocacies] did achieve some success. The radio and television archives remained intact. Even under the Taliban rule, the head of radio and television opposed and prevented this. He had authority. They managed to preserve Afghan Film in some capacity. Dr. Asif oversaw similar efforts at the National Gallery. Within the museum, activities continued discreetly, items were hidden, and some preservation efforts were successful. However, overall, they couldn't entirely halt this destructive trend.

ESFANDIARI: Okay. When discussing the museum's situation during the civil wars, you mentioned that the Mujahideen didn't view the professional museum staff positively. During the Taliban era, did museum staff encounter additional challenges, face pressure, or find it necessary to adopt a different attitude or approach?

MASOUDI: Certainly, when the Mujahideen came to power, those who worked in government offices in Kabul, even if they weren't aligned with Khalq or Parcham, meaning they were

neutral people just doing their jobs—Government employees served under every regime; working under a regime doesn't imply affiliation with it, but they were not viewed favorably. The Taliban were no different. They didn't value museum staff. During the Taliban era, everything became uniform. Museum employees were required to grow beards, wear pakols [men's cap worn in Afghanistan] or turbans, and dress similarly. They blended in. In the workplace, they were not respected at all. However, there were times during the Taliban era when they did listen to professional opinions. As I mentioned in my previous interview, if there was news or information about illegal excavations or artifact smuggling, they would send a delegation. This was especially the case when Amir Khan Muttaqi was the Minister of Information and Culture. I appreciate that he sought advice and sent delegations. I mentioned this in my interview. However, when he left the ministry and Qudratullah Jamal took over, they began destroying artifacts. My impression is that this idea existed before but was not implemented due to concerns about backlash. However, they gradually took steps to create conditions favorable to their actions.

Why shouldn't people listen to cassettes? Whether it was the voice of a male or female artist, people would listen in cars, on tape players, and at home. This was common throughout Afghanistan. When they caught someone, they would hang cassette tapes between trees to scare people, to instill fear, so that people wouldn't raise their voices or stand against them. I believe such news didn't quickly find its way into the media.

ESFANDIARI: Alright. As a final question, you already provided a detailed explanation about the destruction of artifacts. Did the Taliban focus solely on statues and images, or did they also oppose other artifacts not mentioned in Islamic texts?

MASOUDI: They didn't threaten other artifacts at all, only statues, which they considered idols. They destroyed these, citing that keeping idols goes against Sharia. As you know, statues depicting humans and animals have existed throughout Afghanistan's history. They exist in all Islamic countries around the world, and major Islamic countries today preserve their historical heritage. Indonesia is one of the largest Islamic countries, with a substantial population. I have traveled there myself, and they have diligently preserved artifacts from the Buddhist era in all their grandeur. In Egypt, you see Pharaonic artifacts in many museums worldwide and within Egypt itself. No Islamic country fails to maintain its historical past in its museums, except Afghanistan, where artifacts were destroyed.

In Pakistan, where these clerics study, I have visited the Peshawar Museum, Lahore Museum, and archaeological sites like Taxila Museum. They preserve artifacts from the Buddhist era very well. Why don't Pakistani clerics destroy them there? Once, a journalist asked Mullah Sami ul-Haq why they didn't destroy their own artifacts while approving the destruction of Afghan artifacts. He responded, "We have laws here." They respect the laws they have made for themselves, following English law more than anything, but they tell us to destroy our history under their laws, such as the Bamyán statues. What is this if not hostility towards history? It is hostility towards culture.

Pakistan, UAE, Saudi Arabia—all these countries preserve their artifacts. They even create symbolic representations of their historical past, such as camels, which have played a significant role in their economies throughout history. They have established ethnographic and anthropological narratives without destroying their artifacts, and they continue to preserve them. Why was Afghanistan subjected to such cruelty? Part of the blame lies with us. We failed to grasp its value, failed to understand it, destroying the historical legacy of our ancestors with our own hands.

Today, the loss or destruction of an artifact means that a part of our history remains unknown—it's gone. It's a tremendous loss for the tourism industry. These destroyed and looted artifacts represent an irreparable loss that cannot be quantified financially. Only those who understand the value of these artifacts can truly comprehend this. When someone fails to understand and simply states, "This is an idol, it must be destroyed," I cannot comprehend or justify such actions in any way.

ESFANDIARI: Thank you. If there's nothing more you'd like to add, we can conclude today's interview here.

MASOUDI: Thank you. I believe we've covered what needed to be discussed in today's conversation. If there are other topics, we can discuss them in the future as well. Please feel free to ask.

ESFANDIARI: Excellent. Thank you for your time. Have a wonderful day. Thank you.

MASOUDI: May you live long and be well.

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