

Review - Poetry of the Taliban

Written by Robert Sampson

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ROBERT SAMPSON, AUG 21 2012

Poetry of the Taliban

Edited by: Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn

London: Hurst & Co, 2012.

It should be no surprise that the Taliban, like warriors throughout history, use songs to promote their cause and to get psyched up for war. In *Poetry of the Taliban*, edited by Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, we get a chance to hear what they are singing about. Being able to read the poems they sing is a huge step forward in understanding their ethos, and raises some intriguing questions about the way forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

This well written and smoothly translated collection of poems is essential reading for anyone hoping to look beyond the normal stereotypes of the Taliban. The book showcases over 200 of the poems used by the Taliban in the hauntingly beautiful a cappella *tarana* songs which have gone viral in Pashtun society. These same songs are distributed by audiocassette tapes, mp3 files on cell phones and listened to on the radio wherever Pashtuns live. In areas controlled by the Taliban this is the only kind of 'music' that is allowed.

The strength of the book lies in the quality of the translations made by Mirwais Rahmany and Abdul Stanikzai. The

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poems are rendered in a way that retains just enough of the original idiom to give the reader a feel of the effusive sentimentalism of the genre. Such delightful lines as “*they make black smoke rise from its heart*” (p.200), “*we are hungover from the wine of bravery*” (p.124) and “*there is a fluttering of dollars, slavery of the infidels*” (p.124) should be required reading for those who step into the Pashtun world.

What makes this book so useful is that here, at last, is the authentic insider voice of the Taliban movement. As the authors show, the imagination of Pashtun culture is fuelled by poetry. The influence and flavour of the Taliban is perhaps more quickly understood by reading translations of their *tarana* than by listening to security briefings. To have missed their poetry is to have missed a key emotional, even sentimental side to their motivation.

Reading the poems, the authors argue, helps us go beyond the expected and reveals how Taliban thought is far less dominated by jihad and Islamic fundamentalism than we may have assumed. The expected themes of war and suffering, of opposition to cruel invaders, revenge, and the innocence of the noble villager are all here. But what is striking is how lightly the poetry rests on religious oppositional themes. Instead, Taliban poetry is infused with a nostalgic, even romantic ethos.

This mindset is both ancient and modern. On the one hand the poetry is deeply embedded in past history. Frequent mention is made, for example, of the Anglo-Afghan wars of the nineteenth century. One of the favourite heroines recalled in the poems is Malalai, the Pashtun woman who roused an army to defeat the British at the battle of Maiwand in 1880. This excerpt from a poem written in 2008 is typical of the genre:

My nation breaks the bloody heads;
The enemy breaks the bangles of our girls;
They break the water pots while they are going to the spring.
I will take revenge with my blood for them;
They smash the foreheads of our people without guilt;
I swear that I'll bring earthquakes to your home,
My nations' sons always break down the foreigners;
Not only youths but also my maidens break their heads,
Like Malalai who defeated the army of the British.

At the same time Taliban poetry includes a lively response to contemporary issues. There is much mileage made of Guantanamo, the profligacy of foreign Non Government Organizations, and bitter anger over the use of drones:

The infidels are bombing the poor on every side,
Who is doing the spying for this to happen? (p.124)

Throughout, the poems use the well-worn tropes of traditional tragic Persianate poetry. Even current political themes are couched in the language of the romantic meeting, separation, the bulbul and the rose, xenophobia, and of women urging their men folk to fight for their honour. The scurrilous poem entitled “Condolences of Karzai and Bush”, which lampoons the end of the Bush era, is composed as a farewell conversation between two lovers:

Karzai: Give me your hand as you go;
Turn your face as you disappear.

Bush: Sorrow takes over and overwhelms me;
My darling! Take care of yourself and I will take care of myself. (p. 118)

One of the best contributions of the book is to raise questions that relate to the themes the poetry describes. In a 40 page preface and introduction the editors touch on some of the questions about the place of human rights, hegemony, tribalism and religion that have been perplexing observers of the Taliban for two decades. Despite the useful contributions that this book makes in helping readers to understand the Taliban ethos, it lacks commentary from members of the Taliban. Without the benefit of the Taliban's own commentary on the poems the conclusions are

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at times speculative, but at least the book opens the discussion in a more informed way. It allows us to wrestle in a concrete way with the ambiguities of an obscurantist regime that has deftly harnessed the power of modern media to propagate their ideas in song.

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