

## The epistemicide in Afghanistan: an analysis of Taliban's policies towards national and cultural symbols

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### Abstract:

After taking over Kabul for the second time when the US-led NATO forces left Afghanistan in 2021, the Taliban resumed their past practices. To run the affairs of Afghanistan, the Taliban use political Islam, the way they understand and interpret it, as the nodal point around which they articulate the signs and symbols in a chain of equivalence. This paper analyses the Taliban's policies regarding Afghanistan's historical, national, and cultural symbols. Using epistemicide as an analytical device, we argue that in the name of Puritanism and the reconstitution of Afghanistan, according to Sharia, the Taliban discovered and erased all symbols of historical Afghanistan. This tends to serve as a case of epistemicide of the Afghan culture and wipes the slate of Afghan history clean. This paper explains how the Taliban silenced, devalued, and consequently moved to eradicate Afghanistan's cultural memory and knowledge system. This paper provides an account of what the Taliban's policies convey by silencing Afghanistan's historical texts, histories, and narratives. The Afghan society is faced with internal colonisation, which refuses that knowledge production is a social practice that takes into cognisance the history and culture of the Afghan people, among other factors.

### Article History

Received:  
03-Aug-2023

Revised:  
06-Sep-2023

Re-revised:  
15-Dec-2023

Accepted:  
17-Dec-2023

Published:  
31-Dec-2023

**Keywords:** Kabul, Afghans, Pashtuns, nationalism, national memory, national history, national curriculum, national heritage, national flag, national anthem, cinema, music.

### How to Cite:

Malik, T., Jan, F., & Ullah, U. (2023). The epistemicide in Afghanistan: an analysis of Taliban's policies towards national and cultural symbols. *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)*, 7(2), 61-60. <https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.lassij/7.2.4>

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## 1. Introduction

A predominantly Pashtun militia, the Taliban were nurtured in Pakistani *madrassas* (seminaries) and emerged on the scene in Afghanistan in 1994 when they chased out warlords after four years of internecine war in the wake of Soviet withdrawal in 1989. Starting with Kandahar on the border with Pakistan, the Taliban seized cities and villages in southern and western Afghanistan one after the other. They captured the capital Kabul in 1996 and declared Afghanistan an Islamic Emirate with Mulla Umar, the group's leader, as *Amir ul Momineen* (the leader of the faithful), they let loose a reign of terror on the people of Afghanistan in the name of restoring peace and dispensing Islamic justice. Their six-year rule was marked by abuses against ethnic and religious minorities, especially the Shia Hazaras. In the name of so-called *sharia*, the Taliban imposed a slew of restrictions, including a strict dress code for women and compulsory long beards for men.

Centuries-old and deeply rooted cultural pastimes and other activities such as *Nawroz* celebrations<sup>1</sup>, *buzkashi*<sup>2</sup>, and kite flying besides music were banned as 'un-Islamic'. The Taliban also banned the Afghan national flag and replaced it with the militia's standard—a white banner emblazoned with *Kalima* (Islamic confession of faith) in black, and the national anthem with a *nasheed* which is sung a cappella. Television, cinema, and women's public appearance were forbidden for being un-Islamic, as was *jirga*, an important social, cultural, and political institution of the Afghans, which is older than Afghanistan itself. Communal bathhouses known as *hammams*, the site of an ancient tradition of cultural ritual practices, were also closed. The historic Buddha monuments in Bamiyan were demolished as symbols of idolatry, which is forbidden in Islam. Moreover, the Taliban also made changes to the school curriculum to rewrite Afghan history and erase the national memory. All these steps, we argue, amount to the textbook case of epistemicide.

After taking over Kabul for the second time when the US-led NATO forces left Afghanistan in 2021, the Taliban resumed their past practices. They have proposed to drop subjects such as Biology, History, Culture, Arts, and physical education from the national curriculum, which was developed and implemented by the West-supported 'democratic' dispensations (2004-2021). Art is being replaced with agriculture and Islamic learning, while all living images are removed from the syllabus for having "corrupting influence" and being against *sharia* and Afghan culture. Some of the controversial images include pictures of young girls in school uniforms and images of the school and official uniforms. These images, the Taliban argue, promote Western culture and are un-Islamic (Bahesh, 2022). Taliban's assessment board or committee for modification of curriculum insists on the removal of pictures of musical instruments and *attan*, the traditional Afghan dance, as they promote "immorality".

To run the affairs of Afghanistan, the Taliban use political Islam—the way they understand and interpret it—as the nodal point around which they articulate the signs and symbols in a chain of equivalence (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) in such a way that these signs and symbols

acquire their meaning from their relationship to the nodal point, i.e., *Islam*. This political doctrine professes a puritan ideology, a *Salafi* version of *sharia*, which aims to erase ‘impurities’ and everything they consider a sign of *jahiliyya* (a reference to the time before the advent of Islam in Mecca). Consequently, their political strategy resorts to the violent erasure of all Afghan or Pashtun nation and cultural symbols. In this paper, we analyze contrapuntally (Said, 1993), this targeted destruction of Afghan culture using epistemicide as an analytical device.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

The term epistemicide refers to killing the knowledge systems (Hall & Tandon, 2017) and was first proposed by Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (1995) to account for the destruction/marginalization of non-Western knowledge systems by Western imperialism. Santos found epistemicide as a consequence of the rise of Western modernity and rationality in 16th-century Europe. From this period onwards, he argues, there was a systemic erasure of alternative episteme and/or the genocide of social groups that sustained such alternative knowledge to participate in the global epistemic canon.

Several theorists have used epistemicide as an analytical tool to apply to both historical and contemporary phenomena that have resulted in the destruction of knowledge systems outside the purview of the Western knowledge system (see, e.g., Bennett, 2014; Vasquez, 2011; Hall and Tandon, 2017). Bennet, in her study on the domination of English as a lingua franca, argues that despite its obvious limitations in dealing with a multifaceted, decentered, post-modern reality, English’s hegemonic status is such that other knowledge is rendered invisible or ‘couched in the accepted discourse’ in a process of epistemicide. Similarly, Vasquez (2011) argues that translation is used as a technology of incorporating and erasing, i.e., imposing the predator’s or colonizer’s discourse on the subaltern subjects to erase the knowledge system of the colonized.

About the intellectual colonization and the dominance of white man’s knowledge, Grosfoguel (2013) explains that this epistemic privilege is the result of four genocides/epistemicides of the 16<sup>th</sup> century: 1) of the Jewish and Muslim populations of Europe in the conquest of Al-Andalus, 2) of the indigenous people in the conquest of Americas, 3) in the enslavement and killing of Africans in the Americas, and 4) in the burning alive of millions of Indo-European women accused of being witches.<sup>3</sup> These four epistemicides resulted in the transformation of Europe from a peripheral to a central position of knowledge. Hall and Tandon (2017) state that these four genocides were military as well as epistemological/ideological in nature.

Many nations, while dealing with their histories, adopt a policy of adopting a protective narrative that justifies their creation and avoids narrations that lower their self-esteem. For example, in post-Civil War America, a narrative was built in the textbooks that softened slavery as a cause and presented State’s rights as the real issue behind the Civil War (Lurie, 2021). As

time progressed, the southern version of the events infiltrated the northern textbooks and history became exclusively a white perspective. As Bohan (2021) argues a few Black scholars challenged these narratives and contributed their opinion, it was discounted as a minority voice. This resulted in many of the groups being left out of history.

A recent example of epistemicide and 'murder of history' is a move by the ruling Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) government in India to rewrite history to fit its Hindu nationalist agenda (Petersen, 2023). For this purpose, textbooks were revised to remove chapters on the Mughal era, Gandhi's opposition to Hindu nationalism and his support for Hindu-Muslim unity (Petersen, 2023). The amended textbooks do not include a reference to the ban imposed on Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) after the assassination of Gandhi and the 2002 Gujarat riots in which over 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, were massacred under the BJP government watch.

A more recent example of epistemicide is Israel's targeting of schools and universities in Gaza for the destruction of historical knowledge and education. In 2009 Israel's education ministry ordered to removal of the word *nakba*<sup>4</sup> from the textbooks for Arab school children. In 2011, the Israeli government passed 'Nakba law' according to which the government cut funding for any public institute that teaches about *nakba* (Hagopian, 2023). The destruction of Palestinian educational institutes, the killing of students, the harassment of students and teachers, and their prolonged and arbitrary military detention and prosecution in the military court systems is a strategy of war in what is dubbed as Israel's genocide of the Palestinian population. In the recent attacks, Israel has bombed schools and higher education institutes including Al-Azhar University, Gaza, and UN school buildings depriving more than 88,000 students of their right to education (Dawn News, 2023)

### **3. Research methodology**

This is a qualitative study that involves a description and an in-depth analysis of the Taliban's policy decisions regarding the national symbols and centuries-old cultural and institutional practices of the people of Afghanistan. For our analysis, we have used both primary sources and secondary supportive studies. The primary data was collected in two stages. First, the textbooks were collected that had been taught in schools across Afghanistan before and after the Taliban took over in 2021 for comparison to find out what changes have been made by the new regime. Second, after a content analysis of the books, one of us conducted interviews with eight officials of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education Ministry of the Taliban via the messaging application WhatsApp. Interviews were also conducted with eight teachers and university professors in Nangarhar, Kunar, and Kabul. The interviews, conducted in Pashto—the native language of one of us—were transcribed in Pashto and then translated into English. "[A] long preliminary soak" (Hall, 1997, p. 15) in the English-language transcript was the first step of the analysis. It was followed by an individual close reading to identify themes. We compared the themes and picked those which were rich for analysis. Finally, we analyzed the

themes in conjunction with the Taliban's policies regarding national symbols and cultural artifacts, including cinema, as reported by international news media.

One of the authors is a Pashtun residing in Peshawar, where the largest Afghan community is based. Sharing a common cultural code allows for a deeper understanding of cultural insights. Another author has also spent years in Peshawar and conducted research in Afghan refugee camps for her Ph.D. dissertation. Thus, all the three authors possess a justifiable position to comprehend the cultural nuances of Afghans.

#### **4. Epistemicide of Afghan national and cultural symbols: analysis and discussion**

In this section, we discuss how the Taliban in the name of reconstituting order and purifying Afghan society discarded the national flag and anthem which are the cornerstones of what constitutes the essence of Afghan nationhood, or *Afghaniyyat*. We argue that these actions constitute cultural genocide.

##### **4.1. Discarding the national flag**

The national flag symbolizes several things for a nation: its culture, identity, historical memory, thinking pattern/psychological makeup, and honor; it embodies what the nation stands for (Butz et al. 2007; Butz, 2009; Sibley et al., 2011; Sungur, 2020). Literature on the connection between national symbols and the sense of national belonging suggests that the effect of flags on nationalist spirit may be positive or negative depending upon the socio-political context. For instance, Kimmelmeier and Winter (2008) have found that exposure to the US flag increases nationalism among Americans, whereas people of other nations link it with power, aggression, and war (Ferguson & Hassin, 200; Becker et al., 2017). Although for the postmodernists, the flags and emblems have become things of the past, the flag often becomes a symbol of resistance as in the case of Afghanistan's tricolor flag and the Taliban's white banner. Similarly, the red, green, white, and black colored fruit watermelon has become a symbol of Palestinian resistance. Watermelon symbolizes the Palestinian flag since 1967 when Israel occupied Gaza and the West Bank and declared the public display of the Palestinian flag a criminal offense (Varanasi, 2023).

However, the national flags are not permanent icons. The evolution of a flag represents the evolving mood of a nation. This mood can be interpreted from the structure of the flag, i.e., what elements it contains, and what meaning is associated with those elements (Cunha et al., 2020).

The flag of Afghanistan also changed several times depending upon the structure of the State as Emirate, Kingdom, Republic, Socialist Republic, Islamic State, and finally Islamic Emirate (See Chughtai & Muslih 2021). Since its birth as a nation, almost 30 national banners of Afghanistan have been changed. It is not possible here to give details of what all the previous

banners stood for or represent. We will, however, discuss in detail, besides the Afghan national flag, the Taliban's standard what it iterates/represents, and how it attempts to challenge *Afghaniyyat* by banning the tricolor national flag.

The national flag of Afghanistan is a tricolor band—red, black, and green—and bears a national emblem. These symbols are based on Article 19 of the 2004 constitution. As for the color pallet, black represents the dark ages of the past and colonial intervention, red represents the bloodshed in the independence struggle, and green stands for prosperity and hope (Borjian, n.d.). Green also carries religious symbolism as it is the color of Islam, notably present in flags of many Muslim countries (Borjian, n.d.). The three colors also show the nation's movement in the line of history. As for the insignia, the pulpit (*minbar*) and the altar (*mehrab*) are religious symbols, and sheaves of wheat represent the agriculture of the country. Religious symbolism is also reflected in the Arabic inscriptions of *Allah u Akbar* and *Shahada*. The rising sun represents the old name of the country *Khorasan*—a reference to the origins of the country in antiquity, and as a natural, not a human construct (Hobsbawm, 1983). In short, the tricolor flag of Afghanistan represents the memory of the historical and political development of the country.

The Taliban, however, does not recognize the tricolor flag. They contend that this flag has been constructed outside of Afghanistan and according to the wishes of Americans. As a Taliban official emphasizes: “Under this tricolor flag, Afghans were mercilessly killed and we [the Taliban] fought to uphold the sanctity of our Islamic flag.” The national flag, he argued, lacked a visible statement of faith which the Taliban banner bears. Another Taliban official argued, “The tri-color flag was a remnant of Amanullah [Khan] [the founder of modern Afghanistan] who believed in Western democracy.” In other words, the tri-color flag represents the secular democratic part of Afghanistan. “It was this [tricolor] flag which rallied the Afghan regime forces against us. We shed our blood in fighting against this flag.”

The Taliban presents Afghanistan as having two identities represented by two different flags: before and after their takeover, which were in an antagonistic relationship with each other. Therefore, first, they construct an identity of their banner around the master signifier, Islam, and then discard/erase the identity of the historical, multi-ethnic Afghanistan by equating the tri-color flag with an identity formed around ‘democracy’, ‘secularism’, and ‘schism’ (as reflected in recognition of Afghanistan's ethnic and cultural diversity).

The solid white in the Taliban's banner represents ‘purity’. The scripture in black ink on the flag represents the faith of the nation, which here excludes non-Muslims. “We fought against the occupying forces and their stooges under the banner of this Islamic flag and defeated those fighting under the banner of their flag,” the Taliban official said, adding: “That flag symbolized the hordes of the infidels, not Afghans.”

Figure 1: Tricolor Afghanistan National Flag



Figure 2: The Taliban's banner



The solid white is also an iteration of the political ideology and outlook of the Taliban which believes in puritanism and the erasure of all symbols of the previous regimes through the imposition of their version of *sharia* (The Taliban adheres to the Wahhabi version of Islam (Bell & Sempel, 2021)). They realize the significance of their white banner as it serves to symbolize the group's legitimacy to rule the country. The Taliban has realized the importance of organizational symbols and is projecting an increasing consciousness of their brand (Boyd, 2017). Since the death of Mullah Omar, the founder, schisms have appeared within their ranks (Boyd, 2017), and they hope that by displaying the white flag they will project unity. "Our white banner represents Islam; it was the flag of Prophet Mohammad as well; it stands for a single nation and not ethnicities," the Taliban official emphasized. Thus, the white banner

actually denies the presence of the different ethnic identities in Afghanistan, which had been ensembled in the word 'Afghan' and their representation in previous versions of national flags. "After we defeated our *enemy*, we had to eliminate every symbol and the very name of it" (emphasis is ours), the Taliban official added.

#### 4.2. The National Anthem

An anthem is a song that is often chanted at sports events, national celebrations, and in schools. It creates a feeling of emotional excitement that brings people together, also known as "collective effervescence" according to Durkheim (2001). The first royal salute or national anthem of Afghanistan was adopted in 1926 during the rule of Amir Amanullah Khan. Since then, Afghanistan has had five national anthems. The previous national anthem of Afghanistan, which was replaced by the Taliban, was officially adopted by a Loya Jirga in May 2006. The anthem is in Pashto and its lyrics were written by Abdul Bari Jahani, with composition by German Afghan, Babrak Wassa.

The national anthem calls Afghanistan the land of all Afghans, the 'land of peace' and the 'land of the sword'. It accepts the multiple identities of Afghans: ethnic and tribal and describes Afghanistan as the land that 'will shine forever, like the Sun in the blue sky'. This description invokes the antiquity of the land, and the nation as is manifest in its older name *Khorasan*.<sup>5</sup> It also invokes the geostrategic placement of Afghanistan as the 'heart of Asia;' at the end, there is a declaration of faith in Allah. Then comes the gendered discourse which reflects the patriarchal structure of tribal Afghan society. The anthem describes Afghanistan as 'the honor of every Afghan' and a motherland whose sons are all heroes who will protect its honor.

Ethnicity runs deep in Afghan society and at times stands in the way of nation-building (Sungur, 2020; Schetter, 2005; Simonsen, 2004, Dinakhel, 2018). The *sarud e mili* (or national anthem) recognizes the multiethnic character of Afghan society and stitches together all 14 ethnicities<sup>6</sup> residing in the country and is officially recognized by the 2004 constitution. The national anthem reflects the sense of nationhood among these ethnicities despite the lack of a common culture. Thus, on the one hand, the anthem recognizes the multiethnic character and divisions in Afghan society based on *qaum* (nation), on the other, it mentions Islam and *Afghaniyyat* as the uniting forces, or in the vocabulary of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) the nodal point. As a chant of the modern nation, the anthem is aimed to unite the heterogeneous collection of the groups into a single national body with a more homogenous focus, i.e., *Afghaniyyat*.

When the Taliban came to power in 1996-2001 and then in August 2021, both times a *nasheed*,<sup>7</sup> "this is the home of the brave," was used instead of the national anthem. The *nasheed* is played at the beginning of the Taliban's radio broadcasts and at the opening of the Taliban's representative offices when the flag is raised. The *nasheed* remained in use in the same capacity even when the Taliban were not in government. *Nasheed* is the resistance and *jihadi* poetry that



exhorts the bravery of the Taliban and eulogizes the martyrdom of their friends. As with other Taliban chants, the *nasheed* attends to three core themes of the group's poetry: *wataniya*, *turra*, *matamuna* (Pelevin & Weinreich, 2012), i.e., *homeland*, *bravery*, and *mourning* (a tragedy such as the death of its fighters).

However, the national anthem which was replaced by the *nasheed* also became a symbol of resistance. The Taliban refused to recognize it on the grounds that the anthem, like the tricolor flag, was developed outside of Afghanistan and dictated by Americans. The national anthem is also objected to on the grounds that it is against the spirit of faith. "The name of Allah is pronounced in accompaniment with music which is *haram* [forbidden]" a Taliban official argued, adding: "It was this *haram* anthem which the infidels and their surrogates would play to emotionally charge their forces against us." This is how the Taliban uses "the tactic of adequation" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004) to discursively create sameness between the Afghan national anthem and the occupation of Afghanistan by the 'infidels. The *sarud e mili*, in this equation, stands for the anti-Islam Other, and the Taliban's *nasheed* for the Islamic Emirate.

#### **4.3. Cultural heritage**

In the following sections, we discuss the annihilation of Afghan culture and the Afghan way of life by the Taliban in their policy toward icons and practices of Afghan culture which are repositories of cultural memory, and the changes made to the textbooks which amounts to a cultural epistemicide.

Culture serves as both a means of identity and a source of it. It is a collection of the most well-known ideas, a structured system of symbols and meanings, and the artistic creations of the community (Said, 1993; Shabir et al., 2023). The rich mosaic of Afghan culture evolved over millennia with ebbs and flows of internal political disorder and influences from outside. This cultural mosaic is much more than the images seen on the TV screens with bearded warriors, missiles, suicide bombers, and women clad in blue *chadari/burqa*. These images are a construct and product of wars Afghanistan has been subjected to since the 1970s. External and internal forces attempted to write the national history and construct the memory of the Afghan nation according to their vested interests. The Soviets (1978-1989) attempted to Sovietize the Afghan culture and the US (1979-1989) tried to write its history and mold its culture through *Jihadi* literature to undo what the Soviets did (Coulson, 2004). Afghans strongly cling to their cultural values despite the ups and downs of nation-building, embodying the true essence of *Afghaniyyat*. This essence and spirit are preserved and celebrated through objects, places, and rituals in their daily lives, which collectively make up the nation's memory.

During the Taliban's reign, they disapproved of almost every aspect of Afghan culture. Their strict beliefs influenced what people wore, the music they listened to, the national education system, and even the celebrations and entertainment activities. Sadly, a major consequence of their cultural suppression was the absence of women in public spaces (Ahmadi & Worden,

2022). When they gained control, their policies, which they claimed were based on Islam, began to target the core of Afghan identity. Their efforts to dislodge Afghan identity began as early as 1996 when Mullah Omer issued a decree banning unauthorized excavations of archaeological sites. Despite this order, the theft of historical relics and cultural artifacts continued to be widespread, and the Kabul Museum was forced to close.

In 2000, Mullah Omer tasked the Ministry for the Prevention of Vice and the Promotion of Virtue to determine the appropriateness of the National Museum's holding according to *sharia* (Dupree, 2002). Consequently, an unspecified number of objects in the museum were destroyed. On 26th February 2001, an edict prohibited the 'adoration of idols' (Manhart, 2001) branding the two 6th-century Buddha statues in Bamiyan "a sanctuary for unbelievers". In March 2001, the Buddhas were dynamited. It was ordered that all statues and non-Islamic shrines be destroyed. The destruction of the Buddha statues was by far the most spectacular attack on the Afghan heritage. It was a part of destroying all the pre-Islamic icons in the country.

#### 4.4. Cinema

Cinema was introduced to Afghanistan in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it has since served as a documented record of the country's history. The history of Afghan cinema highlights a strong connection between cultural production and efforts at modern nation-state building over the past century. Khachab (2020) has found cinema integral to Afghanistan's national developmental discourse emerging since the country's independence in 1919. Afghan films in the earlier years were based on society, culture and the life of the people. Cinema was an artistic initiative to create and promote a national culture under the central government's guidance (Khachab, 2020). King Amanullah Khan had his international trip in 1927-1928 recorded by a personal film crew. In 1959, the Independent Press Directorate, which became the Ministry of Art and Culture in 1966, documented the travels and political achievements of King Zahir Shah. In October 1946, *Manand-e Oqab* (Like an Eagle) was the first feature film shot in Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup> There was even a deeper link between cinema and nationalism as is evident from the premiering of the first Afghan feature films such *Ishq wa Dusti* and *Rozgaran* on the first day of independence celebrations (Khachab, 2020).

Civil unrest and political strife in the country affected the cinema in Afghanistan. As mentioned by Siddiq Barmak, Afghan Film director and producer, "In the short and varied history of Afghan cinema, every [historical and political] change engendered its specific films and censorship" (quoted in Schäfer, 2019, p. 6). In the wake of the 1978 Saur Revolution, cinema in Afghanistan saw a surge in funding. Private Productions came to an end and Afghan Films was the only remaining state-run national film institute. Under the Soviet occupation (1979-89), the cinema was centralized, controlled by external Soviet censors and geared toward propaganda. Using cinema as a tool to educate 'the illiterate masses, Moscow encouraged the production of nationalist films such as *Hamsa-e- Ishq* (Love Epic) and *Sabur-e Sarbaz* (Soldier

Saboor). With the fall of the Communist regime, the civil war, and the Taliban's coming to power, film production in Afghanistan was hampered. Only one film was produced in the 1990s. The documentary made in 1994 featured celebrations of mujahedeen's victory over the Soviets (Rotman & Hassib, 2012).

After the fall of the Taliban regime, filmmakers returned to the country. The archivists working in Afghan Film rescued the film heritage as depicted in Pietra Brettkelly's *A Flickering Truth* (2015) and Ariel Nasr's *The Forbidden Reel* (2019). During the Taliban rule, Afghan national Habibullah Ali saved thousands of reels which were later digitized (Dawn News, 2017). These preserved reels centered on the theme of *love* rather than *war* and introduced young Afghans to another aspect of Afghanistan unknown to the young generation: Peace. The older generation refreshed the cultural memory of pre-war Afghanistan. The films made in the post-Taliban era including films like *The Kite Runner*, *Osama*, Roya Sadaat's *Se noqhta/Three Dots* (2004) and *Panj-e asr/At Five in the Afternoon* (2005) exposed the violent practices of the Taliban regime and narrated stories of resistance against tyranny from everyday living beyond the geostrategy and high politics. In the films like *Chopandaz*, *Buzkashi Boys*, *Kite Runner*, camel fighting, galloping horses and turbaned *Chopandaz*, the kite running festivals and bustling bazaars present a quite different picture of the Afghanistan and its rich culture (Davis, 2002).

The return of the Taliban in 2021 signaled the destruction of Afghanistan's art and cinema. Soon after the group took control, the offices of TV and film companies were shuttered, cinemas were closed, and music was banned. Some artists fled while others went underground. Some have been brutally murdered. Famous comedian Nazar Mohammad, popularly known as Khasha Zwan and one of the country's top media officials Dawa Khan Menapal were murdered by the Taliban gunmen (Gopalakrishnan, 2021). To the TV channels, there were clear guidelines by the Taliban not to air films that are considered against *sharia* and Afghan values and promote foreign cultural values. Comedy shows considered an insult to the values of Islam and Afghan culture were banned (BBC News, 2021). The Taliban also banned women from appearing on TV shows.

#### **4.5. Curriculum**

Foucault posits that power and knowledge are mutually constituted and there are no relations of power without corresponding knowledge (Gordon, 1980). Similarly, no knowledge does not presuppose power relations. This is true for the Taliban's—or for that matter, any regime's—education policy. The Taliban has overhauled the curriculum to bring it in line with their theology, Deobandi fundamentalism, and militant Islamism, and purge it of any reference to Afghanistan's past and democracy. For example, a Taliban official in the Ministry of Education informed us that “our priorities are to purify our curriculum of those *pollutants* which do not sync with our core Islamic values and culture. Therefore, we want to *purify* our syllabi by removing contents that are against our peculiar Islamic culture.”

The Taliban uses curriculum and schools as a bulwark of the nation-state and as the state's ideological apparatus to interpellate the people as docile subjects in the face of a militant State and zealous militant against the other. "Our education aims to produce a society of a *pure lot* who follow by practice pure Islamic injunctions in their daily life and are at the ready for *jihad* at all times," said a member of the Taliban regime's committee for the curriculum development. "They [educational institutions] should inculcate pure Islamic thoughts so that the degree holders are turned into individuals enriched with genuine Islamic ideology and true preachers of Islam."

The history of subjectification/objectification of subjects reveals that the objects and experiences are a product of discourses, and the role of the curriculum is central to constituting a homogenous national people. In the early years of the insurgency, the Taliban attacked educational institutes, teachers, and students considering them symbols of foreign occupation and hence legitimate targets for attack (Amiri & Jackson, 2021).

As the Taliban's core objective was restoring a 'pure Islamic society,' education is considered a means to bring 'reforms' and restore Islamic values. For the Taliban, reforms mean removing all and any content that refer to democracy and human rights, especially women's rights. "Taliban have objections to those contents of the curriculum which are related to the cultural, historical aspect of the lives of females and also those contents which deal with female liberation," Taliban Minister for Education and Curriculum told us. "That's why these contents were deleted but as a matter of fact, it was not the right job that those contents had been included." The Taliban introduced new religious books and 'offensive' and 'un-Islamic subjects' were excised from the curriculum.

The Taliban holds a belief in their version of Islam that is all-encompassing and differs from the traditional understanding and practice of religion in Afghanistan. Their interpretation of *sharia* is presented as the ultimate truth and surpasses all other traditions and disciplines, which are ultimately only different forms of its expression. This perspective is held by the Taliban's Minister for Education and Curriculum.

One of the fundamental problems with the past curriculum was that the understanding of the graduates it produced was restricted only to their respective professions without any true Islamic spirit. We want them to be zealot *Muslim* engineers, doctors who are also imbued with Islamic ideology (emphasis is ours).

And in order to achieve this objective, the Taliban have:

Added 16 more credit hours on top of 8 existing ones on the religion and practices of Islam have been added to be read by students along with their majors in medicine, engineering, human rights, agriculture, and journalism,

etc. The objective is to equip our graduates with contemporary knowledge in the light of religion [Islam]; so that enemy forces may not pollute their beliefs.

Thus, religion is being used as a totalizing ideology, which through the operation of ‘quilting,’ submerge specialized fields into the structure of the Taliban’s version of Islam.

Even before gaining control for the second time, the Taliban had developed a bureaucratic apparatus with a strict hierarchy and shadow ministers for education to monitor schools in Taliban-controlled provinces. They had a codified education policy (Amiri & Jackson, 2021). The 2006 *Layha*<sup>9</sup>, or code of conduct, forbids working as a teacher in a State which the Taliban considers as an infidel. The *Layha* authorized the killing of teachers instructing secular curricula (Amiri & Jackson, 2021). The curriculum from the mujahedeen period of the Emirate was considered the only acceptable one. For the sake of legitimacy, the overarching policy acknowledges the need to teach secular subjects alongside religious ones in schools. However, they present a different picture. For example, a professor at Nangarhar University informed:

The syllabus of the schools and universities [during the previous government] was good enough as compared to other countries of the region but the Taliban claimed that the syllabus contained contents that were against religion, culture, and morality. Without altogether changing or scrapping these courses, the Taliban introduced ‘Islamic culture,’ the Arabic language, and theories of Ibni Khaldun to the contents drowning out the original course content. It has created a mismatch between the titles of the courses and their contents.

Furthermore, the need to teach secular subjects is followed by a reference to the jihadi arrangement which requires excising anti-Jihad topics, and subjects derived from infidel law (Bahesh, 2022). The process of modification of the curriculum started immediately after the Doha agreement in 2020. The Taliban proposed changes on the pretext that the existing curriculum was made by a puppet regime funded by Jewish and Western countries and contained ‘non-Islamic and non-Afghan standards’ (Oates, 2022). The proposed changes aim at valorizing and promoting *jihad*. War is so valuable a concept as opposed to peace that it is proposed to use ‘*Ghazwai*<sup>10</sup> Maiwand’ instead of ‘the Battle of Maiwand’ in 12th-grade history (Bahesh, 2022).

The Taliban opposes women’s education, prohibits advocacy of human rights and democracy, and propagates their own version of history. Certain topics are declared useless and harmful such as democracy, human rights, the introduction to the constitution, elections, the national police, etc. Rather, the Taliban curriculum teaches the negative impacts of these instead of valorizing these institutes (Bahesh, 2022). According to Nangarhar University professor, “The Taliban have objections to those contents of the curriculum which are related to the cultural, and historical aspects of the lives of females and deal with female liberation.”

A professor of History at the University of Kabul explained that the Taliban project of purifying the curriculum and synchronizing it with their version of *Sharia* considers all content that deviates from their professed values, objectionable. For instance, “Schools and departments such as *Hunar Hai Zeba*<sup>11</sup> [Fine Arts; literally meaning, *Beautiful Arts*] are the targets of their purges,” a professor at Kunar University informed us. One radical recommendation for modification in the curriculum involves the treatment of historical relics such as statues of Bamiyan Buddhas and mythological figures. The history professor added: “The Taliban believes that the figures such as Zoroaster, Rostam, Kushans and Sekander, etc. are godless worshippers of fire.” Similarly, the Bamiyan Buddhas are relics of Buddhism and their inclusion in the curriculum promotes Buddhism (Bahesh, 2022). According to the Taliban, these statues are ‘not history but shame’ and teachers must teach the drawbacks of idolatry to their students.

## 5. Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to analyze the policies of the Taliban after its takeover of Kabul in 2021 to show how the militia is committing an epistemicide of Afghan and Pashtun national and cultural symbols. For this purpose, we examined how the Taliban silenced, devalued and consequently moved to annihilate Afghanistan's cultural memory and knowledge system. This was reflected in their policy decisions regarding the national symbols and centuries-old cultural and institutional practices of the people of Afghanistan. This article provides an account of what these policies convey and the silenced texts, histories and narratives.

Throughout history, colonial powers have implemented epistemicide as a policy, driven by their hegemonic status and association with modern structures such as technology and industry. These colonialists presented their science as the ultimate authority and rationality, rendering local knowledge systems outdated and unscientific. This approach stripped colonized communities of their history and identity as heirs to a vast repository of indigenous knowledge. As a result, they became disconnected from their past and historical context.

Historically, epistemicide is being associated with Western colonial powers, but we have made an argument in this paper that the Taliban, by superimposing an alien epistemic system that discredits Afghan culture, cultural and national symbols, has become an internal colonial master colonizing its own people through epistemicide. In the Taliban's epistemic system, their interpretation of Islam is the totalizing entity that negates all things of the Afghan that predate their rise to power. The Afghan society is faced with internal colonization which refuses that knowledge production is a social practice that takes into cognizance the history and culture of Afghan people among other factors.

### **Declaration of conflict of interest**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest(s) with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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### **Publisher's Note**

IDEA PUBLISHERS (IDEA Publishers Group) stands neutral with regard to the jurisdictional claims in the published maps and the institutional affiliations.

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**Notes:**

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<sup>1</sup> Nawroz is the Persian new year celebrated worldwide by various ethnicities for more than 3000 years.

<sup>2</sup> Buzkashi is Afghanistan's national sport. *Buz* (goat) *Kashi* (dragging), literally goat pulling, has been played in Afghanistan and Central Asia for centuries with each country having its own variations.

<sup>3</sup> Because their knowledge practices were said to be not controlled by men

<sup>4</sup> *Nakba* means "catastrophe" inflicted on Palestinians during the establishment of Israel in 1947 and 1948 and which resulted in death of around 1434 Palestinians, including 400 children and displacement of more than 700,000 Palestinians.

<sup>5</sup> The ancient name of the regions encompassing today's Afghanistan and the east of Iran was called Khorasan.

<sup>6</sup> Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Balochis, Turkmens, Nooristanis, Pamiris, Arabs, Gujars, Brahuis, Qizilbash, Aimaq and Pashai

<sup>7</sup> We defend it with our blood, this is the home of the martyrs!

This is the home of the brave, this is the home of the brave!

All your stones and bushes look like rubies to us!

Blood is spilled upon them; they are all red like roses!

Do you think it can be conquered? It is the home of the lions!

This is the home of the brave; this is the home of the brave!

<sup>8</sup> The film tells the story of Shahla, a young girl from Paghman who eagerly awaits the national Independence Day celebrations in the capital city of Kabul. Throughout the day, she watches various events, including concerts by famous Afghan musicians, national sports displays, military parades, and traditional dances. The movie interweaves actual footage of the 1963 independence celebrations, which were watched by King Zahir Shah, with Shahla's experiences in Kabul. In the final scene, Shahla's mother remarks that her daughter has "become a grown woman" after the day's events. The film offers a contrast between the perspectives of the monarch and the Subject, represented by Shahla, highlighting the spirit and culture of Afghanistan.

<sup>9</sup> The rule book or the code of conduct that directs Taliban on the matters of war and their dealing with the common people, opposition, prisoners, etc. It is also an aspirational document projecting an image of rule-bound Islamic jihad and a quasi-state (Clark, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> *Ghazwa* in Arabic implies a war that is guided by faith rather than territorial or materialistic gains. In Islamic history, *Ghazwa* refers to battles of the early years of Islam in which Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) participated personally, regardless of the fact that he had a military encounter with them or not.

<sup>11</sup> In this department, students would learn music, calligraphy, song composition and art, etc.