

From memories to melodies

Regional music on brink of oblivion

ANALYSIS

Iran's regional music, stretching from north to south and east to west, stands as one of the oldest and most indigenous expressions of the country's auditory culture. Rooted in the climates, languages, rituals, and lifestyles of local communities, it has been passed down orally through generations, shaping the cultural identity of diverse societies over centuries.

Unlike urban or courtly musical forms, Iran's regional music has rarely been written down or recorded, surviving instead through oral tradition within local communities. Yet today, amid sweeping social changes, mass migration, globalization, media homogenization, and neglect by cultural institutions, this musical heritage teeters on the brink of oblivion.

Contrary to popular belief, regional music is not merely an artistic format. It mirrors the life, struggles, joys, rituals, history, and myths of Iran's ethnic groups — from Azeris to Kurds, Gilaks to Turkmens, Bakhtiari to Lors, and the people of Sistan and Baluchestan and southern Iran. Each region, with its distinct language and dialect, holds on to its music through distinctive patterns of storytelling and performance as an essential part of its collective identity. In Kurdish regions, music is deeply tied to mystical and religious rites. In northern Iran, melodies are often bound up with farming and nature. In Khorasan, ballads carry the weight of epic tales, while southern Iran's seafaring music echoes journeys, migration, and labor. The functions of regional music are vast: ritualistic and ceremonial, used in weddings, funerals, rain-invoking prayers, and healing rituals; narrative and historical, employed to hand down stories, epics, and myths; therapeutic and mystical, from Khorasani devotional chants to Gvati healing rites in the southeast; and aesthetic and social, livening up evening gatherings, teamwork, and communal celebrations.

Yet despite this diversity, common threads run through these traditions: the oral transmission of musical knowledge, heavy reliance on local socio-cultural environments, a lack of formal documentation, and the overwhelming threat of mainstream urban commercial music.

Why are ancient voices falling silent?

Despite its rich background and irreplaceable role in preserving Iran's cultural identity, regional music has come up against serious challenges in recent decades, threatening not only its survival but also eroding cultural memory and diversity. Key threats include:

1. Generational gap and broken transmission chains: For centuries, regional music was handed down through master-apprentice oral traditions. But in today's fast-paced, digitally hyped-up world, younger generations show little interest or opportunity to take up this music. Many elderly musicians have passed away without training successors, taking with them vast musical knowledge and oral tradition.

2. Exclusion from formal education: Iran's education system, from schools to universities, has given short shrift to regional music, focusing instead on classical Persian or Western music. Even textbooks leave no room for local instruments or melodies. Without a formal curriculum to record and transmit regional music and structured documentation, these traditions survive only in the memories of a few, edging closer to extinction.

3. Commercialization and shift in



function: Some regional music has been watered down for commercial entertainment — festival performances and urban concerts often stray far from their authentic forms, offering sanitized, lifeless versions. This superficial, uncritical use of folk traditions does more harm than good, distorting and even ridiculing indigenous styles.

4. Policy gaps and media neglect: Despite cultural rhetoric in support of the arts, no clear policies prop up and promote regional music. Funding for research, production, or documentation is scarce, and key institutions like national media, the Ministry of Culture, and the House of Music fall short in sustained support. Official media pay little attention to local artists or critical analysis, missing a key platform for revival.

5. When voices die, memories fade: Beyond aesthetics, the erosion of regional music spells a threat to the lived culture of Iran's ethnic groups. These melodies carry unwritten stories of love, war, migration, and ritual. Their disappearance wipes out a piece of historical memory and cultural diversity.

6. Language and cultural erosion: Many regional pieces are performed in endangered languages and dialects. When this music falls silent, these languages and dialects also lose a living channel of survival and are more quickly marginalized.

7. Weakened local identity and cultural homogenization: Music is a pillar of collective identity. Losing it chips away at communities' selfhood, accelerating cultural homogenization, and dulls the bonds linking ethnic groups to their roots.

8. Collapse of traditional cultural networks: Regional music once existed within a web of people, rituals, and places — from communal singing

to healing ceremonies, from farming festivals to village gatherings. As these networks fall apart, it's not just the sounds that vanish but also human connections, shared narratives, and forms of cultural participation. It must be said that the disappearance of Iran's regional music is not merely the loss of instruments or voices, but a sign of a far broader trend in which a land's historical and cultural memory is slowly slipping away. While countering this decline is no easy task, it is certainly possible — provided that media, cultural institutions, educators, and policymakers join forces.

The decline of Iran's regional music signals not just silenced instruments but the broader unraveling of a land's historical and cultural memory. While reversing this trend is no easy feat, it is possible — if and only if media, cultural institutions, educators, and policymakers step up and join forces.

In light of these challenges, an interview was conducted by IRNA with Foad Tohidi, a regional music scholar and secretary of Iran's 17th Regional Music Festival, to discuss threats to this cultural treasure. The important parts of the text follow.

Diagnosing wounds of Iran's regional music

According to Tohidi, regional music stems from the customs, climate, and culture of each area, making it unique to its own geography. The diversity of melodies mirrors the cultural, linguistic, religious, and environmental differences across the country.

"We are witnessing a trend where life in various parts of Iran is being streamlined," he says. "Villages have drawn closer to cities, and similar amenities have become widely available. Local



↑ Foad Tohidi

words, languages, and dialects have been edged out by urban and official vocabulary. Traditional clothing and customs have also fallen by the wayside. This has watered down the distinctive features of each region and pushed people toward mainstream music. Moreover, the rise of new arrangements for regional music ensembles has stripped away the authenticity of traditional instrumentation. Incongruous fusions and the introduction of instruments from other Iranian regions or even foreign instruments have only added fuel to the fire. The media, especially social networks, play a major role in these changes. Sadly, the information picked up from the internet has fanned the flames of urban lifestyles and blurred the unique identities of local communities."

Tohidi also believes that "cracking down on" these trends is no easy task. "The only effective solution is to raise awareness and shed light on the value of regional music. Unfortunately, there are times when cultural heritage is overlooked, and anything coming from the city is taken for granted as superior."

He takes issue with the role of the media, especially national radio and television in recent decades, stating: "These outlets could have put out specialized programs to introduce the instruments, styles, and features of regional music, driving home the value of this treasure for the public. Sadly, the opposite approach has been taken up, and regional music has been pushed to the sidelines. Nowadays, we are seeing regional music morph into pop and fusion genres in many areas."

Tohidi, calling attention to the damage caused by amateur and ill-informed research, explains: "Unfortunately, some people pass themselves off as researchers, head out to different regions, and roll out misguided models that chip away at the authenticity of regional music. By forcing musical terminology and popularizing non-native techniques and behaviors, they have steered regional music toward a bland, festival-oriented style. What is needed is the training of knowledgeable, specialized researchers. The first commitment of a researcher should be impartiality and non-interference in the musical customs of a region. Sadly, there isn't even a single dedicated venue for regional music anywhere in Iran. The absence of a space for exchanging views, tackling problems, and holding research sessions speaks volumes about the neglect of this cultural asset."

How can priceless musical heritage be preserved?

He also paints a bleak picture of the state of regional music festivals, saying: "In the past, artists threw themselves into these events with passion, but over time, we have seen a shift in attitudes and the rise of unreasonable expectations. Some artists treat the festival as their personal property and demand participation and payment through threats, while some of the true masters of regional music, owing to their hum-

Two musicians perform an Iranian regional tune live at a concert.
● IRNA

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Two musicians play the Iranian woodwind instrument Ney (L) and the percussion instrument Tonbak.
● SHAHROUZ ESMAEILI/TASTEIRAN