Global Campus of Human Rights

SOUNDS OF JUSTICE PODCAST

Episode 4

Instruments of Abuse: Weaponizing music in human rights violations

MANSOOR ADAYFI, MANFRED NOWAK and RACHEL HARRIS

In conversation with IGNACIO SAIZ

Ignacio Saiz: Hello and welcome to Sounds of Justice, a podcast on music and human rights brought to you by the Global Campus of Human Rights. I'm your host, Ignacio Saiz. In previous episodes, we've been exploring music as one of the most powerful expressions of human dignity and creativity. In this episode, we turn our attention to a disturbing, yet largely under-acknowledged phenomenon, the use of music as an instrument of abuse and as a means of depriving people of their dignity, identity and sense of self.

The weaponization of music is as old as humanity. Throughout history, armies have used militaristic music to rally the troops, instill fear and project authority over vanquished populations. Colonizing powers have used music as a means of forced cultural assimilation of indigenous or minority populations, as we'll hear later in the program.

A notorious context in recent times has been the so called 'War on Terror' waged by the US and its allies in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, where deliberate and constant exposure to loud music and distressing sounds became a psychological weapon deployed in detention centers and so called 'black sites' to disorient, degrade and punish detainees. These inhumane practices, euphemistically described by the CIA as 'enhanced interrogation' were categorized by human rights bodies as torture. Perhaps surprisingly, music also played another role in these settings. And as we'll hear, for detainees music could become a source of resistance, memory and even dignity.

Joining me today are two extraordinary guests: Mansoor Adayfi, a Yemeni national who spent 14 years in Guantanamo Bay and has spoken powerfully about the use of music torture during his detention and is now Guantanamo Project Coordinator of CAGE International. And Manfred Nowak, Secretary General of the Global Campus of Human Rights and former UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, who was among the first international figures to document and denounce these practices.

Welcome Mansoor. Welcome Manfred.

Ignacio Saiz: Manfred, why don't you say two words of introduction about yourself.

Manfred Nowak: I had six years as UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, starting in October 2004. This was the high time already of Guantanamo Bay being a place that was outside any kind of legal protection, neither by the US Constitution nor by international law. And we immediately started five

of these special rapporteurs/working groups of the United Nations Human Rights Council to investigate what happened in Guantanamo Bay. We were finally invited, after long, long discussions, by the US government, to visit Guantanamo Bay, but under very restrictive conditions. But we interviewed quite a number of former Guantanamo Bay detainees that were released and later we also did a joint report on the use of secret detention in the fight against terrorism. That is not only the US. We identified 66 states that use secret detention. But of course, most of them were somehow related to the CIA detention facilities, the black sites, detention by proxy, etc. So we again interviewed quite many people who have been in these black sites and got a lot of evidence that was strongly opposed originally by the United States, in particular, the Bush administration, but later turned out to be very accurate.

Ignacio Saiz: Thank you, Manfred. Mansoor, you've described how music was used against you during your years in Guantanamo. Would you mind taking us back to that time, describing what you experienced, what kind of music was used, how it was played?

Mansoor Adayfi: First of all, let me introduce myself. Salaam alaikum. I'm Mansoor Adayfi, former Guantanamo prisoner today before we start...let me sing for you. So [*Sings in Arabic*] Basically, the song says, 'Welcome, welcome by the one who come, and more, welcome by the one who come.' It's simple words. So, we are going to talk more history about that song later.

Answering your questions about the misuse and abuse of music, I was in prison in one of the CIA black sites in Afghanistan and the part of the music, how it used - you know, it's not just music - music, noises, woman screaming, baby crying. Sometime when they bring a screen and they actually hold your eyes, you look the flashing scenes while listening to this kind of people crying, screaming, or that loud music. It keeps flashing over and over and over again.

You know, I came from a tribal society, from Yemen. I never, ever listened to music in English. Mostly it's Yemeni tradition music where I come from. And music, it's one of the strongest expression of feelings, communications. In our culture, the music came to reflect what the people, the tribe, the person stand for. It is kind of part of our identity and so on.

When it come to the black site, they start playing this crazy loud music, and I had no idea what they were saying, just so loud, repetitive over and over and over again, you know, it's non-stop. And I could remember those heavy metal later on in Guantanamo, when I started telling the people about, the brothers and other detainees or prisoners, about what the words, you know, which is 'let the body hit the floor'... like you know the F word ....die mother F word, you know, the squeezing doors over and over. You can say it goes to inside your head. The worst was when they played some kind of music attached to people being tortured, horror, people dismember all kind of stuff, and they're like, you cannot close your eyes. You cannot. You can, like, they just force you to watch, like.

Ignacio Saiz: Mansour, what do you think the purpose of using music in that way was?

Mansoor Adayfi: Basically, music was used as a tool of war, a tool of torture and abuse and dehumanization. I met some other prisoners who actually developed mental and psychological problems, even until now, I have damaged nerve. So physically it has and mentally, it has a lot of impact, because we listen to it for years and years and years. So other prisoners, I, when I talk to them, they don't want to listen or hear any music at all, like, okay, we hate music. I don't want to listen any kind of music whatsoever.

Ignacio Saiz: So at risk of triggering you by playing an extract of the kinds of music that was played in Guantanamo, for the purposes of our listeners, we are going to play just a few seconds of the piece that you referred to: "Bodies" by Drowning Pool.

[Drowning Pool, Bodies]

Ignacio Saiz: Manfred, let me come back to you. You talked about the work that you did investigating this kind of abuse, not just in Guantanamo, but in other black sites. Can you help us put this in context and tell us a little more about what your investigations uncovered - firstly, about how and why music was being used in this way, but also maybe put it in a historical context?

Manfred Nowak: One of the worst stories that I was told is from the so called 'Prison of Darkness' in Kabul, and it's very much what Mansoor was saying. People were kept in solitary confinement, handcuffed and shackled. This was totally dark. The person who told me that from Gambia, he said: 'you couldn't even see where the wall is', so you were just trying with your shackles going a little bit and then you are bumping against the wall. And then you have 24 hours this kind of combination: screams, very, very strange noises that make you frightened. And then this kind of music, all kind, heavy metal, but also Bruce Springsteen or whatever, but it is very, very loud. And the purpose was simply to destroy your kind of resistance. And of course, afterwards, you were interrogated. So it's preparing you for an interrogation when you, in principle, are already broken down, and then you might tell them things that you would otherwise not tell them, or simply in order that they stop this kind of treatment, you confess things or you tell them the names of others and whatever.

So, it was a classical form of torture to break your will and your resistance down in order to extract information, extract confession, etc. And that is not new. We have seen, for instance, the British were using in the early 1970s against IRA-accused people in Northern Ireland, these five so called combined interrogation techniques: standing against the wall for a long period of time, being handcuffed, being hooded, and also deprived of water and something to eat, and then subjected to loud noises. This combination was established by the European Commission of Human Rights at that time to be amounting to torture. If you go back to the Greek military dictatorship between 1967 and 74 they also used this type of music torture. So it's nothing new.

Ignacio Saiz: Thank you, Manfred. Let me, let me ask both of you. Both of you have campaigned or have done work to denounce these abuses and to push for justice. What challenges have you had to confront to have these abuses recognized as torture?

Manfred Nowak: Our Guantanamo Bay report, which was finished in February 2006 and we were only allowed to actually present it to the Human Rights Council in June, and that was already very difficult because of strong Bush administration, kind of all they tried everything to prevent us from publishing this, because we also clearly said Guantanamo Bay, as such, is violating international law and needs to be closed immediately - violating many different rights, the right to personal liberty, the right to independence of justice, right to freedom of religion, the right to health, but also prohibition of torture. The Bush administration said everything that we were writing is wrong, simply wrong. They didn't even start to engage in some kind of discussions. It was only President Obama who, at his first day, said: 'Okay, I will close down the camp within one year'. As we all know, he didn't manage, and there are still around 30 persons today in Guantanamo Bay, but at least he reduced significantly the number of people being there. And I helped certain Guantanamo detainees to reintegrate into society in Bosnia, for instance, because I was very much involved in these Bosnian citizens of Algerian origin, who were actually already in 2001 abducted and then sent to Guantanamo Bay. And as soon as you are labelled as a Guantanamo Bay detainee, it's very, very difficult, even in a Muslim country like

Bosnia Herzegovina, to be reintegrated, because everybody says, but these might be very, very dangerous people, although they had nothing to do with 9/11. With the second report, they really tried to, although it was already under the Obama administration, but many other states also said that it should not be published at all. So it was again very, very difficult to have it published as an official UN document, so it was really downplayed. And even the US Senate Intelligence Committee said at that time, we don't need the United Nations to do that, we do it ourselves. And at the end, it turned out that much later, they investigated exactly the same and they came to the same conclusions, although most of the report was blacked out, so it's only a short summary.

Ignacio Saiz: Thanks, Manfred. Mansoor, what about you? What challenges have you experienced, you and your organization experienced, in demanding justice and reparation for these abuses?

Mansoor Adayfi: Well, you know, when it comes to the torture in general, United States hasn't acknowledged that torture, although you know, when you look at the way the war of words, the way they named the torture as 'enhanced integration technique' and the language itself was manipulated and was weaponized against victims. So, however, in 2010 I think or 2009, Obama said: 'we tortured some folks'. That's it. Although, when you look at the Senate Intelligence Committee report they acknowledge, there was a lot...the CIA was documenting everything... they were actually video recording everything.

So they do not acknowledge the torture, the silence from the international community to condemn the torture, the abuses and so on. But moreover, the stigma we live after Guantanamo, being surveilled, being deprived to have a normal life. So I mean, we have been doing like CAGE International, actually, I work with them as Guantanamo Project coordinator, trying to document these cases, trying to spread the world's awareness, trying to educate people, demand accountability and justice. For the last 23 years, Guantanamo is still open, and we haven't seen a single case of accountability. We haven't seen any acknowledgement or apology, absolutely nothing.

Ignacio Saiz: Thank you both. In our final minutes together, I want to ask you about what, certainly for me speaking to you Mansoor, was the most moving and heartening aspect of this whole situation. Despite the brutality of the environment that you've described, you also have spoken about how detainees used music and used song as a form of resilience, as a form of resistance and even solidarity between prisoners. Can you say a little more about that? What did it mean to you as prisoners to reclaim music and voice in that way?

Mansoor Adayfi: So, the music was used by the government to dehumanize you, to strip you of your identity, to control you, to break you. It was only natural that we started resisting. We start, you know, trying to, you know, stick to our humanity, to who we are. First of all, it was, you know... as Muslims, we pray five times a day, three of these prayers, we need to recite the Holy Quran like in loud voice. It's like singing [*sings*: Allah wa akbar, allah..]Then, later on, we in Guantanamo, we start singing, using that as a way to survive, a way to defy, a way to resist. So, the song I sang at the beginning when they would bring a new group, we would sing for them [*sings in Arabic*]. We would sing in a collectively 200, 300 people in one voice [*sings].* So when the brothers, imagine you are being hooded, tapped, cuffed, gagged, you know, like beaten, dragged and someone's singing, and you recognize those songs. It was a way to communicate with them, to tell them, everything is okay, you will be okay, although it's not, it just give them some kind of like strength and support.

I sent you one of the songs that were sung at Guantanamo by Faiz Al-Kandari, he's a former Guantanamo prisoner. But also that song we used to sing when someone arrived at Guantanamo or when, also when someone leaves Guantanamo or taken to another block or camp, we would sing

collectively [Sings: *Ruh, ruh, ma'a salaama. Allah yazeedak anwa salaama*] which means: 'Go, go with peace. May Allah grant you more peace and safety'. And this for me is special song, special words.

[AUDIO: recreation of Guantanamo detainees singing Ruh Ruh Ma'a Salaama, from Letters from Guantanamo audiobook]

We fight their abuse of music by using music as a way of resisting survival, but also identity. Singing is a beautiful way of expressing yourself to connect your humanity to your memory, to your life and so on.

Ignacio Saiz: You mentioned the song by Faiz Al Kandari. Can you introduce it for us, Mansoor?

Mansoor Adayfi: Well, Faiz Al Kandari is a former Guantanamo prisoner, and he's a poet, he's a singer, and he's also scholar, and he was targeted because he always would give classes, educating to the prisoners and so on. When you listen to the tone, it's kind of sad, because it was, it was composed at Guantanamo. But also, it shows the strength and resilience and resistance at the same time.

[MUSIC: Faiz Al Kandari, Fi Ridak (Song from Guantanamo)]

Ignacio Saiz: Beautiful. Mansoor Adayfi, Manfred Nowak, thank you so much to both of you for guiding us around this dark side of the issue of music and human rights and the use and misuse of music, and for speaking so powerfully to the power of music as a means of resilience to oppression and a way, as you say Mansoor, of restoring and reconnecting us to our humanity. Thank you both very much.

Both: Thank you. Thank you, It was a pleasure.

[MUSIC: Faiz Al Kandari, Fi Ridak (Song from Guantanamo) continued]

[MUSIC: Chopstick Brothers, Little Apple]

Ignacio Saiz: Welcome once again to the Sounds of Justice podcast. I'm your host, Ignacio Saiz.

We have been hearing about the use and abuse of music to commit human rights violations in the context of the war on terror which followed the 9/11 attacks in the US. What's perhaps less known is that there were other so-called wars on terror in which music has equally been weaponized against vulnerable populations. To help us explore those other contexts, my next guest is Rachel Harris, Professor of Ethnomusicology at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London. Her research has focused on music, expressive culture, religion and state policies in China's Muslim borderlands, where she's conducted extensive field work. Welcome Rachel.

Rachel Harris: Thank you.

Ignacio Saiz: Rachel, help us understand what we've just listened to, this extraordinary piece of music that has introduced this segment.

Rachel Harris: So that was a song called Little Apple (Xiǎo Pingguǒ in Chinese). And that was a massively popular song which came out in 2014 and it was performed by The Chopstick Brothers. And it was one of those viral hits that got big, really, because of the dance moves that went along with it. So, everyone across the whole of China was really dancing to Little Apple in 2014/15. So, I really got interested in this song when I was working on Islam, on religious practice in the Xinjiang Uyghur region, which is in northwest China. The reason for Little Apple being all over the place in the Uyghur region was because it was being organized, organized by local governments, organized by local cultural bureaus.

This was really an early period of the crackdown on what they called religious extremism amongst the Uyghurs, who are the indigenous Muslim inhabitants of this region. You've probably heard more about the camps, the big system of mass internment camps that rose in 2017 but in this earlier period, in 2015 the campaigns were really quite a lot more about singing and dancing. They had a more kind of glossy and cheerful kind of aspect to them. And this song, this Little Apple, was actually part of the campaign. So, these compulsory dance sessions were taking place outside police stations. There were big kind of public displays of dancing. One of the most famous ones, or infamous ones, was a mass display of dancing imam, so imam are the local religious clerics, imagine these respected religious figures all doing these kind of silly pop dances.

Ignacio Saiz: That must have been seen as highly offensive.

Rachel Harris: Oh, indeed. So within the region at that time, you know, there was no space for any kind of dissenting voices about these kind of campaigns. But some of the footage of it got out to Turkey. So there was a huge scandal in Turkey, but no dissent within the Uyghur region.

Ignacio Saiz: You've described this as part of the process of 'sonic territorialization'. And how that territorialization was part of the Chinese state's campaign to counter what they described as Islamic extremism. Can you help us unpack that term? What do you mean by 'sonic territorialization'?

Rachel Harris: Fundamentally, my argument was that these campaigns were not about any kind of extremist threat. It was really a campaign which was about consolidating Chinese territory. So, when the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region today is quite a significant chunk of Chinese territory, and it is mainly populated by minority peoples, they were called, and by Muslims. And that region has a very complicated relationship with China. So it's quite like Tibet. Really since the end of the Cultural Revolution, I would say, the region then has been undergoing this religious revival. So, Uyghurs have been returning to more kind of pious lifestyles, and the soundscape then has been more filled with the sounds of the call to prayer, the sounds of Quranic recitation. It's been visible in the way that people dress. So more women adopting like the veil, the headscarf, more men growing beards and that, you know. So, all of this was really felt by the local authorities, I would say, to be pulling the region away from China, to be just reorienting it towards the wider Islamic world. I really think that that kind of broad shift in sensibility was the main target of these campaigns, even though they were dressed as anti-extremism. By reorienting Uyghurs into a Chinese cultural sphere they were consolidating their control over this territory. So the work of territorialization.

The soundscape was also a battleground, if you like, for this kind of reorienting. Little Apple was one side of this, because it was such a popular song across China. Uyghurs were mainly well listening to the Quran or they were listening to religious pop songs like *nasheed* from Turkey, they were definitely not listening to things like Little Apple, so that, I think, was one reason for really trying to reinsert

things like that back into the Uyghur soundscape. But the other kind of music that they used very extensively were the revolutionary songs.

Ignacio Saiz: It sounds like the soundscape was a battleground in a very pervasive way. There were many, many different sites where that battle was played out. But can you tell us just more in terms of daily life, what other sites were sites where there was, for example, compulsory singing of these revolutionary songs, or other attempts at, like, imposing or erasing cultural identity?

Rachel Harris: Working with my Uyghur partner, we found a lot of reports from local governments about compulsory singing and dancing sessions. And quite often these would take place, very conveniently for the authorities, right outside the police station. And so like the local villagers, would just be called up and told to dance. And quite often these sessions would happen on a Friday lunchtime, so right at the time of the main public prayers should be happening. And so that was that real sense of ok, Muslim practice, no, dancing to revolutionary songs, yes.

Ignacio Saiz: Well, let's listen to one of these compulsory singing and dancing sessions. I believe we're going to hear Uyghur detainees singing a very well-known revolutionary song, 'Without the Chinese CP Communist Party, there would be no new China'.

Rachel Harris: So these kinds of songs that we call revolutionary songs, are songs that were composed from the 1940s onwards. There's been a lot of research over the years about the uses of music in the Cultural Revolution, music as propaganda, but also, much more powerfully, I think, the use of music to really inculcate in the Chinese people new sensibilities, new revolutionary sensibilities and how all that incessant sort of singing of revolutionary songs and taking part in revolutionary plays really felt like they were becoming a new person.

Of course, that's quite a brutal process in many ways. You know, it might sound like fun, all this kind of singing and dancing about the Communist Party. And of course, these are very cheery and upbeat kind of songs. But actually, you know, there's a huge amount of coercion and brutality. So, we find these revolutionary songs at play, actually, within the internment camps where huge numbers of people were sent. I mean, conservatively, we can talk about hundreds of thousands of people, and they were sent for very minor things, like, women were wearing hijab, okay they needed re-education in the camps, men were wearing beards, okay, off they went. Or they were caught doing their prayers, or they had Quranic recitation on their phones. And in the camps they had this daily regime where they would study the writings of Xi Jinping, and they would do a lot of singing. And so one of the things they had to sing very repeatedly was this song, Mayo Gung Chang Dang Jo Meo Shin Jong Guo: Without the Communist Party, there will be no new China. Very famous song, and they were expected to sing this before they got their food. And if they didn't sing enthusiastically enough, then they wouldn't be fed.

[AUDIO: Uyghur detainees singing 'Without the Chinese CP there would be no new China']

Ignacio Saiz: Rachel, you've drawn parallels in your work between the use of music in the so-called People's War on Terror and the more widely known War on Terror waged by the US and its allies in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. So we were just speaking earlier with Mansoor Adayfi, who was detained for 14 years in Guantanamo. And he described how very loud, incessant, very nationalistic music was used to kind of crush the detainees' sense of self. And I'm struck by the resonance with how you describe the impact and the intention behind the use of music here. So, to what extent do you see similarities, or do you see differences in the way music was abused and weaponized in each of these contexts?

Rachel Harris: I think it's extremely important to understand the transnational flows of Islamophobia, really. I think it's very important that we understand how these models of repression and these ideologies of, you know, hierarchy and difference spread around the world. We should definitely not see the Chinese repression of its own Muslim minorities in isolation. I think these are part of wider patterns.

So clearly, the US War on Terror enabled China to develop its own narrative of terrorism by scooping up these huge numbers of people and labeling them as terror... terrorists, China was able to discipline them fundamentally, without too much kickback from the rest of the world.

So, in both of these contexts of detention, then, music, I think, was being used as a form of torture. Both cases were really designed, I think, to create this kind of crisis of self, to break down identities. And perhaps the Chinese context is even more invasive, in a way, because people you know, they're being required to give voice to these very ideological songs.

Ignacio Saiz: Yeah, they're literally being forced to embody those values that are being imposed on them at the expense of their own cultural identity. Finally, Rachel, how has the situation evolved since you carried out this research, and I'm curious to know whether music has played any role in the quest for justice for these abuses or in healing from trauma. How is music being used now to preserve the fabric of Uyghur culture, whether it's in the province or in the diaspora?

Rachel Harris: So, China announced that it had closed down most of the internment camps in 2022 and that is true. Nonetheless, a lot of the detainees in those camps were moved into prison. So, the situation of repression in this region is far from over. And over the past few years, I guess, what we've seen is an awful lot of Uyghur traditional music being rolled out again to reassure the world that, you know, everything's great. There's been a very strong effort to normalize what the outside world is seeing.

But subsequently, I got involved with some of the Uyghur diaspora communities and started working with them on their projects which were really about sustaining culture, sustaining language and identity outside of the Uyghur homeland. So, one really nice project that I was working with was in Kazakhstan. And *meshrep*, then is a Uyghur term, which means a gathering, a party, fundamentally, and at these parties, people eat food, they listen to music, they play music, they dance, they do a lot of joking. These *meshrep* are really about forging stronger communities. It's about social cohesion. It's about finding a space for activism and fundraising, and very much about sustaining the language and culture. So yeah, it would be great just to play a bit of one of those parties I went to, because that is cheering.

Ignacio Saiz: Absolutely. Let's do that. Let's end the segment with Ösek Sadasi which is being performed, by the Nightingales of Yerkent.

[MUSIC: The Nightingales of Yerkent, Ösek Sadasi]

Ignacio Saiz: Rachel, thank you so much for illuminating this very dark terrain of the use of music as a tool of cultural erasure, as a form of torture but also for showing us how music can be a powerful instrument of cultural healing, recovery and affirmation. Thank you very much, Rachel.

Rachel Harris: Thank you for having me.

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Ignacio Saiz: In this episode of Sounds of Justice we heard the song Bodies by the US nu-metal group, Drowning Pool, and the prison chant, Ruh Ruh Ma'salaama, as sung by detainees in Guantanamo, recreated for the Audiobook Letters from Guantanamo by Mansoor Adayfi and Antonio Aiello, as well as a composition by Faiz Al Kandari, a former Guantanamo detainee from Kuwait.

In the second part of the program, on the sonic territorialization of the Uyghur region in China, we listened to Little Apple by The Chopstick Brothers, a recording of Uyghur detainees singing Without the Communist Party there would be no China, and the Uyghur group The Nightingales of Yerkent, performing the song Ösek Sadasi at a meshrep in Kazakhstan.

Our signature tune is from the song Yehlisan'umoya Ma-Afrika by the South African singer, Busi Mhlongo. You can find other episodes of Sounds of Justice where you get your podcasts and on the website of the Global Campus of Human Rights.

I'm Ignacio Saiz. Thank you for listening!

RELEVANT LINKS:

CAGE International
Letters from Guantanamo Audiobook (Mansoor Adayfi and Antonio Aiello)
Ongoing UN work on Guantanamo and other human rights abuses linked to countering terrorism

Prof. Rachel Harris
Soundscapes of Uyghur Islam (Rachel Harris)
Sounding Islam in China