



In this photo a kite vendor shows his merchandise inside a warehouse in Shor Bazaar in the old quarters of Kabul. — AFP photos



Manizha Talash (left), the only female member of a group of breakdancers comprised of mostly Hazara boys, looks on as a fellow troupe member breaks a move in Kabul.



In this photo a bride wearing a traditional costume for her marriage poses for a picture at a beauty parlor in Kabul.

‘Talebanned’: From kite-running to breakdancing, Afghan pastimes again under threat

The Taliban outlawed dozens of seemingly innocuous activities and pastimes in Afghanistan during their 1996-2001 rule—including kite flying, TV soap operas, pigeon racing, fancy haircuts, and even playing music. These have made a comeback in the years since, but fears are growing they will be banned again if the hardline Islamists return to power. The insurgents have made enormous military and territorial gains since US troops began their final withdrawal in May, and their leaders say they want Afghanistan to return to being an Islamic emirate ruled by religious elders. AFP looks at some of the activities the Taliban banned, and the fears of those now taking part in them.

The musician

Sayed Mohammad makes a living as a professional musician playing the jupani, a traditional Central Asian stringed instrument he first picked up as a boy. He still remembers the evening two decades ago when the Taliban broke into a house where he and his friends were playing music and singing songs. According to the Taliban's strict interpretation of Islam, only the human voice should produce music—and only in praise of God.

"I was young, so I was beaten less than my friends," said Mohammad, now 40 and a resident of the former insurgent bastion of Kandahar. "I was still unable to stand for three days," he added. He was lucky, he said, describing how on another occasion the Taliban cut off the fingers of one of his friends for playing the jupani. When the insurgents were ousted, Mohammad celebrated by attending a concert. "When the music played, I felt a tremor passing through my body out of sheer joy," he said. "Joy that our country was free and that people were now free to start a new life."

Since then, many Afghans like Mohammad have become professional musicians and singers. "There is no pleasure in life if we live in fear," the father of eight told AFP. He is determined to pursue his passion—even if the Taliban return to power. "It's like an addiction. Even if they cut our fingers we will still play music."

The makeup artist

In a small shop in the Afghan capital Kabul, beautician Farida transforms a shy young Afghan woman into a radiant bride-to-be. Oversized false eyelashes are delicately glued on, followed by the application of a rich carmine-red lipstick. Next comes eyeshadow, before beige and



A beautician paints the nails of a Pashtun bride for her marriage at a beauty parlor in Kabul.

ochre blush is delicately brushed on. Despite its bustling popularity, Farida's beauty parlor is one of hundreds across the country that face an uncertain future. The Taliban severely restricted the movement and activities of women and girls during their rule, and banned beauty parlors from operating in public. "If they come back, we'll never have the freedom we have now," said 27-year-old Farida, who asked not to be further identified. "They don't want women working." Farida's shop is busiest on Thursday and Friday—the

adding she would love to move to Canada given a chance.

The kite-maker

In a bustling Kabul market shop, surrounded by hundreds of colorful kites of all sizes, Zelgai says he is determined not to give up the business his family has run for generations—and he has flown close to the wind before. The Taliban outlawed kite flying on the grounds it distracted young men from praying and other religious activities, but Zelgai and his family kept operating. "Of course, we did it in secret," the 59-year-old told AFP at his shop in the capital's Shor bazaar.

His colorful store has hundreds of fragile ready-made kites for sale, and he also takes orders for elaborate custom designs. And business has soared in the years since the Taliban were ousted. "This is freedom... we are able to showcase and sell our kites openly without any fear," Zelgai said. The much-loved national pastime earned a reputation abroad after Afghan author Khaled Hosseini's 2003 bestselling novel "The Kite Runner" was turned into a film. Today, when the wind is



A Pashtun bride wearing a traditional costume for her marriage is pictured inside a beauty parlour in Kabul.

weekend in Afghanistan, when hundreds gather for huge wedding ceremonies. Out of the sight of men, the women come to be pampered for a few hours.

Beauty comes at a price, however. At Farida's salon, one of Kabul's most popular, a full treatment package can cost up to \$300. "I think the Taliban will force us to leave when they come," Farida said,

right, thousands of kites can be seen fluttering in Afghanistan's clear blue skies. Some are engaged in fights, with the pilots trying to outwit each other with their flying skills and some using glass-encrusted twine to cut the strings of their opponents. "People would suffer if it is banned. Thousands of families survive on this,"



A general view of a beauty parlor in Kabul. Zelgai said.

The breakdancer

The day Manizha Talash took up breakdancing she knew she would become a target for the Taliban. Talash is the only female member of a group of mostly Hazara boys who practice breakdancing in Kabul—usually in secret. The 18-year-old has the support of her mother, who has several jobs to support the family after her husband went missing a few years ago.

But for Talash, who dreams of representing Afghanistan at the Olympics, the risks of continuing are multiple. Not only is she a girl taking part in a forbidden activity, she is also a member of the Hazara community, considered heretical by some Muslim radicals. "If the Taliban have not changed and they lock women at homes and trample their rights, then life would be meaningless for me and for millions of other women of Afghanistan," said Talash.

Despite the risks—the troupe was forced to switch practice venues after receiving death threats—she is determined to pursue her passion. There have been women pioneers in many fields in Afghanistan, and Talash now sees herself as one of them. "We had no women police officers before; now you see them everywhere," she said, dressed in a t-shirt, cap and black leggings—an outfit that would be anathema to the Taliban. "I took the risk of becoming a target. I have fear in my heart but I won't give up."

The shisha smoker

On the bank of a river flowing through the eastern city of Jalalabad, Mohammad Saleem and his friends gather every evening to smoke shisha, an ancient pastime enjoying something of a renaissance across the world. "Smoking shisha is very normal at the moment in Afghanistan,"

said Saleem, puffing the vapors of fruit-flavored tobacco from a bubbling hookah.

But the Taliban say it is an intoxicant—something prohibited by the Koran. Shisha cafes have popped up across the country since the fall of the Taliban, serving hot saffron tea to customers occupied with their pipes. Cafe owner Bakhtyar Ahmad believes the habit is a good way to keep youngsters off the streets—or from indulging in worse vices, such as drugs. "There is peace here. We serve shisha and we play music in the cafe," Ahmad said. "If the Taliban come back with their old ideas then they will stop us." Shisha smokers agree. "It will not be possible to go for a picnic or smoke shisha by the side of a river like now," Saleem said.

The barber

Business is brisk at Mohammad Ghaderi's salon in the western city of Herat, with young men lining up for a shave or fancy haircut that matches their favorite Bollywood or Hollywood actor. "Afghanistan has entered a new world," said Ghaderi, a men's hairstylist for nearly 10 years. "There are more hairdressers now, more young people taking to fashion... the government is not against it like the way the Taliban were." While men in rural areas tend to stick to Islamic styles—a shaved top lip, a beard longer than a man's fist-city slickers are a parade of the latest fashion. But Ghaderi and his customers fear their individualism will end if the Taliban return.

"We are afraid that if the Taliban enter the city and the bazaar, they might be the same as they were 20 years ago," he said. "Again women will be in burqa and young men would not be free to do what they want," added Sanaullah Amin, a regular customer. — AFP



Manizha Talash (center), the only female member of a group of breakdancers comprised of mostly Hazara boys, poses with two members of her troupe in Kabul.



In this photo a beautician (left) tends to a customer at a beauty parlor in Kabul.



Kite vendors wait for customers at a shop in Shor Bazaar in the old quarters of Kabul.



In this photo professional musician Sayed Mohammad (right) rehearses with his jupani, a traditional Central Asian stringed instrument, along with harmonium player Ghulam Mohammad at his music studio in Kandahar.



A kite vendor carries his merchandise inside a warehouse in Shor Bazaar in the old quarters of Kabul.



A kite vendor displays his merchandise for sale at a shop in Shor Bazaar in the old quarters of Kabul.



In this photo Manizha Talash, the only female member of a group of breakdancers comprised of mostly Hazara boys, practices a move in Kabul.