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 From the Los Angeles Times

UC Davis professor studies Bin Laden's pre-9/11 recordings

The audio library offers unprecedented insight into the evolution of the Al Qaeda leader.

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DAVIS, CALIF. — Heaped haphazardly into twin cardboard boxes, the hundreds of audiocassette tapes looked more like a baby boomer's teenage detritus than a historical link to Osama bin Laden.

Flagg Miller knew their value.

The tapes were the UC Davis Arabic scholar's portal into the early years of the Al Qaeda leader behind the Sept. 11 attacks who became the world's most wanted terrorist.

On the seventh anniversary of 9/11, Miller has pulled back the curtain on the more than 1,500 tapes retrieved after Bin Laden fled U.S. troops advancing on his residential compound in Afghanistan's Kandahar province.

They feature Bin Laden talking off the cuff at weddings, delivering cajoling recruitment pitches, extolling true believers and dishing up poetry.

Taken together, Miller says, the tapes show the evolution of history's most infamous terrorist -- his metamorphosis from the black sheep of a wealthy Saudi family to a "freedom fighter" during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s to his exile in Sudan and ultimately to becoming the leader of Al Qaeda.

Miller calls it the most complete audio library of Bin Laden's past.

Compared to the stiff, taped pronouncements the terrorist leader delivers these days from hiding, "it is all far less formal and official -- and in that way is very valuable," said Miller, an assistant religious studies professor.

The cassettes also launched a remarkable scholarly journey for Miller, 40.

He grew up in Kansas City, Kan., the son of a lawyer and a high-school French teacher. He spent a year as a foreign exchange student in Tunisia when he was 17, and went on to study Arabic at Dartmouth and later at Oxford and while getting his doctorate in cultural anthropology at the University of Michigan.

Miller found he had an uncanny ear for language -- which has come in handy with the tapes since he can listen to a recording in Arabic and speedily type out a translation in English. He also developed an expertise in Islam and its media, particularly the cultural proclivity toward recording life on audiocassette.

But these tapes took a slow and somewhat miraculous route to Miller's hands.

After Bin Laden fled his walled Kandahar compound in December 2001, locals looted the residence.

When they were done, all that was left were a few boxes brimming with audio and video tapes.

In the weeks that followed, CNN procured the tapes and aired the videos. But the cable network turned over the hundreds of audiocassettes to U.S. intelligence agents.

Then, after the FBI determined them free of "any smoking guns" that would indicate future security threats, the tapes found their way to the Williams Afghan Media Project at Williams College in Massachusetts.

Experts there called in Miller.

He flew east, bleary from insomnia born of scholarly anticipation. In a spare room on campus, he opened the shipping boxes to lay eyes on the tapes, still bearing the dust of Afghanistan.

Many were battered, in need of repair. He gently laid them out on tables, sorting and cataloging.

In the coming days, the lanky academician would fold himself into a chair for hours, hungry to listen and transcribe.

"It was daunting," he recalled.

And it would go on, in session after session, for another five years.

The collection included tapes from more than 200 speakers from a dozen countries. A few of them dated as far back as the late 1960s.

Identified on the labels, the speakers included Islamic scholars and some of the men who would become Al Qaeda's operational leaders. Miller waded through sermons, political speeches, lectures, telephone conversations, radio broadcasts, Islamic anthems, even recordings of live battles.

Bin Laden, in fact, is featured on just 20 of the tapes, a dozen of them never before published in any language.

Miller said they offer unprecedented insight into the wrangling going on among Bin Laden's allies and critics in the five years before 9/11. They also show his development from a relatively unpolished Muslim orator and jihad recruiter to a leader.

The earliest Bin Laden recordings are from the late 1980s, when he was fresh from battling the Soviets in Afghanistan. In sometimes gory detail, he recounted the battlefield death of a close comrade, but noted how at peace the man seemed near the end and how such bravery can be a lesson.

In each recording, "he remains very even-keeled, very measured," Miller said. "But he's a militant above all. This is what comes across. And he's a very good recruiter."

Even a poet. Bin Laden's poems are "embedded" into his speeches at times, offering sometimes macabre insights into battle and death, Miller said: "He coaches his audiences through their fears about dying in a violent way. He coaches them to consider such an end as noble and potentially beneficial to a larger purpose."

Much of the rhetoric is familiar Bin Laden, as the world now knows him.

He consistently targets the U.S. as the prime enemy, especially because of its support of Israel. He talks of economic imbalances, whether it is the wealth of the Saudi elite or the strength of the U.S. economy. He characterizes Muslims as victims of global persecution and promotes himself as a reformer who is setting Islam on a better path.

Miller's first research paper from the tapes will appear in the October issue of the journal *Language & Communication*. The tapes, meanwhile, have been moved to Yale University, where they are being cleaned and digitally rerecorded, a process that will take several years to complete.

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