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Balochi Oral Tradition

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What is Oral Tradition?

The oral tradition of the Baloch belongs to an ethnic group speaking a northwest Iranian language called Balochi and inhabiting Balochistan, a country now divided among Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan. It was until recently—and to a great extent in many parts of the country it remains even now—a living art. It is, however, an art that is losing ground rapidly to the written word and to modern means of communication and entertainment.

A few decades back oral tradition was present in a Baloch's life from cradle to grave. It was so diffused, authoritative, and highly esteemed that among some Baloch tribes a newborn baby boy was presented with the recital of several heroic epics—either three or seven—by an old man in place of the call of prayers, *azan* (the proclamation of faith among Muslims saying that Allah is the only God and Muhammad is his only prophet), as is usually done in many other Muslim communities. A special session of epic recitation would be arranged and male elders of the family would be invited, animal(s) would be sacrificed, and a male elder of the family or someone else from the family or tribe would recite these epics for three to seven nights (Badalkhan 1992:38, n. 39). This was the first lesson the newborn boy would receive from the elders of his family, who expected him to behave accordingly and to follow in the footsteps of past Baloch heroes who left their legacy in historical epics with heroic deeds that safeguarded true Baloch values (*balochiat*). After that, the baby was sung lullabies by his mother, sisters, and maidservants until he grew old enough to be circumcised, wear trousers, enter the ranks of men, and assume all the obligations and duties that a man of the tribe had to manage. From then on, he was expected to participate in tribal warfare and other affairs of the tribe and to involve himself in cycles of revenge as necessary. Before that age he was considered a child and there was no consequence to any of his actions.

A boy's circumcision ceremony was in itself a great moment for his parents and family members, and also an event of even greater importance for his tribe in that a new man was entering their ranks and strengthening the tribal body. In such festivities, the whole tribe participated and often it was the tribal chief who sponsored the whole ceremony and covered all of the expenses. Famous minstrels would be invited by well-off families and local female singers would perform, accompanied by other women. Among poor families only the local female singer, usually the wife of the village blacksmith (Badalkhan 2000-01:163-64), would sing along with women of the village and the neighbourhood; no circumcision or wedding ceremony went without singing and music lest it be considered an ill omen for the boy and his family.

Similar oral traditional performances accompanied other life-cycle activities of the Baloch. Weddings were one recurring site for such activities. In some parts of Balochistan, especially in the north until recently, mourning, mostly of men but also of women if they belonged to an important family, included sung elegies, in some places accompanied by drums if it was the funeral of a tribal chief. Although the birth of a girl was not celebrated except in those families with no child at all or in the upper-class families, a daughter's wedding was celebrated by her family with much singing and dancing, as well as animal sacrifices.

Oral tradition has been very important for the Baloch as an ethnolinguistic group. It served them as their history when there was no written history in their language. It was also the record of their cultural values, a mark of their identity, a guideline for the younger generation, and a check on their behavior and way of conduct. Oral tradition also "flavors" assemblies via tale-telling, the recital of poems, and the quoting of proverbs or excerpts from past poets; in this way various speech-acts are strengthened and opinions can be authenticated. There can be no dispute about the wisdom of the past. Reciting poems or inserting proverbs in discourse also demonstrates that the speaker is well versed in the Baloch traditions, serving as a kind of presentation card certifying the speaker as a true Baloch (*asli Baloch*).

While verse narratives (*sheyr*) and their composers (*shair*) certainly held a high place in Baloch society, other genres of verbal art did not occupy a lesser position in regard to daily life. For example, people with a talent for reciting proverbs in discussions always have a prominent place in men's gatherings. Similarly, proverbs are equally popular among women, and in some areas women quote more proverbs than their menfolk do. Riddle competition is also highly valued since it is considered to be an important test of a person's wittiness. When sitting or walking in a group, it is not

unusual for a person to observe something, put it in riddle form, and ask others to see whether they can guess the meaning.

Oral tradition has also served as a pastime during long winter nights. During this period people spent a considerable part of the night gathered at a chief's guesthouse or visiting neighbors or the village blacksmith to listen to tales and legends or to compete with each other in posing riddles. Each village has a blacksmith, who in addition to being a craftsman also plays music and tells tales on festive occasions. Although they belonged to the lower strata of Balochi society and had no or little social position in a traditionally hierarchical organization, blacksmiths' mastery of the verbal art always secured them a central place at public gatherings during leisure times or when someone was needed to entertain the assembly. They were in the service of the people, and people provided them with a livelihood by bestowing special gifts on festive occasions as well as at harvests.

To sum up, we can say without hesitation that Balochs have a very rich oral tradition that includes poems and songs to celebrate or commemorate many events. But although they boast one of the richest song genres in the region (see Badalkhan 1994:ch. 3), it remains the least studied so far.

The most interesting new directions in Balochi oral tradition studies

The first fieldwork on Balochi oral tradition stems from the nineteenth century, when the British came in contact with Baloch tribes and felt the need to study the local language to be able to communicate. British missionaries and administrators concentrated mainly on the collection of samples of Balochi oral poetry, but some also gathered folktales and other genres such as riddles, proverbs, and so forth. The most important collection was that done by Longworth Dames, chiefly on the Dera Ghazi Khan district of southwestern Punjab. His *Popular Poetry of the Baloches*, published in London in two volumes in 1907 (vol. 1 is the English translation of the Balochi texts given in vol. 2) was a landmark in the study of indigenous oral tradition and a great stimulus for Baloch men of letters during the second half of the twentieth century (see Badalkhan 1992). It was the only such work that contained an introductory note dealing with the sources, origin, and character of Balochi poetry, with material on classification, forms of verse, methods of singing, the antiquity of heroic poems, and so on; the second volume contains an account of the language of Balochi poetry. But after the publication of this important collection no work of any scale was carried out until the withdrawal of the British from the Indian subcontinent

and the emergence of Pakistan in the second half of the twentieth century. Balochistan, with its capital at Kalat, declared its independence and survived as a separate country until late March, 1948, when the Pakistan Army moved to Kalat and forced the ruler to sign a document of accession.

In 1949 Radio Pakistan's Karachi station began broadcasting in regional languages. The new 45-minute programs in Balochi were a development that encouraged the Baloch literate class to write in their own language and to collect material from the rich oral tradition of their people. But such collections resulted only in sporadic publications of a poem here and there in a Balochi journal; since the language was not taught in schools and had no official sponsorship, attempts to publish in Balochi were viewed with suspicion by the central government. Indeed, Balochi publications were severely limited and came under constant censorship. As a result, the oral tradition is still largely unrecorded, and Balochs themselves still consider their oral literature as having no value. I remember once talking to a native compiler of a volume on Balochi folktales who recounted once making a collection and presenting the manuscript to the chairman of the Balochi Academy. He told me that the Academy chairman, who himself was a famous writer, had shouted at him, berating him for undertaking such a useless project. "This was the last time that I made any attempt to collect folktales," he told me in an interview in Quetta in 2000 (oral communication with Surat Khan Mari).

One can say without hesitation that oral tradition is now a dying art in Balochistan. Notwithstanding the emergence of a strong nationalistic feeling among the Baloch population both in Iran and Pakistan, the existence of *pahlawan* (professional singers of verse narratives), and the love for *suroz* (a bowed instrument played as an accompaniment to narrative songs and considered to be the national instrument of the Baloch) among the educated classes, there seems to be no future for the oral tradition in Balochistan. Times are changing rapidly and it is unlikely that Balochi oral traditions, such as minstrelsy and storytelling sessions, can survive even a couple of decades from now. Worst of all is the fact that many of these forms have not been collected and preserved at all. If the bearers of this centuries-old, highly refined art die, we will have very little material in hand on which to base a description and study of the Balochi oral tradition.

For example, about 30 years back when I was in elementary school the children of our village spent every moonlit night in outdoor games (every village had a playground for such purposes), while dark nights were devoted to telling tales to each other or organizing riddle competitions. Winter nights, on the other hand, were ideal for storytelling sessions and indoor games such as riddle competitions, where children were sometimes

also joined by elders, both men and women. There were also additional indoor games that involved rhymes and songs. On other occasions, people of the village, including children and adults of both sexes, gathered at the house of an aged man or woman or at the house of the village *ludi* (professional blacksmith but also musician, singer, storyteller, handicraftsman, circumciser; see Badalkhan 2000-01:163-64). Very often, boys from farming families would collect wood for fuel while those from wealthier families would bring sugar, tea, and the like for the storyteller and her/his audience. These homes would function as storytelling institutions where long winter nights became “short” and tales remained “long,” as one of the formulae in Balochi storytelling puts it (Badalkhan 2000-01:171). Frequently, someone from among the audience would also come up and tell tales. Very rare was the night with no storytelling or indoor games.

Other factors were operative as well. Since the people of the village were in the majority of cases related to each other by blood, there was no concept of refusing the favor of telling tales to each other. The case was the same with the *ludi*, who was economically dependent on the village community and so had a professional duty to entertain the village people with his tales whenever they gathered at his place or called him to some other place. The Muslim fasting month of Ramazan was another occasion for such regular sessions; people kept the fast for 30 days from sunrise to sunset, with many nights spent awake from dinner up to the last meal at around 5 a.m. These were occasions when people were kept busy by storytellers, either professionals or amateurs, and the repertoires of these storytellers were so rich that they never came to an end.

In the past, itinerant minstrels would also visit regularly after every harvest or during religious festivals; they were frequently invited for wedding and circumcision ceremonies or upon the birth of sons of important families. During their seasonal tours these minstrels would visit all of the villages on their route. One was followed by another, and this sequence would continue for weeks, keeping the people’s interest fresh and their attachment to the tradition alive. But now, alas, people of all ages and of both sexes are stuck to television sets, sometimes spending every bit of their free time there. There are numerous satellite television networks, and local distributors have made them accessible even to families with minimum earnings. Since television is a new phenomenon, people are lost in it and have abandoned interest in all other types of traditional entertainments and engagements. And since these networks mostly telecast their programs in Hindi, which when spoken is very similar to Urdu, people have no difficulty in understanding them. Indeed, even when people do not understand the language, they enjoy these performances and are entertained.

Balochi verbal art and musical traditions have also suffered a severe setback from the constantly rising tide of Islamic fundamentalism in the region. This influence started soon after the Communist coup in Afghanistan in April 1978, followed by the holy war of the West against the Soviets in Afghanistan using the card of Islam; all reactionary Arab regimes joined the West in this war. As a result, Islamic fundamentalism has made gains throughout the area and Balochistan has been no exception. In many places where Islamic fundamentalist parties have established roots, singing and playing music have been prohibited and replaced by religious sermons. Even clapping hands has been declared un-Islamic and replaced by chanting “Allah o Akbar” (“Allah is Great”), following the model of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Balochi oral tradition needs the urgent attention of folklore scholars. We must collect as much material as possible because time is running out very fast. The most urgent necessity is to interview living minstrels and record their repertoires, for all of them have reached an advanced age and no new minstrels have emerged for decades. The simple reason is that the social, cultural, and economic situation in Balochistan has undergone drastic change, and under the new circumstances this centuries-old art has not found any place. People in modern times lack both the interest and the time to listen to and appreciate these long narrative songs, which sometimes require many nights to be sung fully. Other types of verbal art also need the attention of folklore scholars. Balochi is very rich in folktales, riddles, simple proverbs and anecdotal proverbs, songs related to the life cycle (the birth of a child, e.g.), lullabies, cradle songs, praise songs to babies, circumcision and wedding songs, elegies, play songs, work songs, songs of nostalgia and longing, and so on. All this needs our immediate attention lest we lose this rich material forever.

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