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Song as Register: Socio-cultural Role of Poetry in Balochistan*

Introduction

The land of Balochistan is harsh, inhospitable, mostly uncultivable desert and mountainous, with meagre economical resources. As a result, it has only supported a sparsely distributed population, settled mainly along dry river beds with patches of cultivable lands in some parts, while in other parts people mostly lived as pastoral nomads. Balochistan was also situated on the cross-roads of different cultures and continents linking Middle East and the Mediterranean world with the Indian Ocean World on the one hand and Central Asia with the Arabian Gulf countries and East Africa on the other hand. The geographical position and climatic conditions and periodical invasions and interventions by foreign powers moulded the Baloch way of life to a great extent, which resulted with a strong warlike mentality (Sardar Khan Baluch 1977: 48). Tribal conflicts often ended up with the mass migration of one of the rival tribes or with the abandonment of cultivated fertile lands and in the adaptation to a nomadic life. It was natural that under such circumstances they could not develop a settled life with a settled mind which was necessary for the development of any kind of art and architecture and a written literary tradition. However, this way of life was ideal for the development of a strong poetic tradition. There emerged a class of poets who were seers of the masses, guides of the people, the ones whose poems gave name and fame to a tribe or to a person.¹ Poetry was the means of self expression as well as of self preservation to

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¹ A similar situation has been recorded among the ancient Arabs whose Bedouin life-style and tribal set-up had been very similar to that of the Baloch (C. Lyall, quoted in Nicholson 1930: 71; also Khairallah 1980: 1).

them. Poems were composed, memorized and transmitted to celebrate the conquest of a new territory, victory in a tribal war, on the birth of a son, on a prosperous rainy year, on the outburst of a calamity, and so on. Every tribe had its poets (Rooman 1967: 12; Sardar Khan Baluch 1977: 77; Gičkī 1990: 34), and a tribe with no poet was a tribe with no voice, with no name or fame, and with nothing to be proud of, and no one to be celebrated by. The high respect related to the composing of narrative poems, called *šeyr*,² attracted tribal chiefs, Khans, Nawabs and Sardars (Sardar Khan Baluch 1958: 181, 199), family elders, as well as Mullahs and others. Besides, there were tribal poets, who were known as *rezwār šāir* among the tribes in eastern Balochistan and *zangīšāhī* in the rest of Balochistan (Nasīr 1979b: 20-21).³ Such poets were supported economically by the tribe and had a share from the earning of the tribe as a whole.⁴ It was the tribal poet who had to compose poems on all important events in his tribe's collective life as well as on important issues in chief's family, and then tribal minstrels, who belonged to the Lūrī and Romb of low social background, memorized their poems and sang them in public during their seasonal wanderings from one village to another and from one region and/or tribe to another (Gičkī 1990: 34). As minstrels belonged to the low social class, on whom the Baloch code of honour prohibit any physical or verbal assault, they could go anywhere and sing their songs in the presence of anyone (Barker and Mengal 1969: II, 264; Nasīr 1976: 59; 1982: 261).⁵

² *Šeyr* is a narrative in verse, based on rote memorization and no intentional modification in its contents is either permitted or tolerated by the public (Badalkhan 2002a: 302 ff.). It is generally composed by Baloch belonging to upper social classes but the performers traditionally belonged exclusively to the low social class of Lūrīs and Rombs of supposed Indian origin (Badalkhan 2000-2001: 163, n. 9; for a detailed discussion on the Lūrīs, see Badalkhan 2005). However, this distinction is no more observed strictly in modern times and there are minstrels from all social backgrounds (for a detailed discussion, see Badalkhan 1994).

³ For details on *rezwār šāirs*, see Badalkhan (1994: 31 ff.); cf. also Miṭhā Khān Marī (1978: 4). For *zangīšāhīs*, see Badalkhan (1994: 129-30).

⁴ Normally, big tribes with thousands of members, such as the Maris, whose number is presently estimated at about 300,000 (Šāh Mohammad Marī 2000: 32), the Bugtis (about 150,000 to 200,000 individuals), and other tribes of similar strength had their tribal poets although we are told that almost every tribe, no matter how big or small it was, had someone who would compose poems to keep important events in tribal life recorded in verses and then to pass it on to the coming generation. At the same time, there were also independent poets who composed poems on important events and then area/local minstrels would memorize them and sing them in public gatherings in their regular tours. In these cases the poet was not dependent to anyone but earned his living by other means.

⁵ Every single member from the enemy tribe is considered an enemy of the rival tribe during tribal wars and is subject to be killed and is expected to kill, depending upon who anticipates whom. So the only way of communication between two rival tribes was through minstrels whose movements knew no restrictions (Barker and Mengal 1969: II, 264).

1. *Balochi Poetic Tradition on the Migrations*

We lack any records of Balochi poetry prior to the 14th-15th centuries AD when, according to the epic tradition, forty-four Baloch tribes,⁶ under the leadership of Mir Jalal Khan, migrated from southwestern Iran in the 12th century AD (Nasīr 1976: 19) and moved towards present-day Makran.⁷ The oral tradition is that they first settled in the area of Bampur in western Makran, now in Iran, which, according to Sardar Khan Baluch (1977: 71), became «the homeland and distributing centre of the race in Persia». It was here in Bampur, maintains Inayatullah Baloch, that «they founded the ‘First Baluch Confederacy’ and gave it the name of ‘Baluchistan’» (Baloch 1983: 188; cf. Field 1959: 52).⁸ This first Baloch confederacy of the 12th century AD was headed by Mir Jalal Khan (Dames 1904: 36) who is known as the «founding father of the Baluch nation» among Baloch scholars (‘Anqā Baloč 1974: 98; Baloch 1987: 95). The tradition is that Mir Jalal Khan died in Bampur and was buried there.

⁶ Although the Balochi tradition is firm about the number of the tribes («forty were Balōč, and four were servile tribes dependent on them»; Spooner 1989: 609) who migrated from southwestern Iran and moved towards east, I personally believe that the number forty-four (*čill u čār*) indicates here any very big number and not necessarily a fixed number. We are not sure about the early migrations of the Baloch towards present-day Balochistan but we learn that many Baloch «moved into and through Makrān starting in the 5th/11th century, others were probably already present in the general area east of Kerman» (*ibid.*). The first record of movement into Sind is from the 7-8th/13-14th centuries (*ibid.*), followed by a series of other migrations. As for the time of the migration of the forty-four tribes, much alluded in Balochi epic tradition, Sardar Khan Baluch (1977: 70-71) opines that the first major migration took place during the reign of Malik Shams-ud-Din when forty-four Baloch tribes migrated from Sistan towards Persian Makran under the leadership of Mir Jalal Khan (1100-1185 AD). The second major migration, according to him, took place during the early 15th century, when the Rind and Lashar and their allied tribes migrated from Iranian Makran towards the present-day Pakistani Makran (*ibid.*).

⁷ Some poems from the classical stock also state that Baloch tribes originally migrated from a place called Alab or Alap, which, according to common Baloch, is situated somewhere in the Arabian peninsula (Hetū Rām 1987: 64), but is commonly indicated as the city of Aleppo/Halab (initial ‘h’ being absent in most Balochi dialects) in Syria (Hetu Ram 1898: 122; Dames 1907: I, 2, 96; Marri Baloch 1964: 6, 58-59; Curzon 1966: II, 255; Barker and Mengal 1969: II, 263; Sardar Khan Baluch 1977: 469; *Baluchistan* 1991: 28; Nasīr 1993: 1; see also Baloch 1987: 39 ff.). However, on the basis of some features of the language, which has been classified as belonging to the northwestern Iranian languages, the majority of scholars are of the opinion that the original homeland of the speakers of Balochi was somewhere in northwestern Persia or the areas adjacent to the southern coasts of the Caspian Sea (Dames 1904: 13; Spooner 1964: 58; Gankovsky 1971: 144; Harrison unpublished: 155; Khan 1983: 176; Sayad Hašmī 1986: 177, 208; Elfenbein 1989: 633; Bosworth 1994: 203).

⁸ We are not in a position to say when the name ‘Balochistan’ was first used for the country of the Baloch but we find the term already fixed in the late 15th and early 16th century epic poetry (Sardar Khan Baluch 1977: 168, 170; Badalkhan 2000-2003: 33, n. 23), and in Sidi Ali Reis’s report, the Turkish admiral who visited Makran during the mid-16th century (Reis 1899: 15). Marri Baloch (1974: 10) traces the name ‘Balochistan’ in «the early decades of the fifteenth century».

It seems that these tribes lived in western Makran for a considerable time before they decided to migrate towards the east during the 15th century. We are not sure about the reasons of such a mass migration but Gankovsky (1971: 146-47) believes that

the predatory campaigns of the Ghaznivides and Ghurids and above all the forays of the Mongols ... resulted in the devastation of farming oases in the territory of Baluchistan, the reduction of the settled land-cultivating population and the decline of several small feudal states that flourished there ... These events contributed to the dispersion of the Baluchi tribes from Makran farther north and north-east, up to the frontiers of the Punjab and Sind.

The Balochi tradition is not of much help as regards to the reasons of the migration from western Makran to further east but the Makran version of the 'epic of migration'⁹ says that an army attacked them from Iran and they were forced to leave the country and to migrate further east. It says: *pawj ki rusta ča Erānā / jāgāh na būt šerānā*, «When an army came invading (lit. grew up) from Iran, / there was no place for the lions», *i.e.*, the Baloch.¹⁰ The majority of tribes moved towards east occupying territories and subjugating inhabitants on their way while some tribes decided to stay in western Makran which are still to be found there. The tradition is that prior to the arrival of these Baloch tribes the population of Makran was already Baloch whose language was Balochi (Spooner 1964: 58; Wink 1999: I, 143; Badalkhan 2002b: 243), and who surrendered to the new arrivals without any resistance. After spending some time in Kolwāh in eastern Makran, they decided to abandon Kolwāh, «the land of damned barleys» (*šūmročen jawānī jāh*), as the epic of migration says, and move further east. This was sometime during the late 15th century. Migrating from Makran they went to the highlands of Kalat,¹¹ occupied it and made a Rind noble, Mir Mando Khan, the father-in-law of Mir Chakar Khan Rind, the governor of the province and then proceeded towards the plains of Sibi and Kacchi (Ahmad Yar Khan Baluch 1975: 71; Spooner 1989: 610; Nasir 1993: 6-8).¹² This was the culmination of their conquests and the end of their mis-

⁹ For a broader discussion on the epic of migration, see my paper ('History versus Legends: a Study of the Balochi Epic of Genealogy'), presented at the Colloquium on 'Discourses of Memory in Iranian Languages', Paris, February 23-24, 2006.

¹⁰ Recorded from Saleh Mahmad Gorgej in Malir, Karachi (unpublished folklore material collected by the Author in Balochistan in 1989). These two lines are present in most of the versions of the epic from southwestern Balochistan that I know of (Šād 2000: 57).

¹¹ Kalat was then ruled by Mir Omar of the Mirwani tribe who was killed in the battle (Sardar Khan Baluch 1965: 128; Farīdī 1983: 16-17; Hetū Rām 1987: 198; Nasir 1993: 6).

¹² The control over Kalat was maintained by the Rinds as long as Mir Chakar Khan was powerful and ruled from Sibi. When his power was weakened as a result of the 30-year fratricidal war, and he abandoned Balochistan and migrated to the Punjab, Mir Bijjar, son of Mir Omar Mirwadi, attacked Kalat and «wrested it from the Rinds. The Rind chief, Mando Khān, was

sion, as well as the achievement of their highest goals. Here, according to the tradition, they founded their first united Baloch rule over the land, now known as Balochistan and presently inhabited by the Baloch, which also included the present-day Iranian and Afghani Balochistans. It was in this period, and as a result of this mass migration, that they expanded their rule upon a country which stretched from the Mari-Bugti areas, bordering with Sind and Punjab on the east to Kirman on the west, and from Helmand on the north to the Arabian Sea on the south (Usmān Hasan 1976: 57; Sardar Khan Baluch 1984: 2). However, once settled down, they started a fratricidal war, which, according to the oral tradition, continued for thirty long years until they were all exhausted and dispersed. At the aftermath of this never-ending fratricidal war, in which most of their best men were killed, the majority of these tribes left Balochistan for ever and migrated towards Sind and Punjab, with some even penetrating into the Gujarat and Kathiawar regions of India.¹³ As the result of this mass migration, they lost their hold upon eastern Balochistan, and settled in the Punjab and Sind in such great numbers that today more Baloch, by origin, are said to be living in Sind and the Punjab than in Balochistan proper (Marri Baloch 1974: 23; see also Hetū Rām 1987: 50 ff.).¹⁴ Dames opined in the early 20th century that «the extent of the migration may be judged from the fact that a recent census (1891) showed 935,000 Baloches in Sind and the Panjab. Only 80,000 have been enumerated in the Kelāt territory, while the figures for Mekran and Persian Balochistan, not accurately known, may be roughly put at 200,000» (Dames 1904: 47, n. 1).¹⁵ The great majority of Baloch tribes, now living in the Punjab and Sind, no more speak Balochi and have shifted to local languages (Sardar Khan Baluch 1984: 4; Spooner 1989: 609) but most of them still call themselves Baloch and are known by their tribal denominations, which link them with their co-tribals in Balochistan and to their original homeland in Balochistan.

slain in the battle, and his tomb is still to be seen in Kelāt» (Hetu Ram 1898: 122; cf. Sardar Khan Baluch 1965: 182; Hetū Rām 1987: 23; Spooner 1989: 610; Nasīr 1993: 9).

¹³ Hetū Rām (1987: 50) records that during the 30-year war between the Rind and the Lashar tribes the armed force of the Rinds was 50 thousand strong coming from 67 tribes and the Lashar force was 40 thousand men comprising of 39 tribes.

¹⁴ Sardar Khan Baluch (1984: 5) claims that «today every third man in Sind is a Baluch», and Marri Baloch (1974: 21) estimated that in 1961 «Baloches constituted at least 25% of the total population» of Sind (for a detailed discussion, see *ibid.*: 15-23). He is of the opinion that one sixth of the total population of the Punjab is Baloch by origin (*ibid.*: 222).

¹⁵ One may doubt the accuracy of numbers for Kalat as well as those for Makran and Persian Balochistan as in the predominantly nomadic life of the Baloch it must have been almost impossible to obtain accurate numbers on the one hand, and the general tendency among the Baloch, who are convinced that one should always give a lesser number for children as well as for the livestock otherwise they will be subject to the evil eye and struck by a calamity (a trend which is still very much alive in nomadic and semi-nomadic families). Nevertheless, even if we double the number estimated by Dames for the Baloch population in Kalat, Makran and Persian Balochistan, the total number of the Baloch in Sind and the Punjab will still be more than that of the rest.

Details of all these wars and conflicts as well as of migrations and settlements are minutely preserved in the epic tradition which has been transmitted by the Lūfī and Ṙomb minstrels from generation to generation. This tradition is considered as the national heritage of the Baloch as well as the *baločī daptar* (past record of the Baloch), and minstrels work hard to memorize these poems by rote memorization and transmit them as accurately as possible. It is from this period that we have surviving Balochi oral poetry and epic tradition. From here onwards, we have a series of epic poems where war and romance are alternated, as well as a rich body of poems on other topics, such as migrations and settlements, family affairs and feuds, births and deaths in important families, rains and droughts, etc. It is hard to say why the poetry of the period prior to the 14th and 15th centuries has not survived but one reason could be the fact that the much-celebrated mass migration of the forty-four tribes, compact and united under a single leader, brought a drastic change in the life and mind of the people of Balochistan. Furthermore, with the outbreak of the war between the Rind and Lashar tribes, in which 67 tribes were involved on the Rind side and 39 on the Lashar side, and which lasted for thirty years, we can imagine how the audience of minstrels of the time would have been curious to listen about the ongoing conflicts rather than listening to past stories, so it was natural that the past oral poetic tradition left the ground for new compositions.

2. Poetry as Historical Record

In societies where the art of writing was not practised widely poetry has always been used as an effective tool to record important events and transmit them from one generation to another. As Baloch lacked any written tradition, the only source has been that of the oral tradition, where Baloch poets have recorded in great details a large number of important events. However, as oral tradition is subject to variations we are not in a position to say how much has been added or omitted by later minstrels although we are aware of the fact that a Baloch minstrel is considered to be a transmitter and not the author of a piece of poetry, so having no rights, under any circumstances, to change or alter the contents of a poem transmitted to him by others.¹⁶ Nevertheless, we cannot say anything for sure about the historicity of the poems recounting historical events, and especially of those whose composers were not direct witnesses of the events recorded in their poems, such as about the early migration of the Baloch from a mythical land or about a common progenitor of all Baloch. But, at the same time, as this is the only available material at our disposition in order to reconstruct the past history of the Baloch, it has been treated as of great importance by scholars of all times. Since the early interest about the

¹⁶ See Badalkhan (2002a) for a detailed discussion on the question of improvisation versus memorisation in a Balochi *šeyr* singing.

Baloch and their country, first by the British starting from the early 19th century, then by local scholars during the second half of the 20th century, oral poetic tradition has been a major source to reconstruct their history.¹⁷ The historical importance of Balochi epic tradition is also increased by the fact that the composers of these poems¹⁸ were Baloch of upper social class, in most cases either tribal elders or poets attached to their entourage (Barker and Mengal 1969: II, 263; Naṣīr 1979b: 20-21), for whom flattery and derailment from the facts was considered below their status, being something reserved only for low class *Ṛombs* and *Lūrīs*, traditional class of minstrels and musicians who are not poets themselves.

The Baloch consider the poems of the past, especially those of the 15th and 16th centuries (a period commonly known as ‘the heroic age’ of the Baloch), as their collective assets and the sense of national pride. These are the record of a glorious time recounting of events when all Baloch were united as a *kaum*, inhabiting a country which they had brought under the rule of a single ruler, Mir Chakar Khan Rind, and they were not divided among different states as in modern times. The poetic heritage of the period consists of a series of epics. Famous among them is the epic about the migration of the Rind, Lashar and their allied tribes from the present-day Iranian Makran; their temporary settlement in the Pakistani Makran, their further moving towards east occupying Kalat and the highlands; from there onward to Sibi and the Kachhi plains; their conquest of these regions and the formation of the first Baloch confederacy under Mir Chakar Khan Rind¹⁹ (Harrison 1981: 12; Khan 1983: 176), and so on. A vast body of poems from the same period also recount of love romances of Baloch heroes, their activities in daily life, such as hunting expeditions, archery contests, horse racing, and so on. Then we have poems related to Balach (an eighteenth century warrior hero and poet), who alone

¹⁷ The poems regarding the origins and the mythical homeland of the Baloch, be it in Arabia or in Syria, are not given much credit by scholars believing that they come from not earlier than the 14th century and are most probably attempts by poets who tried to versify what they had heard from the oral tradition, and thus based only on mythical beliefs about their origins (and their blood relations with the family of the Prophet Muhammad). Spooner (1989: 609) reminds us that «tribal populations in the Muslim world have typically traced their genealogies back to the time of the Prophet as a way of legitimizing their Islam in their own tribal (*i.e.*, genealogical) terms».

¹⁸ We are only referring to the *ṣeyr* (a narrative in verse) genre and not to other types of oral poems – the former are to be memorized literally and transmitted as faithfully as possible (Badalkhan 2002a) while other types of oral poems are subject to improvisations and their performers have the liberty to make any additions or omissions as the situation may demand.

¹⁹ The short-lived tribal confederacy, headed by Mir Chakar Khan Rind, who is known as the first nation-builder in Baloch historical annals, stretched from the Makran coast to the present-day Mari-Bugti areas west of the Punjab (Usmān Hasan 1976: 57; Harrison 1981: 12; cf. Badalkhan 2000-2003: 33, n. 24). It is interesting to note that Hetū Rām, who was a native of Rajinpur in District Dera Ghazi Khan, now in the Punjab, considered District Dera Ghazi Khan as «a part of Balochistan» while writing in the late 19th century (Hetū Rām 1987: 3).

fought the powerful Bulaidi tribe for decades to revenge the murder of his elder brother, Doda, who was killed by the Bulaidi tribe while he was trying to defend the property of a widow who had taken refuge at his place (Šer Mohammad Marī 1970: 141-77; Nasīr 1976: 199-227; Sardar Khan Baluch 1977: 401-10; Hayāt Marī 1987: 57-86; Šād 2000: 198-250); poems related to Mir Hammal-i Jiand, the ruler of Kalamat, a harbour now abandoned but once an important trading port on the Makran coast, who, during the 16th century, fought against the Portuguese and was later arrested and imprisoned where he died (Badalkhan 2000). Equally famous are the poems related to Mir Kambar, Chief of the Bent region in Iranian Makran, who fought bravely and died while fighting against an army of marauders who had looted his village (Šād 2000: 251-72).²⁰

The Baloch are very proud of their past history. The epic tradition claims that all Baloch of upper social class,²¹ who can trace their origin in one of the characters mentioned in the Balochi epic tradition,²² come from a single com-

²⁰ Composition of long narratives in verse continued until the middle of the 20th century. Famous among them are the epics composed by Marī *rezwār šāirs* about the fights of the Maris against the British during the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Miṭhā Khān Marī 1978; Elfenbein 1990: I, 309-26); poems about the War of Chamburi fought between the Mari and Bugti tribes in 1857 (Sardar Khan Baluch 1984: 137 ff.; cf. Hetū Rām 1987: 130-87), when tribal poets of both sides composed lengthy poems to record their versions of events. Some other poem cycles are equally famous among the Baloch such as those on the exploits of Dadshah who fought against the Shah of Iran and his army during 1946-1957 (Janmahmad 1989: 205; Šāhbaxš 1373/1994); Baloch exploits against the British, and later on their fights with the Pakistan army during 1940s to 1970s (see the interesting accounts about the role poetry plays in Baloch mental set-up during the time of war by (retired) Brigadier M. Usmān Hasan, who commanded army operations against the Baloch insurgency in the Marī area during the Prime-Ministership of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto in 1970s [Usmān Hasan 1976: 90-92]).

²¹ Upper social class Baloch are generally considered those who belong to one of the landowning families or are/were nomads. However, not all members of them may necessarily own land or live as pastoral nomads but they must belong to a group or family who traditionally either owned land or were engaged in pastoral nomadism. In present times, many from these groups are engaged in small businesses or are government employees, like people from other social groups, but, as Spooner observes, nomadism «is still thought of as the genuine Baluch life, which embodies the authentic Baluch virtues of honesty, loyalty, faith, hospitality, asylum for refugees, and so on» (quoted in Titus 1998: 670; cf. also Badalkhan 2000-2001: 179, n. 56).

²² Some tribes, who are commonly believed to have been the natives of the country inhabiting there before the mass migration of the tribes mentioned in the 14th and 15th century epic tradition, also try to find some connections with one of the tribes mentioned in the epic poetry. It is important to note that almost all Baloch tribes living on the borderlands with Sind and Punjab, or those living in Sind and the Punjab, trace some connections with one of the tribes mentioned in the 15th-16th century epic tradition – the only exceptions are low social classes related to them. Here, the Baloch «social superiority holds a definite shape. The tribes having their roots and names from the five children of Amir Jalāl Khan, *i.e.* Rind, Lāshār, Korāi, Hot and Jato are deemed socially superior to the rest, and ... the Rinds are held as the most dignified of all the Baluch tribes» (Sardar Khan Baluch 1977: 46; cf. *Baluchistan District Gazetteer, Sibi*, 1986: 55-56).

mon ancestor, who lived in a far country and then led the migration of all Baloch tribes to Balochistan. Be it mythical or historical, the Baloch have a firm belief that what is handed down from the past recounts historical facts and can, in no way, be false.²³ Furthermore, wandering minstrels have roamed around Balochistan for centuries and sang these epic songs with the accompaniment of their stringed instruments, and in some way, maintained the continuity of the tradition. Baloch minstrels have also kept fresh the minds of their patrons about their heroic past and strengthened among them the sense of belonging to a common progenitor, and having a common heritage. The sense of having descended from a common ancestor and having migrated from an original mythical land has functioned as the most useful tool of uniting the Baloch as an ethnic group (Redaelli 1997: 34), and people of all ages and of all social backgrounds enjoy recounting and listening to these tales of a distant past. In fact, whenever some Baloch get together, mostly if they are coming from different areas or meeting after a long time and are of a certain age, then most of their discourses are centred around the Chakarian period and on stories about how the Baloch migrated from their original homeland, conquered the lands on their way and then settled in the present-day Balochistan as well as the life and deeds of different heroes, quotations from their poems and the like. As a result, there are old people almost in all villages who are famous for being well-versed in the past history of the Baloch and individual tribes of their areas.²⁴ Visiting tribal chiefs and men of high status were always entertained by organized or improvised poetry recitals or by inviting minstrels who sang heroic songs from the classical stock, thus reminding both the host and the guest that they all belong to the same stock and descend from a 'single fore-father and have the same roots as it was the uniting force among different tribes and people coming from different areas. Similarly, it was also a topic every Baloch was expected to be familiar with and proud of. In fact, my own experience is that whenever I go to some place away from my hometown, and if I visit some elderly people, they always discuss on Balochi classical poetry and on topics related to those times and characters. A visiting western scholar, Slimbach

²³ Dames records that Baloch minstrels, after recounting a genealogical poem, add the following epilogue: «This is our track and story ... if you do not believe it, no one has seen it with his eyes, but there are tales upon tales; everyone says that so it was» (Dames 1902: 274). My personal experience is that Baloch minstrels, as well as common people, have no doubts about the historicity of these epics. Cf. Naṣīr (1979b: 28), where a Baloch poet ends a genealogical epic by declaring: *e maī peṛṛey rand int / e baloḥī daftar int* («this is the line of our ancestors / this is the historical record of the Baloch»).

²⁴ Elfenbein (1966: 1-2) records that «perhaps the most remarkable cultural characteristic of the Baloch is their rich literary heritage and continuing strong literary traditions... In every village there can be found someone – often several people – who can recite classical folk ballads at great length». Naṣīr (1979b: 28) writes that all Baloch of certain social status consider it as a national obligation to memorise as many of these poems as possible and then to recite them in public to recollect their national identity and refresh their memories.

(1996: 154), reports of having learnt that «every good tribesman should memorize thirty *sheer* [*sic!*] [poems describing traditions and legends] and transmit them to his sons»²⁵ (explanations in brackets are in the original). Although this statement seems to be somehow overestimated, or something of days bygone, it can be said for sure that a Baloch child really grew up in a surrounding where singing and reciting poems made a part of his everyday life. Poetry was given so much importance and credit in the formation of a Baloch way of thinking and behaving that among some Baloch tribes a new born baby boy was recited several heroic epics, from three to seven, from the classic stock of heroic nature, by an old man in place of reciting the call for prayers, *azān*, as is usually done among many other Muslim communities (Badalkhan 2003b).²⁶

Besides the poems about wars and migrations, Balochi also has a rich body of romantic epics and love lyrics (Nasīr 1979a). Famous among these are the epics of Shey Murid and Hani, and Bibagr and Granaz from the 15th-16th centuries, Kiyya and Sado of the 18th century (Badalkhan 2000); Mast Tawkali

²⁵ It is hard to say whether the number 30 is to be taken as a really fixed number or with the meaning of 'many' but my father used to tell us that at his young age he had memorized 30 long *šeyrs* in order to be able to compete with visiting guests or hosts during nightly gatherings among village elders. It was a point of honour to be well-versed in Balochi oral epic tradition in order to be able to participate in a discussion on these topics (Nasīr 1979b: 28). A man, not actively participating in such discourses was considered to have a dubious origin and not to be a Baloch of high social class, a true *baloch*. Spooner (1964: 64) also observed in Iranian Balochistan that when men return from their work in the evening they sit and talk, among other things, about «the martial glories of the *daureh-i Balūch*», i.e., the past glorious period of the Baloch.

Once I was among the guests in an official dinner at Serena Hotel, Quetta, hosted by Balochistan Newspaper Editors to the provincial cabinet of Balochistan in 1989. I attended the dinner in the company of the Speaker of Balochistan Assembly, Mr Kahda Akram Dashti, and the Minister of Health, Dr Abdul Malik. Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, then the Chief Minister, was already there with a number of ministers and hosts from newspapers. Mr Ata Shad Baloch, then the Secretary Information and himself a far-famed Baloch poet originally from Turbat in Makran, dragged his chair in front of Nawab Akbar Khan and started reciting a poem from the Rind-Lashar period. He made some mistakes in the order of lines and Nawab Akbar Khan kept correcting him but when Nawab Bugti realized that Ata Shad did not remember the epic properly, he started reciting it himself. On this, Ata Shad felt awkward and changed the epic and went on reciting a poem from Hani-Shey Murid cycle, again a 15th-16th century romantic epic (see Badalkhan 2004). Here again, Nawab Akbar Khan corrected him and started reciting the poem in a sequence from memory. After some time, Ata Shad again interrupted and started reciting another poem from Mast Tawkali, an 18th century lover-poet-saint (*Id.* 2003a), and here again he made mistakes and Nawab Akbar Khan corrected him. At this, some Baloches present in the assembly laughed at Ata Shad and advised him to not compete with Nawab Akbar Khan on Balochi epic tradition: since he is a true Baloch of high social status he was expected to master the tradition more than anyone else present there.

²⁶ Now many Mullahs have declared that singing or reciting is a sin and good Muslims should not either sing or recite poems on any occasions. Singing and reciting poems is even barred at wedding and circumcision ceremonies where religious sermons (*wāiz*) are delivered in place of singing and music playing in religious families.

of 18th-19th century (Zakia Sardār Baloč 1965; Mitha Khān Marī 1969; Sābir 1986; 1991; Badalkhan 2003a), and many others.

3. Poetry as a Guard to Cultural Values

The study of Balochi poetry is an important tool to understand the Baloch mental set-up and their socio-cultural norms as it embodies all their cultural values and centuries-old traditions. Since time immemorial, Baloch have used poetry to incite emotions and remind the people about their cultural obligations and social duties as well as to make sure that the age-old established values are observed and safe-guarded. Similarly, poets and singers and/or performers have always been aware of their duty to keep high the morale of their people in giving them a check, when and where there was a lapse in their conducts.

There are certain social values among the Baloch that all members of the society are expected to abide by (see *Baluchistan District Gazetteer, Makran*, 1986: 133). Among them hospitality can probably be put on top of the list. The house of a Baloch was always to be open to anyone, even to the worst enemy of the person or his family. Once entered in the area of one's household then all enmity was forgotten and they were treated with the best of Baloch ways and they could remain there as long as they wanted. Among other social obligations, there was the protection of women and children, even if they belonged to the enemy tribe; the protection of non-Muslims, being considered defenceless as they were tribe-less people in Balochistan, and so on. However, the most burning passion of a Baloch has always remained revenge (*ber*) and protection of a refugee (*bāhoṭ*). These were considered sacred and no one was ever expected to either forget a revenge or to fail in the protection of a refugee.²⁷ In fact, almost all tribal wars in Baloch history have been triggered either in the defence of a refugee (Nasīr 1982: 254-55), or in order to take a revenge (*ibid.*: 247). Poets of all ages have composed touching verses about the importance of revenge and some of these verses have become so popular that they have become proverbial and are quoted by Baloch even in our times. For

²⁷ There are many examples where certain persons, who came short to their social duties, are mocked by poets. Names of such persons are still taken to warn the people that if anyone behaves like them then coming generations will take their names along with these names. Famous among such examples from Makran, for example, are that of a certain Shamsudin, whose guest was killed by the enemies and he did not defend him; of Allayar, in whose house a person came as a guest but Allayar went and informed the enemies of the guest who came and killed him; of Bajo Bulkheyr, whose companion on journey was killed by enemies and he did not defend him; of Gazzo Chunno who did not revenge his brother and made friendship with the killer of his brother while the sister kept on the burning passion of the revenge until she killed the murderers (Nasīr 1979b: 108-9; Šād 2000: 411).

example, poems attributed to the 18th century Baloch hero,²⁸ Balach Gorgej, known as *Bālāč-i Bergīr* («Balach, the revenger»), still warm the hearts and minds of Baloch youths when they gather in wedding or circumcision ceremonies or on other festive and ceremonial occasions. Balach was a little boy when his elder brother, and chief of the clan, was killed while defending a widow refugee. Balach, in one of his poems, reminds the people that:

*ber baločānī
tān du sad sālā
lassahen āhūg ant du dantānen,
sing agān čātānī bunā rezant
guṛa kenag ča mardānī dilā kinz ant,
bali nay sing rezant mān dīrbunen čātān,
u nay kenag ča mardānī dilā kinzant.²⁹*

The revenge of a Baloch,
for two hundred years,
is as young as an antelope of two years of age.
If stones melt at the bottoms of wells,
then the obligation of taking revenge will disappear from the hearts of men;
but neither stones melt (in deep waters),
nor the obligation of vendetta disappears.

The theme of vendetta is one of the most recurrent themes in Balochi oral poetry and tens of poets have composed poems describing different facets of the concept of revenge among the Baloch. Mulla Ragam Dashti, a famous poet of the 19th century from western Balochistan, probably describes best the deep concept of revenge in Baloch mentality:

*šagāl murghe kaṭiānī šubān bīt
kaṭiṭe hamnišīn-i kargazān bīt
pulange uštirānī pāsban bīt
šap-i bīst u nuhum gar māhikān bīt,
waroken gurk nigihbān-i pasān bīt
pasey awlād čo barrey šošagān bīt
agan pīššīg pīggey pāsban bīt
agan āčiš gon pambag hamlisān bīt
agan āhū gon šerā hamkarān bīt
agan sīmmurg dāna gočarān bīt
paša sultān rūmā kāmīrān bīt
hašāš čo Dḥāḍari jumpān kalān bīt
Hamont čo arzuney dānā kasān bīt*

²⁸ Sardar Khan Baluch (1965: 107) gives the approximate date for this conflict as the 17th century but Šer Mohammad Marī (1970: 143, n. 1), after a convincing argumentation, gives the 18th century (ca. 1712-1738).

²⁹ Transcribed from a recording made during a public gathering of the Baloch Students Organization (no date, but 1980s; cf. Nasīr 1979b: 114).

zirey āp hušk u rāh pa gardagān bīt

...

*padā mayg u tāī suhl u trān bīt.*³⁰

If hyena becomes the shepherd of chicks,
 If pigeons sit friendly in the assembly of vultures,
 If leopard becomes the herder of camels,
 If the 29th of the lunar month becomes moonlit,
 If the devourer wolf guards herds of goats,
 If baby goats become predatory beasts of deserts,
 If cats become guards of fat,
 If fire and cotton become friends and chat with each other,
 If antelopes become friendly with lions,
 If phoenix picks grains (to feed itself),
 If mosquitoes become successful king of Rūm (Byzantium),
 Cannabis' seeds become as big as the hillocks of Dhadar,³¹
 (And) the Hamont³² becomes as little as a grain of millet,
 If oceans get dry and people find their way to stroll there,
 ...
 Then there will be peace and peace talks between me and you.

Although it was the poet who composed such piercing verses, it was the minstrel who propagated them to the common people. It is for such reasons that Baloch in present times often argue that minstrels and female singers (*sawtīs*) have played two roles with a great perfection: they have instigated and fomented most of the tribal clashes, or promoted petty family or personal disputes into tribal and/or regional level wars by composing and singing praise or derogatory and sarcastic poems³³ on the one hand; and, at the same time, they have safeguarded and transmitted faithfully the Baloch literary heritage from one generation to another.

³⁰ The text in Balochi is transcribed from Nasīr (1979b: 111-12).

³¹ Dhadar is west of Sibi in Pakistani Balochistan.

³² Hamont is «a high limestone ridge in Persian Baluchistan about a mile in length, giving magnificent views in all directions» (Adamec 1988: 173).

³³ Mulla Kamalān, a famous minstrel from Iranian Balochistan who belongs to the Hot tribe, once mocks his *suroz* player (fiddler) that had his great-grand-ancestor, Saeet Zangīšāhī (the tribal minstrel of the Rinds during the late 15th and early 16th centuries), not existed, there would not have been the 30-year long fratricidal war between the Rind and Lashar tribes, the Baloch forces would not have been weakened and outsiders would not have come and occupied Balochistan, and we would not have lost our kingdom and ruled by outsiders (transcribed from the recording made during a public performance in Iranian Balochistan, n.d. [mid-1980s ?]; cf. also Nasīr 1979b: 73).

4. *The Role of Poetry in Maintaining the Integrity of Language*

Balochi has been a spoken language throughout the history and even today it has a very limited written literature. It is simply because it has never had any official status as the language of the medium of instruction in schools in any of the countries among which its speakers are presently divided.³⁴ At the same time, the country of Balochistan is vast and arid with a small population distributed along isolated dry river-beds where some cultivation is possible.³⁵ They have lacked any proper means of communication and there were no big city centres to make people from different regions get mixed among each other. Under such circumstances it was natural that there emerged many dialects and sub-dialects although most of the dialects are intelligible among each other (with minor difficulties in some cases).³⁶ Only the speakers of a few dialects, such as those living in the border areas with Sind and Punjab, or of those living in these provinces, have difficulties in understanding those coming from Iranian Balochistan or even from Makran, as, being border languages with a lot of interaction with neighbouring language groups, a great number of words and expressions from the neighbouring languages have crept into their dialects.

³⁴ Only two serious but unsuccessful attempts have been made so far to declare Balochi the language of instruction in the present-day Pakistani Balochistan. The first attempt was made in 1947, soon after the declaration of independence of the Khan of Kalat when Balochi was declared the «official and national language» of the government of Kalat (*Proceedings of the Lower and Upper Houses, Government of Kalat*, quoted in Nasir 1993: 499, 503; cf. Baloch 1987: 49, 56), and «a committee was formed to study and report on the adaptation of measures and methods for the introduction of Baluchi as a medium of instruction in schools» (Baloch 1987: 180). But, soon after the merger of Kalat with Pakistan in 1948, Urdu became the medium of instruction and the official language, and all attempts in promoting Balochi were stopped. The second attempt was made in 1989 during the Balochistan National Alliance government in Balochistan with Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti as the Chief Minister. The Nawab Bugti government declared mother-tongues of Balochistan province – Balochi, Brahui and Pashto – languages of instruction in their respective zones and classes were begun at primary school level. However, when the Bugti government was dissolved in 1991 the clock was reversed back and, after a two years very successful experience of teaching mother-tongues in schools, Urdu once again became the only language of instruction in Balochistan (Farrell 2000: 24-28). In Iranian Balochistan, no such attempts were ever made and there the Persian language is rapidly obscuring the Balochi language.

³⁵ Even in modern times the population density is as low as 4 persons per sq. km in some Baloch districts, such as in Awaran and Kharan, while it is 16 in Makran Division, 10 in Kalat Division and 18 in Sibi Division. It is worth reminding that Pakistani Balochistan is 347,190 sq. km (43% of the total land area of Pakistan) but it makes only about 5 per cent (6.5 million according to 1998 Census) of the total population of Pakistan (*Population Census and National Institute of Population Studies, Islamabad*, 1998).

³⁶ On mutual intelligibility among Balochi dialects, cf. Rossi (1982: 169-71); Carleton and Carleton (1987: 14 ff.); Jahani (1989: 67-75); Elfenbein (1990: I, 326); Filippone (1996: 17).

However, the existing dialects are not yet completely unintelligible.³⁷ The fact that the Baloch people, as a whole, shared a common literary heritage and that there were minstrels who travelled from one corner of the country to another in their routine tours, functioning as a link among different tribes and people living in different parts of the country, helped considerably in maintaining the sense of a common heritage and oneness.³⁸ Professional minstrels, by memorizing poems from one region or dialect and transmitting it to other regions or dialects, kept alive inter-dialect contacts and relations, and thus made a great service to the Balochi language.³⁹

5. Women's Songs and Female Singers

As among men, singing tradition among women is also extremely popular. It is a lively thriving art and there are professional female singers who are invited from distant areas to sing at circumcision and wedding ceremonies in well-off families. These professional female singers, called *sawtī*, for they mostly sing short love songs called *sawt*, also come from the low social class. They mostly come from families where men are either musicians or singers, and therefore carry a rich cultural baggage as regards the art of singing and dancing. Women song genres are very rich and cover a vast variety of songs to be sung on different occasions of life. Their repertoire from the past include work songs, such as those sung while grinding grain with a hand millstone, drawing water from deep wells, preparing cotton for making quilts and mattresses, washing clothes at ponds or water canals; songs sung on the backs of camels while on the move in their ever moving nomadic life, etc.; lullabies (*lawlī*) sung to new born babies, praise songs (*nāzenk*) to grown-up sons and brothers; circumcision and wedding songs (*hālo*, *lāro*) sung during the festivities of these ceremonies; and at last, elegies. Women song genres are as rich as the male song genres and every single genre has its distinctive characteristic

³⁷ If the influence of foreign languages keeps the present pressure, with no basic education in Balochi and no official patronage, the next generation of the Baloch from Iran and Pakistan will surely not be able to communicate with each other in their mothertongue seeing the amount of Persian words and expressions used by Baloch youths in Iranian Balochistan and Urdu words and expressions by those from Pakistan.

³⁸ Minstrels from Iranian and Pakistani Makran still visit freely one or the other side of the border and perform on invitations as if they belong to the same country.

³⁹ It appears that minstrels are well aware of this fact. They always try to convince their public that they are the best authorities on Baloch values and on Baloch literary heritage besides being the best custodians of the language and its literature. I have always had similar experiences during my discussions with minstrels in Balochistan during my field works. Moreover, Faiz Mahmud Baloch, the legendary minstrel who died in 1979, once lamented in a public performance saying: «Uncle Paizuk, companion, you were the one who kept alive the Balochi language, why did you become old!» (transcribed from a recording made during a public performance in Karachi, n.d., 1970s).

and can easily be recognized by those who have any knowledge of Balochi oral poetry. Each song genre has its name and is sung on appropriate occasions but the richest body of women's songs is about circumcisions and weddings as on every such occasion women of a village and those of the neighbourhood sing for up to three or seven nights led by a soloist who mostly comes from the Lūṛī background or from other low social class families. The common belief is that unless accompanied by singing and drum beating, or hand clapping as in the case of poor families where they may not afford inviting a drummer, a circumcision or a wedding ceremony does not bring good luck and thus is not a good omen. Even if there are three or four women of the family who clap hands, sing and dance going circle around, as might be the case among nomadic families, there must be some singing, clapping hands and dancing in order to bring good luck to the groom and the bride, or to the boy being circumcised.

One of the interesting aspects of women's songs in Balochistan is that they are in a constant change. They follow the trends in social, economical, cultural and political changes within the society. There is a very wide gap between their songs coming from the old stock which mostly speak of wars, armours, revenge, swordsmanship and horsemanship, and those composed in more recent times which, for example, speak of the riches of the Arabian Gulf states where their men-folk provide labour force and sustain their families back home. Now, their preference for armours, warfare, revenge and gallantry is replaced by wishes for their sons and brothers to go to schools and colleges, become learned persons and occupy high positions and get lucrative jobs in government offices or emerge as political leaders and contest elections and earn name and fame (Badalkhan 1999). Besides singing their own composed songs or songs coming from the stock of other female singers, which are almost always subject to improvisation, they also sing songs composed by modern educated male poets on different topics of common interest ranging from political songs to short love lyrics. A great number of such songs are of political nature with nationalistic themes where the Baloch youths are called upon to struggle for a free Balochistan. Besides, in the recent years an immense body of other type of political songs have also been created by female singers – mostly in praise of one political party and its leadership and candidates in general elections, and mocking the leaders and candidates of the opponent parties often using a highly derogatory language against them (*ibid.*: 120-22). Such songs often create tension and brawls among female supporters of rival political parties. One often hears women saying that they don't want to attend such and such a wedding ceremony where such and such a female singer sings songs criticising such and such a political party and its leadership and they cannot tolerate that and keep silence, so a brawl may come out of it which is not good for the patrons of the ceremony. But apart from this recent political characteristic of some songs, female singers on the whole have provided an

equally important service to the Baloch society as their male counterparts have done in their genres of oral songs. One can find all types of topics treated in women's songs, such as the general condition of women and hardships in their life, scarcity of drinking water and the preoccupation of women to find it for the family at any cost, hard works in their day to day life such as the grinding of grain in former times or taking care of children and doing all household jobs; from voicing against family arranged marriages in some cases to encourage rebellions where someone insists on getting married to a girl out of his family context and often a woman of inferior social status, and so on (Badalkhan 1999). Because of the rich body of women's songs, it is important to study it both because its language is less contaminated in comparison to songs composed by men and in order to study how women see the world around them and how is their participation in the daily affairs of the modern Baloch society.

Conclusion

It should be said in conclusion that Baloch have a rich poetic tradition where the role of the poet was multi-dimensional. Among many other functions, he also had to function as historian as history writing was not known among them, as an educator for books were not common, and as a trend-setter for his words conveyed wisdom and sagacity. At the same time, it was he who was expected to keep a watchful eye on the behaviour of the people – the more elevated was the position of a person, the more he was subject to a close watch and scrutiny. Besides, they also had the obligation to warn people against dangers as well as beware them against their ill-wishers, for the poet was considered to be, as Sardar Khan Baluch (1977: 68) puts it, the oracle and orator of the nation. As he was well-versed about the social and cultural values of the nation it was he who was expected to remind the people of their social, cultural, ethical, moral, and political duties and obligations. Although this trend is kept alive to a great extent by a number of modern poets, these latter compose short lyrics following the style of Persian and Urdu poets and no more compose long narratives in verse, *i.e.*, *šeyr*. Contrary to the past, when those poets who could compose long narratives in verse would earn name and fame and secure patronization, in modern times such poets would be laughed at by other poets as well as not heard by the common people. It is simply because times have changed and so the taste of the people. People are now used to listen to short poems of few couplets and relax. As a result, poets have also modified their art to the taste of their listeners. Besides, with the introduction of electronic media Baloch preferences have also changed and modern singers sing on the pattern of Indian popular singers of film songs. On many cases, Baloch singers, especially those from Karachi, translate Hindi film songs into Balochi

and sing them on the same Hindi music.⁴⁰ In other cases, singers of some prestige sing Balochi songs on the style of Urdu *ghazals* as sung in India and Pakistan. This change of taste is not limited to male singers only: female singers' repertoires have also gone through considerable changes and traditional Balochi songs are mostly replaced by songs sung by male singers imitating Indian popular film songs or Balochi songs with political messages. Regional radio and television networks lack interest in promoting or recording Balochi traditional music and songs, and the local electronic media is very much dominated by Indian popular music, which being sung in the Hindustani language, is almost identical to Urdu and thus comprehensible to the majority of the people in Pakistani Balochistan, while the situation in Iranian side is not better at all. On the whole, one finds a drastic shift in the taste of the people, right from selecting names for new-born babies (Badalkhan 2003c) to singing lullabies on births or other types of songs sung during the course of life.

Studying the changes in Baloch cultural life, it can be said that we are witnessing a radical shift in Baloch mind-set where past and present look centuries apart. However, it is yet to be seen whether the young generation, sooner or later, will re-evaluate the literary heritage of the past and take initiatives to preserve it or keep moving forward without preserving and appreciating the past.

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⁴⁰ Youssefzadeh (2000: 58) observes somewhat similar changes in Iranian music where the traditional musicians are «worried about the upsurge of 'popular' music, they fear that, having survived the rigours of the Islamic Revolution, they might now be doomed to marginalization».

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