

A Brief Introduction to Balochi Literature

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A. Introduction

Balochi is one of the larger Western Iranian languages, spoken mainly in Balochistan (divided by political borders between Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan), but also by a substantial population in Oman, other Gulf States, Turkmenistan, India, and East Africa. The total number of speakers most likely amounts to more than 10 million. (For more details, see, e.g., Jahani 2013: 154–155).

Following Utas' (2006: 206, 209) definition, we regard as literature both oral and written texts that are characterized by elaboration of language and/or narrativity. Until about a century ago, in the pre-literate society of the Baloch, the most important literary form was oral literature. It was rich, diverse, and fit for a variety of social contexts. It existed in the form of songs that were performed on different occasions of life. Songs for the gatherings and festivities of women and children as well as those of men and tribal assemblies were abundant and there were different groups of hereditary professional singers, known as *pahlawān* (singer of heroic deeds), *sawtī* (singer of short love lyrics), and *gwašinda*, a term formerly used for occasional, i.e. non-professional singers but now for male singers of love songs who may come from any social class and not necessarily from the low social class of hereditary singers and musicians (for different types of singers in Balochistan see Badalkhan 1994; 2000–2001). Similarly, there were folktales told by professional and non-professional storytellers, the latter being men and women elders who entertained the village people, mainly at nightly gatherings) (see also Badalkhan 2000–2001).

As there was no tradition of writing Balochi, Persian was used for all record keeping. In most villages there was someone with some knowledge of Persian, usually called “mullah” because of their basic knowledge of the Quran. Some of these also composed poetry in Balochi. We are short of any records showing if early mullah-poets kept written records of their poems or relied only on the memory of singers of their compositions, but we know for sure that by the late 19th and early 20th centuries many literate mullah-poets from central Makran kept registers of their own compositions as well as of those by other famous Baloch poets and of famous epic cycles. Many of these records have got lost for various reasons – one being that in the predominantly non-literate society of the Baloch, the written word was considered magic and a symbol of high prestige so written records were neither shown to anybody nor shared with anybody with the result that they were often consumed by time or eaten up by moths before they could reach a larger readership.

The most active organization in publications in and on Balochi is undoubtedly the Balochi Academy in Quetta, which at present receives a generous grant from the Government of Balochistan and other state institutions. Besides the Balochi Academy in Quetta, other active academies and literary organizations include the Sayad Hāshmi Reference Library in Karachi; Sangat Academy of Sciences in Quetta; Balochistan Academy in Turbat; Baloch Club in Bahrain; Baloch Adabī Juhdkār in Bahrain; Sichkān Publications in Gwadar; Istīn Shingkār in Kech; Izzat Academy in Panjgur, and a few more. A variety of orthographies based mainly on the Arabic script, but occasionally also on the Latin script, are employed in the publications.

B. Research

Several introductory works on Balochi oral literature, mostly in Urdu, which is the language of communication and instruction in Pakistan, have appeared during the post-colonial era. Some of these are Zahūr Shāh Sayad Hāshmī's *Balōcī zabān va adab kī tārīx* [History of Balochi language and literature] published in 1986, Shēr Muhammad Marī's *Balōcī zabān va adab kī tārīx* [History of Balochi language and literature] published in 1973, and Panāh Balōch's *Balōcī adab: aik tārīx, aik tasalsul* [Balochi literature: Its history, its continuity] published in 2016, all in Urdu (see also Badalkhan 2000–2003 for additional works prior to 2000). The latter is a particularly useful work since, in addition to describing different genres of Balochi oral poetry, it also gives a list of Balochi academies and societies and a good picture of their activities and publications in and on Balochi. Needless to say, most of the works on Balochi literary history are written along traditional lines, and no scientific analysis of Balochi literature based on literary theories has so far been carried out. The works of Barker and Mengal (1969) and Elfenbein (1990: I) are the only ones presenting a substantial selection of Balochi literature from different genres with English translations and commentaries.

Poetry is by the Baloch regarded as the highest form of literature (Badalkhan 2000–2003: 6–7, see also Widmark's (2011: 52) discussion of "poeticised communities"), and in addition to the classical heroic and romantic epic poetry, from the 18th century onwards, lyrical poetry is also encountered. In his comprehensive work in two volumes entitled *A Literary History of the Baluchis*, Mohammad Sardar Khan Baluch (1977, 1984) gives an overview of Balochi pre-modern poetry with ample examples. Interestingly enough, the only form of literature that he deals with is poetry.

In addition to a rich heritage of oral literature, both poetry and prose, since the mid-1900s also a certain amount of written literature has emerged, particularly in Eastern (Pakistani) Balochistan. Very little written literature has been produced in Western (Iranian) Balochistan or in other countries where Balochi is spoken.

1. *Oral poetry.* It is hard to date the beginning of Balochi oral poetry, as poetry must have expressed human emotions since the beginning of times. However, datable verse narratives give at hand with some certainty that by the 15th century, poetry was a well established art among the Baloch and that besides itinerant poets and composers, every tribe used to have tribal poets who were dependents to their tribes and whose duty it was to record in verse any event of importance to the tribe as well as to the region (Badalkhan 2000–2003: 8). The tribal poetry was of importance for the purpose of recording events in a particular version, since rival poets from other tribes could give a different version of the events to favour their tribe and its warriors instead. So, if a tribe was without a poet, it was not only without a voice and history, it was also subject to versions of historical events composed and sung by poets and singers from rival groups (Badalkhan 2000–2003: 10).

The classical oral poetry is epic and consists of historical, heroic, and romantic ballads. The subject of the historical, or maybe rather pseudo-historical ballads is the origin and wanderings of the Baloch tribes (see, e.g., Elfenbein 1989a: 640; Badalkhan 2013). In the heroic ballads, the thirty-year long war between the Rind and the Lashari tribes fought in the 15th and 16th centuries, as well as other tribal wars are

depicted. We encounter famous heroes such as Mīr Chākar Rind, Mir Gwahrām Lāshārī, Bālāch Gōrgēj, and Mīr Kambar who are still symbols for bravery among the Baloch. The poems praise the Balochi honour code (*balōčmayār*), of, e.g., revenge, protection of asylum seekers, and keeping one's promise (see also Elfenbein 2010: 177). Another highly appreciated theme is Hammal-i Jānd, the ruler of Kalmat in the late 16th century, and his resistance against the Portuguese invaders (Gul Khān Nasīr 1969; Badalkhan 2000b). Among romantic ballads, we find, e.g., the love stories of Dōstēn and Shīrēn (Gul Khān Nasīr 1964; Elfenbein 1990, I: 203–254), of Hānī and Shay Murīd (Walī Muhammad Rakhshānī 2015; Faqīr Shād 2000; Badalkhan 2004) and of Kīyyā and Sadō (Badalkhan 2002). These poems have been orally transmitted for centuries by generations of bards and were still performed a few decades ago, but their future is rather dismal (Badalkhan 2000–2003: 26; for a detailed study on the Balochi minstrelsy tradition, see Badalkhan 1994).

During the mid-19th century the British came in contact with the Baloch in Eastern Balochistan. British administrators and missionaries appeared first in the Baloch districts of lower Punjab and later approached other parts of Balochistan. As there were no written records to be found for the Baloch, they started collecting material from the rich Balochi oral tradition, both poetry and prose. The very first example of Balochi prose in written form seems to be a manuscript belonging to the British library, published by Josef Elfenbein (1983). Among the early British collectors and commentators, M. Longworth Dames (esp. 1891, 1907) is particularly outstanding.

The collection of Balochi oral tradition, particularly that of poetry, got an impetus with the departure of the British and opening of doors for education to a few Baloch from privileged classes. Noteworthy are Shēr Muhammad Marī (1970) and Faqīr Shād (2000). Another excellent compilation of classical poetry was made by Walī Muhammad Rakhshānī (2015) from among the Baloch in Afghanistan.

The rhyme and metre in the classical epic poems has been discussed by several researchers. Barker and Mengal (1969: II: 264) describe the rhyme patterns and find that “a single final rhyme may be followed for a number of lines, after which a new rhyme begins. Such ‘stanzas’ have no fixed number of lines, and a nonrhyming line may occasionally be found in the middle of them.” A glance at the classical poems published by Mohammad Sardar Khan Baluch (1977) gives at hand that this is a correct description. Dames (1907: I: xxix–xxx) describes the metre as “quantitative in nature” but adds that “prosodical quantity does not always correspond with natural or grammatical quantity, but rather with the accent or stress which falls on certain syllables.” Barker and Mengal (1969: II: 264) write that “the metre of classical Baluchi poetry owe little or nothing to the Arabic metrical system employed in Persian and Urdu. Baluchi metre depends upon a combination of quantity, stress, word juncture, and caesura.” Elfenbein also finds that the two main factors in the metre of classical poetry are syllable count and stress. However, his discussions of metre are no clearer than those of his predecessors whose descriptions he criticises (Elfenbein 1985: 164–165). It seems that the final word about metre in classical Balochi poetry has yet to be said.

The poetry from the 18th century onwards is generally described as the “post-classical” poetry, or the poetry of the Khanate period. (The Khanate referred to is the Ahmadzai Khanate of Kalat founded in 1666 and this literary period ends with the arrival of the British during the second half of the 20th century.) While the poetry during the classical period consisted mostly of epic narratives describing war and romance, the new poetry was mostly lyrical and although poetry composition in

traditional style continued during this period as well, the language and style was often influenced by Arabic and Persian traditions. Many poets had a religious education and were thus literate and acquainted not only with Arabic and the Quran, but also with the Persian literary heritage, which was commonly taught in the traditional religious education system. They were familiar with the Arabic-Persian metric system (*'aruz*) which they also employed in their poems. For a comprehensive overview of poetry from this period, see Mohammad Sardar Khan Baluch (1984) where he discusses the major poets and gives samples of their poems in Balochi with English translations.

The Khanate period produced a good number of far famed poets but the most renowned among these is undoubtedly Jām Durrak, the court poet of the most famous ruler of the Khanate of Kalat, Mir Nasīr Khān I (r. 1748–1795) (Elfenbein 1990: I: 257–273; Mohammad Sardar Khan Baluch 1984: 54–84). Among the Makrani school of mullah-poets, who composed in Southern Balochi, Mullā Fāzul Rind and his brother Mullā Qāsum Rind from Mand in Eastern Balochistan are two of the most renowned names (see Mohammad Sardar Khan Baluch 1984: 369–419). Another prominent poet from eastern Makran was Malik Dīnār Mīrwārī (d. 1923). There were likewise famous poets from Western Balochistan, who also composed in Southern Balochi, e.g. Mullā Ibrāhīm (see Mohammad Sardar Khan Baluch 1984: 442–449) and Mullā Abdullāh Rawānbud Pīshīnī. Mast Tawkalī (see Mohammad Sardar Khan Baluch 1984: 220–276), Raḥmalī Marī and Jwānsāl Bugṭī are among the most famous poets who composed in Eastern Balochi. (The main dialect split is between Eastern, Southern, and Western Balochi; see Jahani and Korn 2009: 636–638.)

2. *Oral prose*. Traditional storytelling comprises, e.g., fairy-tales, legends, and fables, and there is also a rich treasure of riddles, proverbs, and puns. Different types of songs also play an important role in traditional Balochi literature (Badalkhan 1999a, 2000a).

Just like in Persian, oral narrative prose is “generally presented, and probably also understood, as real, as something that has really happened, although ‘far away’ or ‘long ago.’ Even jinns and fairies *are* real. Stories might also have, at least implicitly, an admonishing or moral element [...] they might also aim at some kind of aesthetic or emotional effects, but first of all they are seen as entertaining” (Utas 2006: 207). Professional storytellers are often men who entertain a male audience in the still strongly gender segregated Balochi society. However, there are also (mainly elderly) women storytellers who perform in more closed circles, such as the extended family or the neighbourhood (Badalkhan 1999b: 85).

The first comprehensive collection of oral prose narratives to be published was gathered among the speakers of Balochi in today’s Turkmenistan (in those days the Soviet Union) and published by the Russian scholar Zarubin (1932, 1949). Among more recent folktale collections, Shay Ragām’s *Bādšāh Hudāwand wat at: balōcī qissahānī daptarī daptar* [King is the Lord Himself: a register of Balochi folktales], is a good addition to Balochi folklore documentation (for details of other collections, see Badalkhan 2000–2003). Corporuses of oral prose narratives have also been published in connection with studies of particular Balochi dialects (e.g. Turkmenistan Balochi, Axenov 2006; Sistani Balochi, Barjasteh Delforooz 2010; Koroshi Balochi, Nourzaei *et al.* 2015).

The oral tradition is still alive and there are to this day proficient storytellers to be found throughout Balochistan who know a wide repertoire of stories by heart. Like with the bards, however, many of them are elderly and few in the younger generation are interested in acquiring the art of storytelling, which is gradually being replaced by

new forms of entertainment, such as TV and watching films online (see also Badalkhan 2003: 233).

Commonly occurring types of oral narration are fairy tales, fables, and legends from the life of famous rulers, prophets and other venerated men. Although the main purpose of the stories is definitely to entertain, there are often moral lessons to learn from them. Recurring themes are social issues such as female chastity, the relation between a step-mother and a step-child, bringing up girls as if they were boys, and the futility of worldly riches. Often it is the weaker in society who take revenge on their oppressors in the stories, and negative qualities, such as greed and pride are condemned. However, equally often it is a thief, a liar, or a cheater who is the hero of the story. Although told in a highly rural society, it is interesting to note that there is a strong sense of urbanity and urban life as the ideal in many Balochi tales and legends (Jahani 2010).

Riddles, proverbs, and puns also play an important role in Balochi social interaction, both among men and women. Badalkhan (2003: 230–231) reports that riddle contests are highly appreciated pastimes. Several collections of proverbs and riddles have been published (e.g. Ghaws Bakhsh Sābir, n.y.; Ghulām Fārūq Baloch 2011; Shay Ragām 2012; Qadīr Majīd 2013) but this part of Balochi literature is far from being fully recorded. Elfenbein (1990: I: 436–453) has devoted a section each to these two literary forms where he also stresses their importance in the Balochi culture (see also Elfenbein 1989b).

3. *Written poetry.* There is no clear-cut line between non-written and written Balochi poetry. In the 1930s with an emerging publication of newspapers in British India, Baloch poets occasionally published poetry in Balochi in these newspapers, and in the early 1950s one of the most prolific 20th century poets, Gul Khān Nasīr, published his first collection of poetry entitled *Gulbāng* (Jahani 1997–1998: 82). He was first and foremost a politician, but also a great poet and lover of the Balochi language. He is considered to be the father of modern Balochi poetry and is known as the *Malik al-šuarā* [King of poets] of the Baloch. He, like almost all other young Baloch literate persons of his age, started by writing poems in Urdu, but when he attended a political gathering where Pashtun poets recited their poems composed in Pashto, and not in Urdu, he was so impressed that he then and there decided to shift to Balochi and never compose in Urdu again.

Gul Khān Nasīr's rich poetic production consists of lyrical poetry as well as epic poetry, and he mainly employs bound verse following the *'aruz* system (see also Jahani 1995–1996). Themes commonly found in his poetry are of a patriotic character, praising the beauty of the fatherland and the bravery of its heroes of old and urging the Baloch to unite and reclaim their former glory, but at the same time to be prepared to modernise their society. He authored 21 books ranging from history to poetry and commentaries on Balochi poetic tradition as well as some translations from Persian and Urdu. His total poetic production was published in 2014 in a single volume by the Baloch Academy in Quetta under the title *Tīr gāl kārūt* [The bullet speaks].

Āzāt Jamāldīnī is another poet who not only gave the Balochi language a stimulus with his monthly periodical *Balōčī* (for details on its publication, see, e.g., Dashtyari 2003: 323) when there was a dearth of Balochi publications, but he also fostered a generation of non-religious, nationalist, and progressive Baloch poets and writers.

While Gul Khān Nasīr and Āzāt Jamāldīnī belonged to the literary figures active in Quetta, one of the most well-known first generation literary activists in Karachi is Zahūr Shāh Sayad Hāshmī, whose fame is heavily dependent on his manifold activities, not only as a poet but also as a word-coiner, dictionary compiler, literary purist, and script reformer. Among other renowned poets of the early modern generation, who considerably developed Balochi poetry, Muhammad Husayn Anqā, Murād Sāhir, Atā Shād, Bashīr Bēdār, G. R. Mullā, Ahmad Zahīr and Karīm Dashti, all from Eastern Balochistan, can be mentioned. These were followed by a large number of poets in the last quarter of the 20th century and early 21st century. Prominent names among these include, among others, Allabashk Buzdār, Mubārak Qāzī, Ghulām Husayn Shōhāz, Munīr Mōmin, Manzūr Bismil, Ghanī Pahwāl, Qāsim Farāz, and Tāj Balōch. Presently, about a hundred books in Balochi are published annually, a majority of which are poetry collections.

Some poets have left Balochistan for political or other reasons. Among these are Malik Tawkī, now living in the USA, Akbar Bārakzahī in the United Kingdom, Major Majīd in the Sultanate of Oman, and Siddik Āzāt in Sweden. One of few poets from Western Balochistan, Aziz Dadiar, also lives in exile in Sweden.

Only in the younger generation do we find published poetry by women, even though there was the odd woman poet even earlier. Some young women poets are Zar Jān Nasīr who writes under the pen-name of Mehhlab, Zāhida Raīsī, and Sabīha Karīm, all from Eastern Balochistan.

In the poetry of the first generation poets, the Arabic metric system is predominant, whereas younger poets, following the trend set by Atā Shād, also write more and more free verse. Although patriotic and nationalistic themes are still popular and predominant, new themes of a more philosophical and/or psychological character have also been added. Some poets give voice to new world views, such as atheism, anarchy, and nihilism. Many also express their own inner frustration and desire for freedom of thought and individual expression.

4. *Written prose.* The Balochi written prose still finds itself at a rudimentary stage. As for non-narrative literary prose, there seems to be hardly anything that can be classified as literature according to Utas' definition. Although the language in some essays on various subjects including religion, language, and literature is often rather complicated, it can hardly be described as "elevated".

Fictional prose, particularly short story writing, is an emerging genre, and there are also a number of novels in Balochi. The themes treated in fictional prose are generally rather parochial, depicting the Balochi society and its injustices, prejudices, superstitions, hardships etc. Illicit love is another favoured theme. The style employed by a majority of the writers of fictional prose is social realism, and the end is often tragic.

All fictional prose writers of some fame are from Eastern Balochistan. Among the pioneers, Hakīm Balōch, Munīr Ahmad Bādīnī, and Ghanī Parwāz can be mentioned. Some of the more promising and trend-making young short story writers are A. R. Dād in Pakistan, Nāgumān in the United Kingdom, and Hanīf Sharīf in Germany. Among other names, Major Majīd from Oman (originally from Mand) and Shay Ragām from Dasht in Eastern Balochistan are worth mentioning.

One big problem with publication, particularly of prose literature, is that there is a very limited market for books in Balochi, so commercial publishers do not publish them willingly. Another misfortune in present times is that the security forces in Pakistan are hostile to books in Balochi and consider them instruments in the hands

of Baloch nationalists. As the personnel of these forces come from outside Balochistan and have no knowledge of Balochi they regard any book in Balochi with suspicion. Similarly, bookshops in Balochistan are frequently being raided and bookshop owners and their employees often apprehended if Balochi books are found in their stocks. As a result, bookshops generally avoid keeping books in Balochi to avert any problems with the security forces and government agencies. This hinders local publishers to publish and market books in Balochi. Consequently, publishing is either carried out by the writers themselves or by Balochi literary academies, sometimes partially financed by the government of Balochistan or through membership fees and donations from well-wishers.

5. *Songs*. There are several different types of songs “distinguished by their musical structure, manner of performance, the sex or social position of the performers, or the instrumental accompaniment” (Badalkhan 2000a: 773; for more on Balochi song genres see Badalkhan 1994). Women perform songs that are related to the life cycle, such as songs at childbirth and circumcision, lullabies, wedding songs and elegies. Other types of songs, such as love songs and work songs are performed by men. “One of the most famous Balochi folk-song genres” is the *zahīrōk* (from *zahīr* ‘longing’), sung by, e.g., travellers and shepherds far away from home or women doing tedious chores such as grinding or weaving (Badalkhan 2000a: 775).

There are different stringed instruments, drums, tambourines, bowed instruments, wind instruments, and a zither-type plucked instrument, called *baynġū*, that accompany different kinds of songs. The kind of song and its musical accompaniment determines the social class of the singer and/or the musician. Certain types of songs are also performed together with dances. There are also special songs and dances connected with festivities of the Zikri religious minority and with exorcist rituals of spirit-possessed persons (Badalkhan 2000a: 778–781).

Badalkhan (1999a) testifies to how the women are able to change the texts of the songs they sing in praise of their menfolk to honouring studies and a modern career instead of the virtues of a valiant warrior of past eras. This shows that there is a strong potential in the Balochi culture to adapt to a modern society with new demands on the language and its literature.

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