



BALUCHISTAN IIIA. BALUCHI POETRY

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The clearest way to describe Baluchi poetry is by dividing it into 4 periods: (1) classical, from ca. 1550-1700; (2) post-classical, from 1700-1800; (3) 19th century to early 20th century; (4) modern, after ca. 1930.

Historical development and genres. Up to the modern period, all Baluchi literature was oral and mostly poetical, saved only in the memories of professional reciters (*dōmbs*, *lōrīs*, or *lāngaws*), but from the 1850s on, it was sometimes preserved in writing by collectors (mainly British) in India. By far the most important of these was Mansell Longworth Dames (1850-1922), an Indian Civil Servant, whose work in the 1890s superseded that of all his predecessors. Others followed, including in the 20th century some Baluchi collectors. Serious literary production in prose was not attempted before the 20th century. (The main written sources are given in the Bibliography.)

The preserved poetry of the classical period appears to consist entirely of ballads, whilst from the post-classical times onward some lyrical poems, mainly ghazals (lyric poems; see [ĠAZAL](#)) or similar types, make their appearance. The oldest classical ballads, called *daptar šā'irī* “register ballads” due to their lists of personal, tribal, and place names, may date back to the



16th century. The few that have been preserved are often badly corrupted. Their content does not vary a great deal: the first migrations of the Baluch tribes from their supposed original home in Aleppo, Syria, after the Battle of Karbalā' (680 CE) eastwards towards Persia, thence through present-day Iranian [Baluchistan](#) to Kech (Kēč, in the Makrān division of Baluchistan province, Pakistan). The Kech valley was a central meeting-point for the tribes, who then branched out on their further migrations. Only these parts of the ballads, providing details (place-names, etc.) after the Baluch arrival in Iranian Baluchistan, can have any historical value. Their origins in Aleppo are quite mythical; some of these *daptars* have been published.

The body of Baluchi classical poetry is more extensive than previously thought, and only a part of it has been collected and published. The main body may be conveniently classified in various cycles of heroic balladry, and the constant theme is that of tribal conflict. The structure of Baluch society in the 16th-18th centuries is clearly mirrored in them. It is a picture of a semi-nomadic tribal society, strongly hierarchical and male-dominated, in which concepts of duty and honor play the chief roles, superseding all individual inclinations, so that the outcomes of conflicts are almost always tragic. The chief code of conduct was *riwāǰ* "tribal law," infringement of which usually meant death or banishment.

The most important, as well as extensive, cycle is the Čākur Cycle of ballads, a number of which have been collected and published. Its main subject is the events of the long, thirty years' war between the Rind and Lāšārī tribes, leading to the virtual extermination of the latter. The events described probably belong to the period 1475-1525. It is difficult to vouch for the contemporary nature of many of the extant ballads, for they have been elaborated and reworked over the centuries by reciters; but certainly the core of them must be authentic. Little can be deduced from their language, for the extreme conservatism of Baluchi has kept it from important linguistic change: the Baluchi of a thousand years ago cannot have been very different from the Baluchi of today.

Another important classical cycle is the Dōdā-Bālāč Cycle (dateable perhaps to the 18th century), which begins with the description of a raid by the Buledi tribal chief Mīr Bībarg on Dōdā's cattle, leading to a long and bloody series of retaliations on both sides until most of the principal actors are killed. Only Bālāč, Dōdā's brother, and his friend, the slave Nakīb, survive; he and a few followers proceed to wreak their revenge on their foes.



Also noteworthy are the many ballads in the Hammal j̄hand Cycle, describing the struggles of the Baluch of the Makrān coast with the Portuguese in the 16th century. At base certainly historical, the details have not as yet been studied or compared with possible material in Portuguese archives (for a more detailed description of these cycles, see [BALUCHISTAN III. BALUCHI LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE](#) ii. Baluchi Literature).

Besides these historical ballads, there exist a number of long compositions which could date from the 18th century, mainly based on well-known Persian romances, such as *Leyli o Majnun* and *ʿĪbirin o Farhād*; their authors are unknown. Of greater interest is the purely Baluchi epic *Dōstēn o Šīrēn*, of which several versions are known, including a first-rate modern version (1964) by the poet Gol Khān Naṣīr.

In the post-classical period of the 18th century, we come to the poetry of named poets, of whom the earliest as well as the most important is jām Durrak, the chief poet at the court of Naṣīr Khan I of Kalāt (1749-95). Whilst there are no extant manuscripts from his own time, much of what has come down to us seems genuine. His best work is characterized by a most individual style, of short lyric verses with irregular rhyme and a clipped meter; it has been much imitated. Several other poets of the 18th century are known by name, and brief examples of their work have been collected and published.

From the 19th century onwards, a much larger corpus of poetry is extant, and at least a half-dozen poets are well known, including two from Iranian Baluchistan and two from the eastern regions of Pakistani Baluchistan, and all of their poetry has been preserved in its original dialect form.

In the modern period after ca. 1930, several magazines were started in Karachi and Quetta for the purpose of publishing Baluchi writing in general, and these always included examples of poetry in each issue; the script used was a modified Urdu type. Poetry competitions were held. After the partition of India in 1947, several “Baluchi Academies” were founded in Pakistan, the main purpose of which was literary publication. The earliest of these was the *Balōčī Zubānē Dīwān* (“Baluchi language group”) in Quetta in 1951, but it lasted only two years. Its most important publication was probably *Gulbāng*, a collection of poetry by the poet Gol Khān Naṣīr of Nushki (1914-84), the leading poet of his time.

The centers of Baluchi publication have always been Quetta and Karachi, and



to a lesser degree, after 1978, also Kabul. Unfortunately, what promised to be an impressive program of literary publication in Kabul came to an end after the end of communist rule in 1992; and at the time of writing (2008) there is little prospect of a revival. But in Quetta and Karachi periodicals of note have been published (see Bibliography; Elfenbein, forthcoming). In Quetta, the most important literary magazine formerly was *Māhtāk Balōčī*, which appeared from 1956 at irregular intervals for over 30 years. Much material from the first collections of classical balladry first saw publication there. Nothing of note has been published in Iran, despite the large numbers of Baluchis living there.

Verse construction and metrics. Classical Baluchi balladry employs meters and rhyme schemes which have little or nothing in common with the traditions of Persian or Arabic poetry, and whilst some poets since the 19th century have written, for instance, ghazals in the Persian manner, most leading modern poets tend to avoid them, particularly since the literary revival of the 1930s.

Baluchi poetry depends above all on syllable count and stress; long and short syllables form its basis in various stress patterns. Stress is in principle restricted to long syllables, with one stress per foot, though exceptions are not infrequent. A long syllable is of the type VC or CVC; all other syllables are short. A short syllable may not follow a short syllable; various devices are used to scan a sequence of short syllables, one of the most common being to scan CV CV as CVC V. Sequences of vowels, such as the causative infix *-āēn-*, may be scanned as two syllables, or as a monosyllable, as required.

Rhyme is used as a punctuation device or for dramatic effect. Ultramodern poetry, influenced as it is by European models—principally English—is often composed in free verse, or in any other form which suits the poet's fancy. When rhyme is employed, lines may rhyme in bands of 2, 3, or 4 lines, seldom more. But the poet Gol Khan, in a parade of poetical virtuosity, has composed poems consisting entirely of one rhyme (see example 9, below). A change of rhyme marks the end of a thought sequence; particularly dramatic is a single unrhymed line (sometimes with a caesura or a change of rhythm) standing in the midst of several rhymed lines.

As a standardized written Baluchi has not yet developed, each poet tends to write in his own dialect. But classical balladry has always been recited in the Coastal dialect, and more or less accurately imitated by speakers of other dialects. Eastern Hill Baluchi is also used for classical ballads. (Two examples below, nos. 2 and 11, have been quoted in this dialect.) Most non-Coastal-



speaking poets have composed their work in a mixture of dialects in what is quite an artificial language; in particular the poet Gol Khān Naṣir has often used real (and imagined) Coastal dialect forms in his native Raxšānī. The poems below are cited in the form written or recited. The translations have been kept as literal as possible to facilitate understanding; no attempt has been made to do justice to the originals. Examples 2-11 are taken from Elfenbein, 1990. For the scansion pattern of each example, see [TABLE 1](#).

Example 1. The following exhibits the meter and rhyme scheme of one of the earliest ballads, a *daptar šā'ir* dating from perhaps the 16th century. Accidents of its (oral) transmission have produced many corrupt versions (e.g., Grierson, 1921, pp. 370-75). Below are the first 4 lines of what could be its original form (see Elfenbein, forthcoming).

Rājā ač Ḥalab zahr bītant
Ā rōč ki Yazīd sar zītant
Sulṭān Šāh Ḥusayn kušta
Rājān purr hasad bad burta

The tribes from Aleppo became angry
 On the day that their heads were attacked by Yazid
 Sultan Shah Ḥosayn was killed
 The tribes, full of jealousy, bore it badly.

The lines are of 8 syllables, in a triple rhythm of three feet with a truncated last foot. In line 3 one can scan *Ḥosayn* as three syllables: otherwise the line lacks a syllable. It will be noticed that many long syllables are scanned short, as needed. The lines rhyme in bands of two. This pattern is still in use today for some ballads.

Example 2. The following specimen from the Čākūr Cycle is in the Eastern Hill Dialect, and probably dates from the late 17th century (Elfenbein, 1990, p.332, no. 55 [1]).

Sēwī ghōṛawī gardān bāθ
Durrēn Gōharē margān bāθ
Gwahrām ža dō-žāh bē-žāh bāθ

May the Sihi troop of horse be as dust
 May it be the death of pearly Gohar
 May Gwahram be without either of his two places.



It is to be scanned in eight syllables, stressed as marked in Table 1. Line 3 has, irregularly, a short syllable on the first beat of the second foot.

Example 3. The following is from the Dōda-Bālāč Cycle, but perhaps dates from the post-classical period (Elfenbein, 1990, p.342, no. 57):

Dōdā manī kunḍī kaptā
Ērmānag o dast-ī mušta
Munḍ manā parmōš na-bīt
Dard-ant mān Bālāčē dilā
Dōdā is fallen at my knees

Depressed, and he wrung his hands
Never shall I forget
There are sorrows in Balač's heart.

This poem also shows an eight-syllable line, in triple rhythm with a truncated last foot. There are many interchanges of long and short vowels for scansion; rhyme is irregular: there are bands of two or more rhymed lines, with an unrhymed line preceding the refrain, which itself does not rhyme.

Example 4. The following extract is from a typical lyric poem of ĵām Durrak, a court poet at Kalāt in the 18th century (Elfenbein, 1990, p.308, no. 53):

Gōšit kungurān
Bēl o kēnagān
Šāhī hambalān

Listen, O braves
Friends and enemies
Royal companions.

Durrak's lyric poetry is characterized by short lines, usually with random rhyming schemes. This poem has a five-syllable line, with some longs scanned short.

The following examples, all of them modern, have been chosen to show a typical range of structures. I have restricted quotations to the first few lines; for further details the reader is referred to Elfenbein, 1990. Much used is a ten-syllable line of three feet in triple rhythm, with fixed stress on the first syllable of each foot. The last syllable of the line is also stressed.



Example 5.

*Raptagē taw hamā ča payrīyā
Čamm manī kōr-ant ač zahīrīyā*

Thou art only gone since yesterday
My eyes are blinded with yearning.

This poem, by Moḥammad ‘Onqā (‘Unqā, Elfenbein, 1990, p.132, no. 19(1)) is to be scanned as shown in Table 1; long syllables are often taken as short.

Example 6. In “Bahār Gāh” (“Springtime”; Elfenbein, 1990, p.138, no. 21) a famous long lyric poem by Āzāt ĵamāldīnī, we have a five-syllable line which is to be scanned iambically; its refrain runs:

*O dil ma-kan yāt
ranĵān ma-kan zyāt
ā māh o sālān
ā gapp o gālān!*

O heart, do not remember
Do not grieve me so much
Those months and years
Those chats!

The main poem consists mainly of eight lines preceding each occurrence of the refrain, which itself rhymes in bands of two.

Example 7. Another example of the three-syllable foot is to be seen in Moḥammad Ašāq Šāmīm’s “Balōčī Zubān” (“The Balochi Language;” Elfenbein, 1990, p.150, no. 24), which uses a four-foot, ten- or eleven-syllable line with irregular caesuras:

*Sarōkī nēst, nē rāhē nišān-int
guḍā ham kārawān sarsar ĵānān-int
agar manzil manā ča badgumān-int
hamē āwāz ča kōhān rasān-int
Balōčī mē watī sahdēn zubān-int*

No leader, no road-marker is there
Even so the caravan makes its way ahead



If a stage is depressing for me
 The same cry arrives from the mountains
 Baluchi is our own honeyed tongue.

Note how *watī* in the refrain must be scanned *wat-i* and not *wa-ti*; each verse consists of four lines, each of one rhyme, followed by the refrain line which may or may not rhyme with what precedes it.

Example 8. In “Balōčistān, Balōčistān!” (Elfenbein, 1990, pp.162-65, no. 28) Gol Khan has written what has become almost a national anthem. Written in an iambic, eight-syllable line, the first syllable of each foot must be scanned short even if it is long. The first verse runs:

may nām o nang o burzēn šān
may haḡḡ o gōšt o hōn o sāh
dar āhtag ač tay hākā
taw ē may māt o sērēn lāp
bibē sarsabz o ham šādāp
taw ammē sāh o ammē jān
Balōčistān, Balōčistān!

Our name and honor and high fame
 Our flesh and blood and bone and soul
 Emerged from thy dust
 Thou art our mother and full belly
 Be thou evergreen and a greensward

Thou art our soul and our life
 Baluchistan, Baluchistan!

Line 3 is deliberately irregular with only seven syllables (Table 1.8b), all of them long; a sudden caesura in its third foot adds to the tension.

Example 9. In “Tīr Gāl Kant” (“The Bullet Speaks;” Elfenbein, 1990, p.170, no. 30), Gul Khan exhibits a certain technical virtuosity, rhyming all lines in one rhyme, *-ārīā*:

byāit o bēlān may kačāhrīā
buškunit gālān pa dil-karārīā
kissagē kārān pa dawr-o-bārīā



Come O friends to our meeting
Hear verses with a contented heart
A story I bring for the times

The poem is mainly in eleven-syllable lines (cf. ten in Table 1.9a) with constant rhythm; note the displaced stress in line 3 (Table 1.9c).

Example 10. As an example of a modern treatment of a classical theme, Gul Khan in his modern epic *Dōštēn o Šīrēn* (Elfenbein, 1990, pp.203 ff.) has chosen an iambic, eight-syllable meter of four feet, in rhyming bands of two, three, or four bands; it begins:

byāit manī bēl o yalān
kōhnēn hikāyatē kanān
čō gwašta pēši mardumān

Come, my friends and comrades
I shall sing an old tale
As people of yore told it.

Example 11. Finally, as an example of a modern epic of an entirely different type, I cite the opening of Raḥm-‘Alī Marī’s *Gumbaḍa ḵanga Šā’ir* “The Battle of Gumbad,” composed in the early 20th century (Elfenbein, 1990, pp.308 ff.). The dialect is Eastern Hill Baluchi:

ilāhī yāt-ēn o sattār
karīm o kādar o ḍātār
samad o sādīk o sačyār
khayā diθā thaī diḍar
makā~ o dāīmī darbār.

I recall God the Veiler
The generous and powerful creator
The most high, honest, lover of truth;
Who has seen thy sight
Thy dwelling, thy eternal court?

The line is an eight-syllable, mostly three-beat foot. The fourth line is to be scanned in seven syllables (Table 1.11c).

For a music sample, see [Mirqambar](#).



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Periodicals.



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