



CLOTHING XIX. CLOTHING OF THE BALUCH IN PAKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN

CLOTHING

xix. Clothing of the Baluch in Pakistan and Afghanistan

In contrast to the stark landscape of much of Pakistan and [Afghanistan](#), the clothing of the Baluch is distinguished by colorful embroidery patterns that serve as ethnic markers, helping to differentiate Baluch from Pashtuns (Pathans), Punjabis, Sindhis, and other ethnic groups in these highly pluralistic areas (see xviii, above). The garb of the [Brahui](#), another ethnic group of central Baluchistan, is almost indistinguishable from that of the Baluch, their close neighbors. Although linguistically quite distinct—Brahui is a Dravidian language and Baluchi (see [baluchistan iii. baluchi language and literature](#)) Iranian—in recent years the two groups have joined politically, economically, and in other ways, in order to compete more successfully with the numerically dominant Pashtuns of northern Pakistani Baluchistan and southern Afghanistan.

Baluch apparel, which is loose-fitting and made of many meters of lightweight material, is well suited to the harsh and dusty desert and mountain environments that the Baluch inhabit. The emphasis here is primarily on the



garb of the Pakistani Baluch, who live in the province of Baluchistan (now officially Balochistan) in western Pakistan, and, to a lesser extent, of the Afghan Baluch, who are found in the extreme southwestern section of Afghanistan. Among the major tribal groupings in Pakistan are the Rend, Raḵṣānī, Marri-Bugti (Marī-Bogtī), Mangal (Mengal), Lashari (Lāṣārī), and Ghitchki (Gīčkī); in Afghanistan such groups as Madatkhan (Madadk̄ān), Mashkel (Maškēl), Shorawak (Šōrāwak), Adraskhan (Adrask̄ān), and Mushwari (Mūšwārī) are found. All these tribes have a nomadic history, and today a large proportion persist in a transhumant life-style; the majority of the Baluch are, however, agriculturalists or town dwellers.

There is some variation in apparel among tribes, especially in specific embroidery designs and in the terminology applied to garments and embroidery patterns. Geographic nuances are also apparent: The northern tribes in both Pakistan and Afghanistan wear heavier clothing as protection in the colder climate. Despite these differences, however, there is a basic style of clothing that can be identified as that of present-day Baluch (Figure 67). Only a few decades ago the shirts or dresses (*pašk*) were considerably fuller and reached to the ankles; the loose trousers, or pajamas (*pādak*), were also longer; and men's hair was not cut (Janmahmad, p. 53). This version can still be seen in Afghanistan and in isolated rural regions of Pakistani Baluchistan, especially among the Marri-Bugti; nevertheless, owing to increasing contact with urban centers and subsequent sedentarization, these traditional styles are undergoing change. At the same time, however, both political and economic competition among various ethnic groups in the region is growing more intense, and identification with one's tribal group can be most clearly expressed through traditional dress.

Embroidery designs and techniques. Most characteristic of Baluch costume is embroidery of a beauty and intricacy that contrast strongly with the simplicity of the remainder of Baluch material culture (Koniczny, p. 11). The designs, of which there are many, are composed primarily of geometric shapes suggestive of flowers and leaves arranged in symmetrical patterns. Women's dresses and men's hats provide the best examples of such careful handwork; the colors of both textiles and embroideries are vibrant, with shocking pink and parrot green among the most popular for both female and male. Certain specific embroidery patterns are very common in Pakistan: *hapt-rang* (seven colors; Figure 68a), *kōṭrō* (bungalow; Figure 68b), *mīṛčūk* (pepper; Figure 68c), and *kām-kār/zūrattō* (raw work; Figure 68d). Use of a single pattern is most



common, though sometimes more than one are combined on a single garment. One of the most popular embroidery compositions is the “frame design” (Azadi and Besim, p. 63), in which medallions, or flowers (*pūll*), of complex shape—some complete (*ṭīk*) and others truncated (*kapp*)—fill an assigned rectangular space of field and borders (Figure 68a, d-e). Similar frame designs are also quite common on Baluch flat-weave and pile rugs (see [baluchistan v. baluch carpets](#)), as well as on classic Turkman rugs from farther north in Afghanistan.

In some pieces of embroidery only cotton thread in a multitude of colors is used, whereas in others small circular mirrors (*šīša*) are also incorporated into the designs (Figure 68a, f). Among the Baluch such work is part of an ancient tradition, in which small pieces of mica were used before thin mirror glass became available. Intricate mirror work is also common in neighboring Sind province in Pakistan and the adjacent region of Rajasthan. The designs of the Marri-Bugti tribes (Figure 68e), an isolated population in the eastern portion of the province (Yacopino, p. 32), are generally considered the most detailed of Baluch embroidery designs. The Afghan Baluch use bolder and heavier patterns than those of Pakistan (Figure 68f), reflecting in both colors and stitches the influence of their more numerous and powerful Pashtun neighbors; indeed, Baluch garb is often influenced by that of neighboring groups, especially in the south, where designs from nearby Sind are incorporated (Janmahmad, p. 54).

Most Baluch women know how to embroider, but some are more skilled than others or take more interest in such work. They do not use charts or diagrams but instead create extremely complex designs from memory, often with assistance and suggestions from family members or neighbors. Many women set aside a few hours after completing their daily household tasks for embroidery work in the afternoons, either alone or in groups. Straight needles and commercial thread produced in Pakistan are most commonly used, though hooked needles are required for some patterns. The ground cloth may be of a solid color or a print; some of the cloth is produced in Pakistan, but some is imported from Japan and other countries. Once the embroidery is finished, the garment is assembled by a local tailor or by the woman herself if she is fortunate enough to own a sewing machine. Making clothing fulfills important family needs, but it also provides much enjoyment and recreation for women, who take great pride in their handiwork and consider it the essence of being Baluch. Most women labor for years embroidering fine works



of art for their daughters' dowries (*j[ah]āz, dāj*). Little girls begin to learn basic stitches and patterns at about the age of six or seven years. Extremely skilled embroiderers, or those who are quite poor, may also sell their work to other community members. The prices for their work vary considerably (e.g., \$1-\$75), depending on the difficulty of the pattern and other factors. Money earned from such transactions usually remains part of a woman's own budget and is used for household expenses or for her children (Hunte and Sultana).

Women's clothing. An outfit covered with detailed embroidery is everyday attire for the Baluch woman (Figure 67). She usually possesses at least two sets of matching dress and pajamas, which are worn until they are threadbare. The back of the Afghan Baluch dress often consists of a large square of cheap unembroidered cotton, which can be replaced when worn out without sacrificing the embroidery on the front of the dress. The woman may make a special costume for weddings, which, with the passage of time, becomes her everyday work dress. The embroidered pieces of the dress usually include a fully embroidered bodice (*jīg/jēg*) containing a central patterned strip (*tōī*), embroidered sleeves (*bānzārī*), and a large pocket (*las, paddō/pandōl*), stitched to the skirt of the dress, extending from waist to hem in front. This pocket is the major ethnic marker of Baluch female garb, a handy receptacle for the nomadic woman and more recently for the sedentary town dweller as well. It usually holds embroidery thread, small change, snuff (*nāswār*), medicines, and the like. The skirt is gathered at the waist on each side.

In accordance with the basic tenets of Islam, women must keep their heads covered; a Baluch woman wears a large scarf (*čādar, sarēg*), usually of light flower-printed cotton. Probably as a result of their nomadic history, strict veiling (*parda*) is not as common among the Baluch as among the Pashtuns, but most Baluch women do draw the corners of their scarves across their faces when unknown adult males are near. Most Baluch women today wear bright plastic sandals imported from Persia and sold at any town or city *bāzār* in Pakistan. Only a few decades ago, however, females wore the same shoes of heavy leather and old car tires or, in the hotter southern areas, of date-palm leaves that men wear (see below).

The Baluch woman's everyday garb is completed by jewelry, which serves as an indicator of economic standing. Most characteristic and most impressive are earrings, which typically consist of thirteen or fourteen small rings inserted along the rim of each ear from the top of the ear to the bottom of the lobe (*kārī*). The weight of these rings causes the upper flap of the ear to fall



forward, which is considered a sign of beauty. The earrings are most often of silver, though base metal and gold are also used; they are produced by Baluch silversmiths (*zargar*). A female baby's ears are usually pierced for such a series of small earrings shortly after birth. After marriage a woman may add huge earrings made of thick pieces of gold (*tong*), which are gifts from her husband. In addition, nose rings (*būl*) and nose pins (*pūllī* "flowers") are very popular, as are heavy necklaces (*tawk*) and bracelets (*dastē kangar*). These pieces are usually made of metal, which is commonly believed to be a "strong" substance, helpful in counteracting evil spirits (*jenn*). In addition, all females braid their long hair and tie the bottom of each braid with a single multicolored tassel (*sāgtī*) made of hundreds of small glass beads and yarn pompons.

Men's clothing. Although less colorful than women's attire, men's clothing is also characterized by special features that immediately identify the wearer as Baluch. Most important is the cap (*tōpī*), which has a characteristic blocked shape with a scalloped cutout in the front for ventilation (Figure 67). Women embroider these caps for their husbands and sons, using bright pink, orange, or red thread and gold or silver filament; in addition, a number of small, glittering pieces of mirror are incorporated into the intricate designs. Boys and young men wear only these caps, whereas older men add huge white turbans (*pāg*), each of light cotton cloth many meters long. The specific method of wrapping these turbans further serves to distinguish one tribe from another.

In addition to the loose shirt and pajamas men wear a tight-fitting vest (*giḍḍī, jēkaṭ*) embroidered on the edges of the front and pockets, usually in the *kām-kār/zūrattō* pattern (Figure 68d). The work is normally done by hand, though the dark-blue, brown, or black Marri-Bugti vest is machine-embroidered all over in floral and vine patterns. Historically only a white shirt and pajamas were worn, but today these garments are indistinguishable in color and cut from those worn by the Pashtuns, usually of such muted solid colors as beige, white, or gray, with which the colorful embroidered vest makes a striking contrast. Young men may wear bright blue or green garments, however.

Perhaps the best-known type of Baluch footwear is the heavy sandals (*čabbaw*) produced by men in hundreds of small shops throughout Baluchistan; the tops are of heavy leather and the soles cut from old automobile tires, which are excellent for walking on rough desert or mountain terrain and are comfortable in town as well. There are a score of different arrangements of straps and braids associated with various regions. In the hot south traditional



footwear made from palm fronds is still to be seen, though it is no longer common.

Children's clothing. From birth to the age of six months infants are tightly swaddled in large pieces of cloth (*bandūmī/bandōk*) tied with colorful woven rope (*čett*) that women make by hand. Attached to the end of the rope and serving as a fastener is a huge stuffed triangle colorfully embroidered in the *kām-kār* (Figure 68d) or another pattern. Swaddling is said to prevent the infant from crying and also to keep him or her warm. The infant's head is covered with a multicolored bonnet edged with brilliant embroidery. Toddlers of both sexes are allowed to wander near home wearing frocks without pajamas. According to legend, boys cannot be killed in tribal feuding before they have begun to wear trousers, which is usually at the age of three or four years (Baluch, 1977).

The clothing of older children is simply a miniature version of adult garb. For example, as soon as a little girl is six months old she is fitted with a small frock covered with heavy embroidery and with a large front pocket. Small boys wear heavy sandals in styles similar to those of their fathers. Amulets (*ta'wīd*) are commonly worn by all infants and children, who are thus protected from evil spirits; the amulets may be small leather packets holding extracts from the Qur'an and strings of turquoise beads, fish bones, and the like worn round the neck.

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