



CLOTHING XVIII. CLOTHING OF THE BALUCH IN PERSIA

CLOTHING

xviii. Clothing of the Baluch in Persia

1. Traditional Baluch embroidered dress

The area traditionally known as [Baluchistan](#) comprises the large southeastern portion of the Persian plateau and portions of southwestern Afghanistan and western Pakistan. The Persian province of Baluchistan is inhabited mainly by nomads and a settled rural population. This region is particularly noted for a distinctive type of richly embroidered women's costume, which is still commonly worn in the villages. The embroidery, traditionally produced in cottage industries, is even now, despite inevitable changes, particularly in the color combinations of the needlework, one of the popular handicrafts for which an active market exists.

The basic garments are variations of the traditional and tribal costume characteristic of Persia as a whole: a long, loose robe with a round neckline, a slit down the center of the bodice, and long, wide sleeves tapering toward the wrists ([plate cxliii](#)), worn over a chemise and wide trousers narrowing at the ankles and with a drawstring at the waist. The fabric used today is synthetic. The material maybe plain or printed with an all-over design. Either black or solid bright colors, predominantly red, plum, and orange, provide fitting



backgrounds to set off the very fine and colorful embroidery. As the available fabric comes in narrow widths, numerous seams cunningly fitted together are necessary for the wide chemise. Occasionally, the dress is made up of wide satin pieces in a variety of colors patched together in orderly stripes. The costume is completed with a long, rectangular headscarf of transparent fabric, usually black, colorfully embroidered all around.

Baluch embroidery is worked on a base fabric of loosely woven cotton in panels, which facilitates detailed needlework. The embroidered panels are sewn onto the dress, covering the wide, square bodice entirely (*zī*; [plate cxliv](#)); the long rectangular panel down the center front of the skirt (*jīb*) comes to a point at the top, where it touches the bodice. The cuffs of the trousers and sleeves in particular are also provided with wide bands of embroidery. Nowadays, however, the trouser cuffs are generally embroidered with a simple machine-made motif. The vertical seams of the robes can be ornamented with either narrow bands of machine-made motifs or gilt edging, and an unusual feature is a square patch of embroidery appliquéd on the back of the shoulders. The borders of the neckline, cuffs, and bodice closing are neatly finished in a distinctive fashion. In some areas of Baluchistan mirror work is also incorporated into the embroidery, anchored by buttonhole stitching; alternatively sequins are scattered over the embroidery, a type of ornamentation favored in Pakistani Baluchistan (see [xix](#), below).

Embroidery is worked in strictly compartmentalized repeat geometric and angular designs; stylistic differences in the patterns and colors reflect different geographical areas within the province. The motifs may be stylized versions of flowers and plant forms.

The colorful and opulent ornamentation of Baluch dress may be a response to the harsh environment. Traditionally embroidery was worked in lustrous mercerized cotton thread, in a rich range of orange, red, and plum shades, crisply set off with touches of dark green, maroon, royal blue, and black and flecks of white; now it has generally been replaced by nylon thread. The embroidery itself is very fine, intricate and detailed. The stitches consist of large double back stitches (*ṣarrāfi-dūzī*), double braid stitches forming ridges, eyelet-hole stitches, running stitches, buttonhole stitches, ladder stitches, satin stitches sometimes forming a chevron design (*zarīf-dūzī*), fine interlacing stitches (*perīvār-dūzī*), and small blocks of satin stitches forming geometric shapes (*balūči-dūzī*).



It is relevant to add a word about the traditional jewelry invariably worn by Baluch women with their embroidered costume. The wrists are ornamented with pairs of wide silver bracelets with raised designs. There may also be a choker of semiglobular gold roundels with granulations, topped with alternating red and turquoise stones and surrounded by a double border of plastic gold beads, the whole composition sewn on a band of black material. A profusion of different silver rings worn on the fingers and in the nostrils completes their adornment.

In contrast to the women, men traditionally wear sober white clothing consisting of long, very loose shirts over extremely full trousers (approximately 2.2 m wide), which fall between the legs in folds and taper only at the ankles. The headdress is a white turban with protruding ends.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

This article is based on personal observations. See also I. A. Firouz, "Needlework," in J. Gluck and S. Gluck, eds., *A Survey of Persian Handicraft*, Tehran, 1977, pp. 256-58.

Idem, "Countering the Anonymity of Daily Routine. Embroidery in Iran," *Asian Culture* 34, 1983, p. 22.

(Iran Ala Firouz)

2. Baluch clothing and embroidery today

Today the Baluch, while maintaining their traditional styles of clothing, work with an expanded palette of colorfully patterned commercial fabrics and threads. Local demand is increasingly satisfied by machine embroideries produced by men, who have introduced intricate stitches and new motifs. The increasing demand among urban and foreign connoisseurs for hand embroideries, which take months to produce, has led women to specialize in this work for the marketplace

Traditional men's costume. The traditional costume worn by Baluch men is usually of white, cream, khaki, or light-gray cotton. The trousers are extremely



wide, hanging in folds between the legs (plate cxlv). They are drawn in to a waistband and are tapered at the ankles. A loose shirt reaches to the knees or even lower and is worn over trousers. The older style has a round neckline with a buttoned opening on one shoulder. The more modern neckline has a collar and a buttoned opening down the front to the waist. Until the 1920s men in colder regions used to wear fully embroidered jackets over this basic costume. The material, woven by the men themselves, was of lamb's wool or goat hair and was at most 40 cm wide. The women sewed these pieces into jackets, which they then embroidered with traditional motifs and colors. The headgear of men consists of a piece of cloth wrapped as a turban, which is gradually becoming less popular.

Traditional women's dress. The women wear a straight, loose robe of cotton or light wool, extending to mid-calf. The simple round neckline is slit to the breastbone in front. Sleeves are long and loose and slightly tapered at the wrist. This robe is worn over loose-fitting trousers of a different color; the trousers are gathered at the waist with a drawstring and tapered at the ankles (plate cxlvi).

The most striking feature of the women's costume is the hand embroidery covering the front of the dress and the cuffs of the sleeves and trousers. These embroidered pieces are prepared separately and later sewn onto the dresses. The piece for the front of the bodice (*zī*) is square and extends across the entire front from shoulders to waist. Another rectangular piece (*koptān*) extends from the waist to the hem of the dress and comes to a point at the top; the sides of this piece are left unstitched for approximately 30 cm, so that it can function as a large pocket. Two trapezoidal pieces 25 cm wide and 45 cm long are stitched onto the sleeves as cuffs, and two similar but slightly smaller pieces decorate the trouser hems.

A century ago silk thread was used for this fine needlework; the women raised the silkworms themselves; made the thread locally, then dyed it with vegetable dyes. Within the past century, however, cotton thread has been imported for this purpose, at first mostly from neighboring provinces of India and subsequently from Pakistan. The traditional colors used in the needlework were limited to six, the most important of which were two shades of red (a dark crimson and a lighter vermilion or orange); black and white were used to a lesser degree, with a few specks of green and blue. The material for these embroidered pieces was of a simple weave with clearly visible warp and weft threads, usually in a dark color.



The traditional embroidery technique remains the same. Initially the outline of each motif is sewn onto the back side of the material, a process called *sīahkār*. The outlines are then filled in with the various colors, each of which has its specific place in the design. The whole piece is worked from the back side, an arduous and lengthy process. When it is completed, the embroidery completely covers the base material (plate cxlvii).

There are approximately fifty to seventy motifs in Baluch embroidery (*čakan-e balūčī*), each with its own name, though the names may differ slightly in different regions and simpler versions are identified by the names of the localities where they are made. In Persia this type of embroidery is practiced only by Baluch women and is still very much alive among the settled populations in Persian Baluchistan, especially in the villages of the central region and in the Āhorrān mountains. Within the last thirty years innovative techniques and about 390 new colors have been introduced.

Until recently women's headgear consisted simply of a rectangular piece of thin material (*sarūk*), embroidered on the edges with a simple pattern, which fell to a point just above the knees in back. Since the Revolution of 1358 Š./1979 women have been forced by the government to wear the *čādor*, which covers their beautiful embroidered clothing entirely. Although economic conditions in Baluchistan are harsh, jewelry is accumulated by a woman and her family as a form of displayable wealth. Most pieces are crudely fashioned of silver, though gold is worn by those who can afford it. They are usually decorated with semiprecious stones, glass, or even plastic imitations. The jewelry, which resembles that of the Turkmen and the women of Pakistan, includes headbands, chokers, necklaces, bracelets, earrings of various types, and nose ornaments.

[The author of this article first became interested in the textile arts of Baluchistan in 1960, and subsequently, in the course of numerous trips to that province, she acquainted herself with the traditional embroidery of Baluch women. She became a champion of this art, striving to make it better known outside Baluchistan. She also perceived areas in which the embroideries could be made more appealing, in terms of the variety of colors, designs, and materials. With her assistance, many Baluch women were able to find new outlets for their work in Tehran and abroad.]

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