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GILĀN XIV. ETHNIC GROUPS
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**GILĀN**

xiv. Ethnic Groups

The organization of work in Gilān is marked by an apparently ethnic division of labor. Each group living in the province is characterized by one or several specific production activities, so that an ethnonym refers as much to territorial, linguistic, and cultural roots as to any dominant professional specialization. *Gil-a mard* (lit. “man of Gilān”) thus refers to a farmer from the plain that speaks Gilaki (see GILĀN x. Languages), while Gāleš, a mountain breeder in the eastern part of the province, uses the dialect known as Gāleši. An ethnonym can have different meanings depending on the speaker, but it generally combines cultural and professional dimensions. As Marcel Bazin and Ali Pour-Fickoui (p. 26) note, to many Gilaks, particularly to the city-dwellers of western and central Gilān, a Ṭāleš is a stockbreeder, while the Ṭāleš use the same word, in the northernmost part of the area, to denote a cultivator of rice, as opposed to a Gāleš (stockbreeder). Whatever the differences, the various populations that coexist in the region do not have equal access to the most valued local resources. For this reason, collective names are not only identifiers, but also point to the relative position in the economic hierarchy.

The main regional resources (rice, and in the past, silk) are the prerogative of the Gilak and incidentally, of the Ṭāleš people on the plain. Gilaks also control the principal sectors of commerce and administration, even if, for the latter, they compete with civil servants from the inland. The mountain populations of

the humid side of Mount Alborz (Gāleš and most Ṭāleš people), specializing in breeding cows and sheep, occupy a peripheral position in the regional space, and have a lower status than their Gilak neighbors. The Sunnite faith of a part of the population—indeed of the majority of the population in the Asālem and Ṭāleš Dulāb districts—contributes to the marginalizing of the Ṭāleš people (Bazin and Bromberger, pp. 14-15 and chart 4).

Subsidiary activities and jobs, in the context of the province's overall economy, are allotted to different minorities who either reside permanently in isolated pockets in the province or form part of the province's migratory seasonal labor.

At the forefront of these minority groups, quantitatively speaking, are the Azarbaijanis of the Ḵalḵāl region. They are employed specifically in the more menial tasks associated with agriculture, masonry, and itinerant trading, as well as in the more skilled work of fishing at sea, which has for long been completely out of the control of seaside Gilaks. As pointed out by H. L. Rabino and D. F. Lafont in 1910 (p. 141), for many generations, the Ḵalḵālis had been accustomed to leaving their own cold climate in the fall to seek work in the milder clime of the plains of Gilān and Māzandarān. Each year, 15,000 to 25,000 seasonal migrant workers of both sexes come down from their mountains, carrying all their belongings in a bundle tied to a stick. Further, on Nowruz, at the advent of spring, the Ḵalḵālis down their tools, pack up, and return home. During their winter stay in the plain of Gilān, Ḵalḵālis used to be hired for physically arduous tasks, such as land clearance, plowing, shoring up flood-banks in the rice fields, logging, and threshing rice with a pedal-driven flail. But with the mechanization of most agricultural tasks, the demand for Ḵalḵālis as rural laborers has substantially decreased. Today, many are hired on building sites as construction workers, and particularly as plasterers. Others are traveling salesmen who later become shopkeepers. In the eastern part of the province, Ḵalḵālis must compete with the Gālešis, with the inhabitants of the districts of Deylamān, Kelišom, and even of Ṭāleqān, who migrate each season from the highlands to the rice plains, and to the hills of Lāhijān to pick tea, or travel to eastern Gilān to pick oranges.

Even more surprising is the specialization of the Ḵalḵālis and other Azeris in fishing enterprises, which take two distinct forms. From the end of October to mid-March, part of the male population from the villages located around Herowābād migrates to the banks of the Caspian Sea to work in cooperative companies engaged in commercial catches with a seine (especially of the *māhi-*

*e safid*, a variety of goatfish). Sturgeon fishing, which is carried out twice a year (February to June and August to September), under the control of the state company Šerkat-e sahāmi-e šilāt-e Irān, is carried out by Azeris, though from different regions. Most executives and permanent employees of the fish factories located in Gāziān, near Anzali, are descendants of Azeris from the Caucasus, a relic of the time when the fishing of scale-less fish (regarded as *ḥarām* "forbidden" by Shiite law) was under Russian control, and later under the control of an Iranian-Soviet company (Bazin, II, p. 130). The seasonal workforce comes primarily from the Ardabil plain.

As land-people, the *Gil-a mard* have, until recently, turned their back on sea-fishing activities, and devoted themselves to fishing in rivers and lagoons. The Gilānis' distaste for the sea is manifested by the fact that commercial navigation on the Caspian Sea was during the first half of the 20th century in the hands of crews of Jaʿfarbāy Turkmens whose home ports and shipyards were Gomišān or Bandar-e Torkaman on the eastern bank of the Caspian (Rabino, 1917b, p. 63; Bazin and Bromberger, 1988, pp. 91-93; de Planhol, pp. 371-72).

The image of the Turkmens, and especially that of the Azeris (generically called Ḵalḵālis), is associated with robustness, discipline, and rusticity. These enduring stereotypes (Abbott, fol. 23; MacKenzie, fol. 19; Rabino, 1917a, pp. 28-29) affected the selection of industrial workers. Thus, when in the 1930s major textile companies set up businesses in several cities of Māzandarān, they chose to hire Ḵalḵālis rather than local residents, because of their reputation for hard work and adaptability to the tasks assigned to them (Kopp, p. 24).

The Kurds, who settled in Gilān over three distinct periods of time, are another marginal minority. In the southern part of the province (in the districts of ʿAmmārlu, Deylamān, and Raḥmatābād), Rišvendi Kurds, transplanted there during the reign of Shah Abbas I (r. 1587-1629), live in several villages and specialize in raising sheep. Other groups were transferred to the area under Nāder Shah (r. 1736-48). As a result, some villages in the Rudbār-e Zeytun area are populated with Kurds from Qučān, where they had been sent earlier by the Safavids. Finally, rural towns in the coastal plain (in the district of Langarud, in particular) are home to Kurds originally from around Kermānšāh, who at the beginning of the 20th century were sent to settle in this zone to form a defensive buffer against the Russian threat. The Kurds who live on the plain have a monopoly on buffalo breeding, a pastoral specialty met

with scorn by their Gilak neighbors.

Moreover, these buffalo specialists are stigmatized for their religious affiliation: they are Ahl-e ḥaqq (q.v.) and called, as elsewhere in Iran, ʿAli-Allāhi (Rabino, 1917a, pp. 31, 260, 270, 280; Bazin and Bromberger, pp. 14-15; Bazin, 1988, pp. 80-81). The visible sign of their religious affiliation is their long moustaches, not in keeping with the *feṭrat* (the laws of maintaining a healthy nature, according to Islamic doctrines), which they grow over their upper lips, and which is the subject of stigmatizations.

Among these minority groups of a lower social status the ʿArāqi (a term for the inhabitants of the interior plateau derived from the old territorial divisions going back to the Abbasids; Le Strange, *Lands*, pp. 24-25, 185-86) were *sārebān* (camel rider) and *čārvādār* (mule driver). Inter-regional transport by caravans, from Qazvin to Anzali and vice versa, was left to caravan drivers from the arid side of Mount Alborz.

If the Kurds, the Azarbaijanis, and the ʿArāqi caravan drivers are at the bottom of the social ladder, some non-native urban minorities have enjoyed a more favorable fortune. Armenians, who were either transplanted from the Caucasus to Gilān during the wars of Shah Abbas I, or in the 19th and early 20th centuries emigrated from Russia, played a considerable part in international trade, particularly of silk. Many held trading posts in Baku, Darband, and Astrakhan, and were deeply involved in the Russo-Persian trade (Chaqueri, p. 64). In 1906, ten out of sixty households, delegations and simple agents sharing in the processing and marketing of silk were Armenian (Rabino and Lafont, pp. 143-44; Bromberger, 1989, pp. 74, 85). Another Armenian specialty was pig breeding, which was initiated in the 1920s by emigrants from the Caucasus. In the 1970s, there were eight pig farms and one porcine meat-factory near Rašt (Bazin and Pour-Fickoui, p. 107). In addition, the Armenians retrieved wild boar killed by peasants near the rice fields, and turned them into prepared meats.

The Greeks from Bursa, Smyrna (Izmir), Istanbul, and Baku also formed an active minority in the 19th and early 20th centuries. They focused their commercial and technical skills on three principal fields: silk trade and processing (an agent from the Pascalidis firm in Bursa even gave his name Bezanos to a type of cocoon in the 1890s), the production of olive oil in the Rudbār area (in the late 19th century and under Russian protection controlled by the Koussis and Theophilaktos company), and boxwood farming.

Thus, at the beginning of the 20th century, each group was symbolically associated with an activity, an animal, or a plant. The *Gil-a mard* were associated with rice cultivation, silkworm production and raising oxen. Bullfighting (*varzā jang*) was the symbol of this bovinophile culture (see GĀVBĀZI). The Gāleš and Ṭāleš people were known for their cattle drives from the forested piedmont plains (*qešlāq*) to the alpine prairies (*yeylāq*). The Kurds on the plain were buffalo-breeders, the Armenians pig farmers, and the ʿArāqis caravan drivers. Azeris fished the sea and worked in the fields. Turkmens specialized in marine transportation, while the Greeks partly controlled the production of olive oil (see Bromberger, 2008, pp. 155-57).

This brief description calls for three observations. First, it must be noted that certain specializations, such as Armenian pig breeding or Greek olive-oil production, are directly related to cultural and historical factors, while others are merely the ethnic expression of economic inequalities. Nothing in the culture of the Turkish-speaking Ḵalḵālis predisposes them to hard agricultural work, if not for their status as poor mountain people. As mentioned above, to the east, the Gālešis and the Ṭāleqānis traditionally came to work at the same tasks during the cold season. Therefore, the concept of an ethnic work division is, in many cases, likely to hide the real nature of underlying social relations (see Bromberger, 1988, p. 103). Second, the technical and political evolution in the 20th century caused some specializations to disappear or decline. The Greeks, like other foreign minorities, left Gilān after the First World War. The end of pig-breeding and import-export activities after the 1979 Islamic Revolution caused a significant decline in the Armenian population. The mechanization of agriculture often made the Ḵalḵālis' tasks redundant, in spite of their continued willingness to do hard work. Lastly and more importantly, a process of cutting across and undoing these divisions of labor started about late 20th century. A greater number of *Gil-a mard* take part in cooperative fisheries, while some Ḵalḵālis and Gālešis have settled in villages on the plain, becoming sons-in-law (*ḵān dāmādi*) by marrying local girls, or by sharecropping land owned by people who have migrated to towns. In addition, Azarbaijanis have become active in the urban economy, particularly construction and trade, so that the traditional hierarchy, though still noticeable objectively and subjectively, is in fact beginning to wane..

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