



## RESEARCH NOTE

### The Ethnic Identity of Turkmenistan's Baloch

Some ethnic groups are remarkably resistant to surrounding influences, and only slightly undergo assimilation. What, then, are the most significant factors affecting ethnic assimilation? The foremost is state intervention. The state can support the nationalist tendencies of one group of inhabitants while suppressing the ethnic expressions of non-dominant groups. How do various ethnic groups respond to this kind of support or oppression? In this research note the Baloch minority, a relatively small group in Turkmenistan, have been chosen as a case study to examine the questions raised above. The chosen ethnic group under investigation here does not have a homeland to provide it with support. There are numerous such ethnic groups in non-dominant positions without states that cause tension between minorities and majorities. The tension is often extremely strong, even when such groups have political autonomy (e.g., the Kurds in Iraq and the Uyghurs in China). The aim of this report from the field is to explain how self-aware the Baloch of Turkmenistan are of their identity and the extent to which they have succumbed to modernization and attempts to render them Turkmen.

KEYWORDS: Baloch—Turkmenistan—minorities—ethnic identity—assimilation

This article uses findings obtained during ongoing field research conducted among the Baloch in Turkmenistan during 2009 to 2015.<sup>1</sup> Field research was conducted in Mary Province (Ýolöten District). Only general information about respondents is provided to protect their anonymity. Based on this research, supplemented with structured and unstructured interviews with members of the local Baloch community, we discovered several fundamental events and elements that bind members of this minority together. These elements, we argue, are essential in maintaining Baloch identity, despite state-sponsored schemes to assimilate them into the majority group. A bit of historical contextualization is therefore useful at the outset.

The Baloch ethnic group descended from the originally nomadic nations of Central Asia, Iran, and Pakistan. As an ethnic group without its own state, it was affected by numerous external influences during its ethnogenesis, specifically from the empires and political systems to which it has been subjugated throughout history. In addition to the geographical region we term “historical Balochistan”—which spreads out across the borders of modern-day Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan—at least four generations of Baloch can also be traced to India, states of the Persian Gulf, Africa, Bangladesh, and Turkmenistan. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Baloch migrated to these areas from territories in which they had lived nomadically. They migrated due to the poor living conditions they experienced under foreign rulers, as a result of which they wandered in search of wages and labor. It is important to note that these labor migrations occurred both within and between states. We cannot trace all of the migratory patterns of the Baloch here but will focus on their movements into Turkmenistan.

#### BALUCH MIGRATION TO TURKMENISTAN

The Baloch live in southern Turkmenistan in the city of Mary. They comprise 0.8 percent of the total population of the nation. Despite their relatively small number—there were approximately 30,000 Baloch in 1989 (Panov 1990)—and the fact that in Turkmenistan their status is inferior, they form relatively tight-knit groups and have maintained their identity in the dominant Turkmen environment. How were they able to maintain their sense of distinct identity over the generations? One way is by creating a sense of historical consciousness through the narratives

they tell themselves. The Iranian or Pakistani Baloch especially developed a sense of ethnolinguistic distinctness primarily by telling stories about their mythical origins going back to the Prophet Muhammad. For Turkmenistan's Baloch, these stories evoke their arrival in the country.

The Baloch arrived on camels and donkeys as nomads from Afghanistan and Iran in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when they settled in the Sarakhs and Baýramaly districts. According to their oral history, most of them came in the 1920s. The main reason for leaving Afghanistan and Iran was a lack of pastureland, hard living conditions under feudal lords, and invasion of their territories by other ethnic groups (Hanzlíčková 2017).

When the Baloch first moved to Turkmenistan, they experienced numerous hardships because they were used to living in *gedan* (Balochi tents) and had to adapt to the ideas of their new state, the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic, which was established in October 1924 on part of the territory that comprised what was formerly known as Turkestan. During that period, the official nationality recorded in official documents became extremely important. In some cases, it was possible for citizens to choose their desired nationality, but in some states government officials decided on the nationality imposed upon minority groups. This is precisely what happened to the Baloch upon their arrival.

During the 1930s, Central Asia experienced the rapid and artificial creation of a new national identity, which was later superseded by a supranational Soviet identity. This new identity was connected to the Soviet state, its ideology, and the construction of patriotism that was essentially Soviet in nature, while lower classifications of identity may have included ethnic identity.

The Baloch now perceive some of the events of the 1930s and 1940s, such as the settling of their nomadic population and violent collectivization, in a positive light, since they improved living standards and healthcare, provided regular hot meals and warm clothing, and provided for women and children during famines. However, most events, such as the forced abandonment of their traditional way of life, discrimination, oppression of Balochi identity, and a ban on teaching the Balochi language in schools, are still viewed in a very negative light.

Drawing on the knowledge, experience, and materials collected from two long periods spent with Turkmenistan's Baloch in 1926–1929 and 1958–1961, Edit Gafferberg (1969) describes the pros and cons of the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) policy toward ethnic minorities. On the one hand, the USSR improved living standards, providing food and medical assistance during the famine in the 1930s. On the other, the USSR prevented the cultural and linguistic development of the Baloch. Instead, they re-educated them into accepting a settled way of life, since nomadism was perceived as a burden and a source of trouble to the state. The breakdown of nomadic lifeways broke up traditional Balochi tribal communities, which diminished the power of Balochi feudalists known as Khans. During the process of settlement and land distribution, officials deliberately ignored family groupings and tribal ties.

The official literature records the Baloch as having left their original nomadic tradition for a settled way of life in the USSR in the second half of the twentieth

century (Vinnikov 1971, 151–53). Although this narrative is largely propaganda, the Baloch of Turkmenistan now regard this transformation as positive.

#### BALOCH AS A NATIONAL MINORITY IN TURKMENISTAN

Following the collapse of the USSR, the governments of the Central Asian republics guaranteed a leading role to titular nationalities. For instance, knowledge of the official state language was no longer a prerequisite for citizenship (as in the Baltics, for example), although it did confer a certain social status. The collapse of the USSR therefore reduced the social status of the Balochi population, as jobs in state administration were reserved for titular nationalities. In an independent Turkmenistan, strong nationalistic tendencies emerged and were supported by President Niyazov. The lives of all national minorities were often made very difficult, especially in the area of civil service, which almost exclusively employed ethnic Turkmen within the state administration and educational system. National minorities (including the Baloch) were labelled as politically unstable elements that were persecuted by the police (Chronicles of Turkmenistan 2004).

The unequal status of ethnic minorities in Turkmenistan is also mentioned in the preamble of the Constitution of Turkmenistan, which speaks only of the sovereignty of the “Turkmen nation” in Turkmenistan. For example, Article 55 stipulates that the president must be a citizen of Turkmenistan who is of “Turkmen nationality.”

#### THE MAIN ELEMENTS OF BALOCHI ETHNIC IDENTITY

##### *Language*

One of the elements that connects members of any national minority is language. Using a specific language is thus a key indicator of ethnic identity. However, there are two different understandings of the meaning of language. The first is essentialist, which Johann Herder (1772) and others use to describe language as the heart of the nation. The second is constructivist, where language and ethnic identity are perceived as social constructs and therefore are treated as both relational and negotiable (Lytra 2016, 133). Language may effectively serve as a ticket (or barrier) of entry for members of certain groups. Conversing with a specific accent, for example, immediately reveals whether an individual is one of “the others” or a member of the dominant group. If language and at least some cultural traditions are maintained, people feel as though they are still members of their nation of origin. Language also increases people’s awareness of their roots and origins, as is the case for the Turkmen Baloch.

The Balochi language is only passed on orally in Turkmenistan, since it is not taught in schools. Most Balochi children and young people in Turkmenistan, however, talk to each other and with their parents in their native tongue. The language is thus maintained among Turkmenistan’s Baloch owing to the close connections that exist between Balochi families and the fact that most villages are purely Balochi.

In Turkmenistan, Balochi villages are situated in areas around the city of Mary,

known in earlier times as Merv or Margiana in the Ýolöten district; in Turkmenkala; and in Bayramaly. Some villages, such as Turbin, Kalinin, Zhdanova, and Topkhana, are inhabited only by the Balochi population, while in others the Baloch live alongside the Turkmen or other groups that speak Iranian languages. In purely Balochi villages, the Balochi language dominates. In mixed villages, the Turkmen and Balochi languages are both found. In Kushki/Serhetabat, near the border with Afghanistan, Farsi/Persian is the dominant language among the older population. The situation in cities is different, though, where in the marketplace, at school, and wherever the Baloch meet Turkmen, the Turkmen language is spoken.

The language of Turkmenistan's Baloch forms an extremely significant part of their ethnic identity, in part because they are much smaller in size than the Turkmen majority. The fact that it is not taught in school does not diminish its use. Indeed, the compact and tightly knit Balochi settlements dotting the rural landscape provide good environments in which to transmit the language.

In the 1930s, the USSR created a Latin-based alphabet for the Baloch of Turkmenistan. Balochi newspapers were issued in Ashgabat and Mary, and Turkmenistan's Baloch were the first to be allowed to learn to read and write their own language. However, this political circumstance only lasted until 1937, and during this period, only a few textbooks and brochures with political content were issued ("Izdan pervyj perevod" 2005). Following a sudden change in Soviet policy, the national individuality, diversity, and richness of other cultures was considered nationalistic and an obstacle to building socialism. The author of the Balochi textbooks and alphabet was executed in 1938 because he was considered to be an "anti-Soviet element."

Until the end of the 1980s, Turkmenistan's Balochi language only existed in verbal form, since newspapers or books in the language were not published. Following political reforms in the USSR in the 1980s that were implemented by then Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, the Baloch of Turkmenistan were given another opportunity to reclaim their ethnic heritage. They were promised that they could teach the Balochi language in school and, in cooperation with teachers from Leningrad / Saint Petersburg, a Balochi primer was prepared in Cyrillic. However, before such education could even begin, the USSR dissolved. Then, after the subsequent formation of independent Turkmenistan, Cyrillic was abolished and a Latin-based alphabet was introduced. Consequently, the primer was no longer of use.

Although Turkmenistan's Baloch only use the Balochi language among themselves at present (Turkmen, Russian, and English are the only foreign languages taught at school), they have maintained their language orally. According to the final Soviet population census in 1989, 96.9 percent of the Balochi population listed the Balochi language as their native language (Czech University of Life Sciences 2014).

A proportion as high as this in the USSR was only typical for majority nationalities. For numerous other nationalities, the percentage of native speakers was much lower, for example Tatars, 83 percent; Ukrainians, 81 percent; Belarusians, 71

percent; Germans, 49 percent; Slovaks, 38 percent; Czechs, 35 percent; Chinese, 33 percent; and Poles, 30 percent (Panov 1990).

The strong resistance to linguistic assimilation among the Baloch in Turkmenistan stands in sharp contrast to other Balochi minorities in other locations, like Oman or East Africa. For example, Lodhi (2013, 127–34) writes that, “the Baluchis have not maintained their language or preserved their traditional culture; instead, to a great extent, they have assimilated with the surrounding Muslim communities in the coastal and inland urban centers of East Africa.”

In Turkmenistan, members of the Brahui ethnic group who previously spoke their own language also now use Balochi.<sup>2</sup> Their ancestors migrated from India and Afghanistan in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Their assimilation within this area was completed in the 1960s. Throughout this time, the Brahui people considered themselves Baloch from the Brahui line and spoke mostly Balochi. Brahui people have the same status as representatives of other Balochi lines and intermarriage is permitted. They are now almost completely assimilated with the Baloch and even give Balochi as their nationality on official documents such as passports.

Approximately seven million people speak the Balochi language worldwide, with the largest communities in Pakistan and Iran. Linguistically, however, Balochi speakers are a very heterogeneous group. Some dialects are almost mutually incomprehensible. The problem is in large part due to the use of a variety of scripts, for example the development of a common Balochi language that is written in Cyrillic and Latin in Turkmenistan, when it is written at all, while in Iran and Pakistan it is written in a modified Arabic script.

### *National heroes*

National heroes are an extremely important feature both of political centralization and the creation of national governments. Ted Lewellen (2003) states that centralization requires an ideological transformation and the establishment of core symbols. For example, flags, national heroes, and myths about national origins help to bolster a sense of national identity. However, for the Baloch people in Turkmenistan, national heroes are not only important in political centralization, but they are also a significant component of ethnic identity that runs counter to nationality. Although there are numerous common heroes among several local groups of Baloch, such as their mythic ancestors, national heroes can be of much greater significance for ethnic identity. According to Dariusz Wojakowski (2013), the identity of an individual is not expressed in their behavior but in their ability to sustain a continuous narrative, which allows for the maintenance of everyday relations with others.

One significant figure that the Baloch of Turkmenistan often talk about is Kerim Khan, who, based on respondents’ testimonies, was considered a “good and wise father of Turkmen Baloch” when they first settled in Turkmenistan. Kerim Khan participated in the Basmachi Rebellion fighting against the Soviet government and the Red Army. He is perceived as a Balochi national hero because of an event that occurred in 1929–30 in which he, his family, and other Baloch escaped from

Turkmenistan back to Afghanistan. According to the records of Red Army soldiers who participated in the events of October 1930 in the desert near Kushki/Guşgy/Serhetabat, the Red Army chased the Baloch during a battle, employing several aircraft in the process (Ivantchishin 1972, 93).

For over eighty years, the Baloch have recounted the story of their hero, and everyone is proud that their grandparents knew Kerim Khan. One respondent from Bayramaly stated that her husband was a *mullah* (a Muslim cleric) and when he met his friends, they talked about Kerim Khan.

According to other Balochi *mullahs*, one of the biggest and best Khans in the territory of Turkmenistan was Baloch Kerim Khan, who, with his crew, rescued Turkmens fighting against the Soviet government from prison. He was identified as Basmach and was escaping to Afghanistan together with his family and a large herd of cattle. He governed a big group of Baloch in the Iolatan district. Many people came to him to judge their disputes and solve their difficulties. It is said that before the border with Afghanistan, where Soviet soldiers shot many Balochi women, children, and old people from aircrafts, their cries can still be heard, and horses shy away and do not want to continue their journey.

(Fieldnotes 2011)

Kerim Khan is probably the only hero whose exploits are widely discussed by the Baloch in Turkmenistan. By contrast, heroes of Balochi folklore from Pakistan or Iran, like Sheh Mureed and the heroine Hani, are virtually unknown. For the Iranian or Pakistani Baloch, however, such heroes are martyrs in the struggle for freedom and are celebrated often (Dashti 2017).

### *Religion*

Although some scholars do not regard religion to be an important element of ethnic identity, for others it is crucial. Lori Peek (2005), however, claims that it is difficult to establish whether religious affiliation is essential or merely ancillary to ethnic identity. It is slightly more complex than this, however, as it is not only the “official religion” that is important for ethnic identity but also several local religious customs. Such customs include magical practices and witchcraft. Although their existence is not denied, these are prohibited in Islam. Magic is performed through certain rites and rituals for people who wish to determine whether a situation is good or bad (Mohyuddin et al. 2013).

In terms of religion, the Baloch do not really differ from the majority population of Turkmenistan—they are Sunni/Hanafi Muslims, and, like Turkmen, they are perceived as somewhat “lukewarm” Muslims. Modern Baloch do not really know the Koran, do not attend mosques regularly, and there are few educated Muslim clerics among them. Nevertheless, women and men pray *namaz* five times a day, and this plays an extremely important role in their lives.

During our field research in Turkmenistan, one Balochi respondent described how the Baloch pray there and how knowledge of Sunni prayers is transmitted over the generations. The respondent’s father was Persian (Fars).<sup>3</sup> Her paternal grandmother was also Fars but belonged to the Shi‘i denomination. Her mother was Baloch of the Reki line and Sunni. Although the respondent liked her father,

who died in 1923, very much, she did not want to claim allegiance to the Persian (thus Shi'i) origins of her father. Instead, she identified as Sunni like her mother.

The respondent considers Baloch to be descendants of Mohamed. During prayers, Baloch pronounce the name of Mohamed, unlike Shiites, who pronounce the name of Ali (cousin and son-in-law of the Islamic prophet Mohamed). *Namazes* are prayed five times a day on a rug representing the house of God, the holy place, for them. Men and women pray separately, but they say the same prayer. They do not use the Koran, but instead they learn how to pray from their parents or older friends. Before praying, women wear clean scarves and men wear caps. (Fieldnotes 2013)

Religious tradition therefore plays a significant role in the life of Turkmenistan's Baloch, because it constitutes an important element of their ethnic identity. According to Turkmenistan's Baloch, it is not possible for Baloch to be Shi'ah, even though Shi'i Baloch live in Iran. Claiming to be Sunni as their religious affiliation thus does not set them apart from those around them, as most Turkmen are also Sunni.

Elements of the Baloch people's use of magic become apparent when observing their form of practicing Islam. One of the reasons for using magic, practiced through a *mullah*, may be to get married. The initiator is usually a woman who has been married before. Such women do not have a very good reputation among the Baloch. Divorced women or widows therefore visit the *mullah*, who bewitches and exorcises them to facilitate their marriage to an already married man. They then become second wives to the enchanted man.

The following examples provide evidence of the influence that magic has on the lives of Turkmenistan's Baloch.

A man who had four children with his wife found a second wife, with whom he had two other children. When his first wife wanted to leave him for this reason, she found out from her husband and friends that the second wife "bewitched" him. She visited the shaman with the man's photograph (or any personal thing), paid him, and he uttered some "prayers and enchantments" to tie the man to her and make him want to live with her.

A similar case happened to two brothers in one family. In the first case, both women don't speak to each other, and in the second case, they talk to each other, but they both perceive this as a heavy burden they have had to learn to live with. According to the advice of the elderly, it is possible to cancel such "enchantment," but it is dangerous and not recommended.

Another example of this is the following:

Exorcising and bewitching have been noted in other cases as well, such as when someone wants to change a certain situation or tradition. In one case, it resulted in the attempted suicide of the person being "bewitched." He survived thanks to his father's intervention, and later, his wife admitted that she had visited a *mullah* who used an enchantment to make her husband move in with her parents, which is very inadvisable, according to Balochi patrilineal tradition.

(Fieldnotes 2013)



*Traditional life and celebrations*

The term “traditional” life can be used as a point of contrast with a “current” way of life. For urban residents, traditional life can mean the way as it is now lived in villages. Alternatively, a traditional way of life can refer to the lives of grandparents or other ancestors. Therefore, anthropologists such as Nezar Alsayyad (2001, 68–69) conceptualize traditional life, celebrations, and heritage as being closely connected to kinship, which models the relationship between the past and present, alliance and descent, and inheritance and appropriation.

Unlike in Iran and Pakistan, traditional nomadism has completely disappeared for modern Baloch in Turkmenistan. For instance, tents known as *gedans* are no longer used, even during weddings, since most of Turkmenistan’s Baloch live in sedentary villages, while the others live in cities. The functionality of customary or traditional tents thus has disappeared.

As for ceremonies and celebrations, however, the Baloch still adhere to the old traditions they inherited and preserved from their ancestors, even though Turkmen culture has gradually become dominant. However, this change in tradition is not simply caused by adopting Turkmen habits; often, the cause is modernization itself. This is observable in other ethnic groups in the country, including the dominant Turkmen, whose wedding celebrations now follow European tradition.

The compactness of settlements among the Baloch is maintained through marriage and the continuation of the patrilocal tradition, according to which newlyweds live with the husband’s parents. Elements of this strong family tradition persist, although such traditions and rituals transform and adapt to their surroundings as time passes, where the formation of nuclear families is common among city dwellers.

Although the USSR tried to repress the influence of tribal communities and their enduring ties, an awareness of family affiliations among the Balochi people remains extremely strong even now, ninety years later. All Balochi people know exactly to which family they belong. Balochi families also practice a type of physiognomic hierarchy, since they perceive families whose members have very dark skin to have low social status.

The strong clan-like tradition among the Baloch is most apparent in their large families, in contrast to the Turkmen and most other Central Asian nationals. The smallest and most basic family unit includes parents and infants as well as any adult single children. However, paternal grandparents, related orphans, and the parents’ single siblings may also live with them. If a man marries a widow, they live with the children from her first marriage. Household size, and eventually the number of houses, corresponds to the number of people living in a given family. Sons usually live with their parents, and if their situation allows it, they will build their own house next to that of their parents to maintain the semblance of an extended family.

Every house has two or three rooms. The rooms are modestly furnished with carpets, cabinets, pillows, and cushions for sleeping. Everybody sleeps in one room, usually on the floor. Family houses are built around a large common courtyard with elevated sections (*topchans*), where they sleep, eat, relax, and spend time together in the summer. This type of family arrangement is now common in

Balochi villages; moreover, the courtyard and houses are adapted so that all family members can use them communally.

There are certain unique features of the family structure of Turkmenistan's Baloch that make them immediately noticeable. For instance, if a woman has many children while another cannot have any, the woman who has children must give one child to the woman who has none. This would take place between women who were related via the husband. Another notable feature is the practice of selling children. One respondent, the father of a bought child, stated:

A divorced woman wanted to start a new life with her new husband, so she sold her little daughter for a hundred dollars to us. We can't have a child. We love our daughter and she is getting along well with us. (Fieldnotes 2009)

Balochi weddings have remained extremely important, not only to the family but also as cultural events. For the Baloch, as well as other Muslims, every man and woman has a social and religious duty to get married. Choosing a groom or bride is not simply a matter for the nuclear family; it is the concern of the extended family group. Even today, both close and distant relatives participate in wedding preparations, and entire villages are invited to weddings. The opinions of the future newlyweds are also taken into consideration.

Once the mother, father, grandmother, or other relatives have chosen a suitable partner, both sets of parents negotiate the terms of the wedding and the amount of *kalym* (monetary and other gifts the groom gives to the parents of the bride). Paying *kalym*, a ransom for a bride originally known as *labb*, is still common in other Central Asian nations, so it is not unique to the Baloch. In the Baloch tradition, however, it currently takes the form of gifts both families give to each other. These usually include golden earrings, necklaces, and other valuable gifts displayed at the wedding. *Kalym* can also include a cow with a calf or several sheep.

During their first visit, the groom gives a scarf and a pair of shoes to the bride as an engagement gift. After the engagement, they usually wait a few more years before getting married. The reason for this is because engagements often take place when a bride is very young. Men usually get married when they are between sixteen and thirty years old, and women when they are between fourteen and twenty-two years old. Marriages for older men and women are extremely rare, if they are first ones. One respondent who was thirty-five years old, described to us in 2010 her engagement as follows:

When I was fourteen years old, my parents chose a groom from our relatives on my grandmother's side. During the engagement, they put on my shoes and tied a scarf on my head. And my husband's family brought a ram and a bag of flour. My future husband sometimes visited me over the next five years, and then we had a wedding.

Another respondent, the mother of a future groom, talked about the wedding preparations as follows:

My son will get married in a year; his great-grandmother has chosen his wife, Gulnaz. Gulnaz is seamstress and dressmaker; she can sew Balochi dresses well.

She learnt at a tailor's shop. For the wedding, we will invite Balochi musicians, there will be piano music, we will be singing and dancing the dance with bats and *saichapi*. The bride will dance a slow waltz with the groom. Then, the bride will be at home for three days, not leaving the home. She will have everything necessary from home with her and a suitcase full of food. Ten days after the wedding, her mum will visit her. She will also bring gifts for everyone from the groom's family. Women get scarves and men get shirts. Previously, men would get fabric and their shirts were sewn at home. (Fieldnotes 2010)

According to the Balochi tradition, mothers also prepare a bottom drawer, in which a young woman's collection of linen, clothes, and household items to use after marriage are stored for their daughters before the wedding. However, these are often no longer sewn by the Baloch themselves, who instead buy manufactured versions.

There are several parts to a Balochi *arus* (wedding): *sarshody* (the celebration that takes place one day prior to the wedding), *sartaroshak* (shaving and dressing the groom), *aloka* (dressing the bride), and *nika* (completion of the religious ceremony). Although old traditions are diminishing because of modernization, the Baloch still celebrate weddings in the Balochi style, although some traditional elements have been omitted or simplified.

Balochi brides are more faithful to tradition in their dress, although Turkmen influences have changed the original red color of Balochi dresses to green (Turkmen school uniforms are green; green is also on the Turkmenistan flag). Brides make their wedding dresses from satin or silk. It is still possible to distinguish Turkmen women from Balochi women according to their headgear. A bride's wedding dress also includes a *paty*, an embroidered headdress that is adorned with a white festive *chador*, which is a long scarf covering the entire back.

The nature of a wedding determines whether traditions or adaptations to European culture will prevail. Modern Balochi brides usually wear traditional dresses while grooms wear a dark suit and tie in a European style. Balochi brides in Turkmenistan rarely wear the traditional white dress of Europe. Balochi men also wear European-style clothing (trousers, shirts) nowadays in everyday life. In Turkmenistan, it is only older men who wear the traditional headgear, known as *chalma*; the characteristic wide, loose trousers; and long shirts reaching the knees. Balochi women, in contrast, maintain elements of the Balochi tradition by wearing *patys* and *chadors*, especially on festive occasions.

Although the Baloch in Turkmenistan are proud of their traditional dances (unlike the Turkmen, who apparently have none), Turkmen musicians and contemporary music prevail at modern Balochi weddings. Nevertheless, Balochi men still perform the traditional Balochi bat dance with immense pleasure. Among the Balochi musicians are those of the Luri line. In Balochi feudal society, the Luri manufactured musical instruments and worked as goldsmiths and blacksmiths. They also played these musical instruments and danced, receiving financial rewards for their art. However, the Luri held little prestige within the social hierarchy.

Balochi households in Turkmenistan are furnished according to the traditional nomadic way of life of their ancestors. Beds, chairs, and tables are almost entirely

absent. Even today, *barmuks* (pillows, cushions, blankets, and other items needed for sleeping) hold a place of honor in a Baloch room. They are a source of pride for the family. Each evening, blankets and pillows are spread out and then each morning they are stacked in a corner; the richer the bride, the more sumptuous the *barmuks* tend to be. As mentioned earlier, *gedans*, the traditional dwellings of Balochi people, are only built in Iran these days during weddings, and this tradition has now disappeared completely in Turkmenistan.

Even in contemporary Turkmenistan, there is a clear difference between the roles and status of Balochi and Turkmen women. Turkmen women are separated from men and public society and act as maidservants. For instance, they serve their guests and do not participate in conversation. They also speak only Turkmen; if they speak Russian, it is usually very poorly. Balochi women, on the other hand, speak Balochi, Turkmen, and Russian. They serve their guests and the men first, and then sit down and participate in the conversation. For both ethnic groups, women are the driving force of the entire family, but at the same time they are subordinate to their husbands whom they respect and with whom they rarely fight.

If the Baloch celebrate an important event in their lives or wish to remember a deceased family member, they organize a feast called a *sadaka*, where the women sit inside the house eating, drinking, and spending time together, while the men sit outside. This practice does not distinguish them from the dominant culture, as this form of separation is also typical for the Turkmen.

The Baloch, like other nomadic people, have developed their own special methods for preserving milk, meat, and other products used year-round by the whole family. For example, the Baloch preserve goat and sheep milk in a goat-skin bag (*isak*) from which they obtain cream and produce butter. They mix the butter with melon juice, which is cooked for a long time to reduce ten liters to one liter, and then use this mixture throughout the year without the milk spoiling.

Several Balochi medical processes are akin to European remedies. For example, if they contract pneumonia, the Baloch inhale vapor from mint tea, diet, do not drink cold beverages, lie down for three days, and eat porridge (*kasbk*). To treat rheumatism, they place a dead snake into a hole on top of live coals and add licorice root. They then cover the hole so that the patient can lie on it. They also eat snake meat. As a remedy for cancer, they smoke a hookah, into which they add snake meat. The Baloch also treat lame sheep by filling the place where the sheep sleeps with smoke from a snakeskin. For swollen testicles, the Baloch use the dried yolks of turtle eggs. Most of these recipes, however, have already been forgotten, and they are only transmitted by traditional healers. However, the loss of traditional treatments and food preparation cannot be attributed solely to the ongoing assimilation of the Baloch, since this is a common occurrence irrespective of nationality.

## CONCLUSION

The Soviet regime suppressed numerous national manifestations, even though it declared it had a correct answer to the “national question” (Gellner 1993, 9).

During the years following the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, the model used to solve the national issue, according to Lenin and Stalin, approached the European “triune” model, or the ideal unity of language, nation (ethnicity), and political formation (Kryukova 2016).

Thus, nationhood in the Soviet Union was constructed primarily within autonomous units. Nations without an autonomous unit (such as Baloch) were placed in a difficult situation. After the collapse of the USSR and the emergence of independent states, the situation for national minorities deteriorated. New language laws in Turkmenistan (as in other Central Asian republics) created a schism between the majority and members of national minorities, who had no access to state administration and limited educational opportunities in their own language.

In many respects, the situation for Turkmenistan’s Baloch is unique because the Balochi people maintain the greatest degree of resistance to language assimilation among all the ethnic minorities in the territories of the former USSR. Even though the Baloch of Turkmenistan have displayed cultural assimilation in numerous ways, they remain an extremely compact ethnic minority with a strong ethnic identity.

Under the USSR, Turkmenistan’s Baloch experienced a fundamental change in their way of life when they moved from nomadism to settled farming. This enforced change led to negative experiences, such as violent collectivization, forced sedentism, and the partial severing of social ties among the Baloch. Yet, there were also positive aspects, such as increased aid during poor harvests and famine, and better housing, clothing, and healthcare. The research here also facilitates informative comparisons with other regions where the Balochi people live as national minorities. In places where this ethnic group does not experience significant pressure from the state, the researchers found evidence for progressive and non-violent assimilation with the majority society (e.g., East Africa). However, this is not the case in Turkmenistan. The former government of Saparmurat Niyazov and the current Turkmen president, Gurbanguly Berdymuhamedov, treat the Baloch as an ethnic minority by suppressing their identity; isolating them; and limiting their ability to travel, study, and publicly maintain and develop their culture, language, and traditions. Perhaps for this reason, the Baloch living in Balochi villages in Turkmenistan maintain their language so that they can retain their Balochi identity and transmit their surviving traditions to new Balochi generations. This is despite the partial assimilation with the Turkmen environment that permeates all aspects of their lives.

The Balochi tradition is most visible during weddings in the form of traditional dances and Balochi wedding dress. Although the present life of Turkmenistan’s Baloch is akin to the life of the Turkmen, the traditional dancing alone distinguishes the two groups (the Turkmen have no national dance). Another difference lies in their knowledge of languages: the Turkmen usually speak only Turkmen and sometimes Russian, while almost all Baloch speak Turkmen and the Balochi language, and some speak Russian and Farsi/Persian.

In conclusion, the Baloch of Turkmenistan have largely adapted their way of life to the conditions of the state in which they live. They are no longer nomadic, nor do they build *gedans* like the Baloch in Iran and Pakistan. Even though the

external conditions are not conducive to cultural development or to strengthening their national identity, they manage to maintain their language and an awareness of their culture and some of their traditions. Some ethnic minority writers, academics, and local teachers are making considerable efforts to preserve the Balochi ethnic identity; however, even today the Baloch of Turkmenistan are not educated in the Balochi language. The main reason Turkmenistan has not fully uprooted the Balochi people is the Balochi revivalists who actively transmit their traditions in oral form. Thus, Balochi *mullabs*, musicians, teachers in Turkmen schools, and academics all strive to maintain the Balochi identity.

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#### AUTHORS

Petr Kokaisl conducts research focusing on the anthropology and geography of religion in Central Asia, and transformational processes in society and in ethnic minorities. He has been involved in several medium-term research studies (since 2000) with his wife Pavla Kokaislová, especially in the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan) and in neighboring areas (China, Iran, and Afghanistan).

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#### NOTES

1. This article was created with the support of IGA PEF ČZU / Grant Agency of the Faculty of Economics and Management – Czech University of Life Sciences (No. 20181003).
2. The Brahui are an ethnic and linguistic group of the Dravidians. Nevertheless, the Brahui and Baloch have much in common. The Kelat Khanate, the Brahui, and the Baloch state existed from the mid-eighteenth century until approximately the mid-twentieth century, a time when Brahui were more numerous and superior. The British called this state “Balochistan.”
3. Fars, or Persians, are an ethnic group of Iranian origin. The name derives from the Fars province (former Persida) in the south of Iran, where Persians originally lived and established a powerful empire. Today, most Persians profess Shi‘i Islam.

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