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Writing Balti(ness)

The Challenge of Nation-Building in a Geopolitically Contested Region

The Baltis mostly inhabit a region at the western edge of the Himalayas, also known as Baltistan. Today, Baltistan is considered to be a geographic and geopolitical border region; it is administered predominantly by Pakistan and claimed as a whole by India. Moreover, the Balti language is associated with a third entity, Tibet, while the fact that Baltis identify as Muslims, the majority Shiites, and hence consider Iran a friendly state, adds another dimension to the intricacy of their multiple belongings. Drawing on research in Baltistan in 2014 and 2017, particularly qualitative interviews with Baltis of various backgrounds, this article will show that the current endeavors to standardize a script—a variant of the Perso-Arabic, Tibetan, or Roman scripts—for the currently only sparsely written Balti language illustrate the struggle of identity formation and nation-building among Baltis during the early twenty-first century.

Keywords: Baltistan—script politics—nation-building—geopolitics—Tibetan past—Pakistan

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The road from Gilgit to Skardu is a six-hour drive by car. Undoubtedly, it is one of the most beautiful road trips—along the river Indus, through valleys of the Karakoram mountain range, with mountain peaks to the right and left, some covered in snow. The view of this stark landscape is rarely interrupted by trees or human settlements, but rock inscriptions in Brahmi (*brāhmī*) and Tibetan script and rock carvings depicting ibexes, the Buddha, and *stūpa*s are evidence that this region has been visited or settled by humans at least since the eighth century CE. At times, when rocks lie next to one of the few roads that cut through this seemingly inaccessible landscape, they also bear writing in Roman and/or Perso-Arabic script of more contemporary origin, as is the case for the rock close to the village of Gol (figures 1 and 2).

While in the past Buddhists left their messages in stone, today rocks in this region still serve as message boards and advertisement space, for instance for Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen Pakistan (MWM), a political organization that raises awareness of the rights of Shia Muslims in Pakistan (figure 3).

Figure 1. Rock with inscriptions in Brahmi (bottom of image), Perso-Arabic, and Roman script, and carvings of ibexes and *stūpa*s close to the village of Gol, Baltistan. Photo by the author.

Figure 2. Close-up of the rock in figure 1. Photo by the author.

Figure 3. A message painted on a rock by the political Shiite organization Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen Pakistan (MWM). Photo by the author.

Figure 4. A banner of an Iranian organization called Pairavān-i vilāyat with a photo of Iran's political and religious authority, Ali Chāmeneʾi. Photo by the author.

The current dominance of Shia Islam and links to the Islamic Republic of Iran are obvious also when we enter Skardu, Baltistan's biggest city (see figure 4). However, a walk through Skardu also reveals references to the Tibetan past of this region, which was already called "Little Tibet" by the Mughals. Most prominent is the bilingual sign on a shop in the New Bazaar (figure 5).

Although this sign was already mentioned in several other publications (for example, Bouzas 2017, 219f.; MacDonald 2006, 193), its translation was always missing. In Urdu it says "New Baltistan vegetable and fruit shop. New Bazaar Skardu. [Proprietor:] Ġulām ʿAlī Tanǧūs," and in Balti, in Tibetan script, "New Baltistan shop. Vegetable and fruit trader. New Bazaar. West Tibet." West Tibet? Nobody I ask on the street about the writing in Balti seems to have a clue that they are on a street in West Tibet. Many different languages can be heard: Balti, Pashtu, Punjabi, Shina, and Urdu. But no one seems to be able to read the Tibetan script. After all, Skardu has officially been administered by Pakistan since 1949, and education takes place predominantly in Urdu, the national and official language of Pakistan. Hence, apart from the Roman script used for English, the second official language of Pakistan, Urdu and the Perso-Arabic script are omnipresent in the whole country, including here. Yet rock inscriptions and the shop sign in the New Bazaar hint at a culturally and geopolitically complex past and present of this region, where the indigenous population, the Baltis, have been searching for their identity over the last few decades.

In this article, I will discuss this struggle of identity formation and nation-building among Baltis by taking the endeavors to standardize a script for the Balti language as an example. Based particularly on qualitative interviews with Baltis of diverse

Figure 5. A shop sign with writing in Balti in Tibetan script and Urdu in the New Bazaar in Skardu. Photo by the author.

backgrounds I conducted in 2014 and 2017, I will show how the standardization of the currently only sparsely written language in a variant of the Perso-Arabic, Tibetan, or Roman scripts reflect this search for identity. Although there is a smaller Balti population in the Indian-administered districts of Kargil and Leh,[1] this article will focus solely on the Baltis in the region administered by Pakistan. My decision to do so is based on the fact that, after all, due to the different geopolitical settings in India and Pakistan, the dynamics of identity politics among Baltis differ in the two regions, despite their close proximity and contiguity.

The case of the Baltis

The Balti language and its speakers are an intriguing case for several reasons. First, Balti is today still sparsely written; there are only a few publications in Balti. Neither has the grammar of this language been officially standardized, nor its orthography. Some scholars have studied Balti and its variants and published on the topic (for example, Backstrom 2002; Ġāsingī and Wilāyat 2011; Lobsang 1995; Read 1934; Sharma 2004), but none of these studies have led to the implementation of a specific standardized form. Second, Baltis who can read and write are, as a rule, literate in Urdu, and some also in English, depending on their educational level. Literary

evidence in this region, comprising stone inscriptions in Brāhmī and Tibetan script, is very old. Moreover, due to the spread of Islam and the Quran, all Baltis are today at least familiar with the concept of writing and the value of literacy. Due to Islam and hence the importance of Arabic, as well as the two official languages of Pakistan, Urdu and English, the scripts Baltis are familiar with are Perso-Arabic and Roman. Third, linguistically, Balti is classified as a Tibetic language, the westernmost language of a continuum that continues until it reaches the western part of the Chinese province of Sichuan, in the east. It is closely related to Ladakhi and Purki (or Purgi, Puriki), two languages that are, besides Balti to a lesser extent, spoken in the neighboring region of Ladakh, which is part of today's Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. The historic connection to the east is thus evident. However, Baltistan has also experienced the migration of people from various other regions—from today's Pakistan and India, and Central and Western Asia. Most noticeable is the spread of Shia Islam among the majority of Baltis, which links them sociologically and religiously to Iran, in contrast to the overwhelming majority of Pakistan's population, who are Sunni Muslims.

Hence, in many ways, the region Baltis inhabit today seems to be a typical upland border region, reflecting the various historic belongings that are today often perceived to contradict each other.[2] Besides the border to the east already mentioned, with the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, the majority of Baltis live in the modern geopolitical entity of Gilgit-Baltistan, which shares a border with China in the north, a short border with Afghanistan in the west, and one with Pakistan in the south. While Gilgit-Baltistan is administered by Pakistan, India claims this region completely as part of Jammu and Kashmir. Being part of the so-called Kashmir conflict, the region is often perceived as the subject of a dispute between India and Pakistan, although China is another major geopolitical player (see, for example, Kreutzmann 2015, 285–88) in this sensitive region, since it controls some areas in the north that are also claimed by India. The recent so-called "Belt and Road Initiative" undertaken by China, for which this region constitutes the only direct access point to the Arabian Sea via the Karakoram Highway, might lead to new geopolitical tensions in the future.

More importantly, the geographic location and geopolitical fuzziness of the region in the past and present have prevented sustainable identity-building among its inhabitants, as will become apparent in this article. The difficulty in creating a distinct identity is reflected in rather late and arduous nation-building endeavors by local activists around the idea of "Baltiness." Yet, during my stay in Baltistan in August 2017, I observed that many Baltis were also enthusiastically celebrating Pakistani Independence Day, suggesting their patriotic and national fervor. State symbols such as the Pakistani flag were omnipresent, even in domestic spaces. Thus, it is important to note that the following discussion on nation-building around the concept of "Baltiness" is limited to specific strata of Balti society. Script activists, especially, overwhelmingly belong to the urban, educated, and socioeconomically better-off segment of the Balti population. But even from my limited research in Skardu, it became quite evident that there is no single definition of "Baltiness." As for the majority of Baltis who are considered to be socioeconomically "backward," spread out in a web of many villages throughout Baltistan, often with little, if any, education, we neither know whether and to what extent they identify as Pakistanis,

nor do we know whether they consider themselves part of the Pakistani nation. We also do not know if and how they define Baltiness.

Balti—Baltis—Baltistan

The ethnic term "Balti" and its geographical counterpart "Baltistan" are very real in the early twenty-first century, even though the specific characteristics of the people inhabiting the region are highly contested. Moreover, the geopolitical status of the terrain in which they live is also debated, due to porous perceptions of borders, among other factors. Apart from a claim to the territory today labeled "Baltistan," the only element of Baltiness that seems to be uncontested is the Balti language. However, there is no generally accepted standardized form of Balti regarding grammar, script, and orthography yet; there are, however, diverse varieties of this language that, although mutually intelligible, are distinguished mainly by differences in pronunciation and approximately 10 percent variable vocabulary (Backstrom 2002, 11f.). Peter C. Backstrom has classified Balti into six distinct variants spoken mainly in different valleys: Rondu Balti, Shigar Balti, Skardu Balti, Khaplu Balti, Kharmang Balti, and Chorbat Balti (ibid., 11). The variant spoken in Skardu is accepted by many of my interviewees. Many other people from a variety of regions in the area also accept the Skardu variant. People in Khaplu, for instance, the second-largest city in Baltistan, also view it to be a potential form of what might be considered "standard" Balti. Backstrom also supports my observations that the Balti variant from Skardu is most widely understood, partly because of radio broadcasts from this city (ibid., 24).

Dieter Schuh illustrates in his impressive three-volume publication on Baltistan (Schuh 2011a, 2011b, 2011c) that the term "Balti" has undergone some major semantic changes over the years. Balti was earlier used as a denomination for a region, even though the extent of that region sometimes deviated extensively. It was used for the people living there as well (Schuh 2011a, 66f.). Regardless of the different connotations of the term, the region today known as Baltistan never formed a geopolitical entity administered centrally for any long period of time, and it was only at the beginning of the twentieth century that Baltistan was established as a toponym for the region (Schuh 2008, 171).

Between the seventh and ninth centuries, the region apparently became part of the Tibetan Empire. There are signs that Tibetan influence began at the beginning of the seventh century (Schuh 2011b, 117), such as the fact that Baltis speak a Tibetic language, or that certain archaeological sites, such as the Buddha rock close to Skardu, suggest a Buddhist past before conversion to Shia Islam. After the decline of the Tibetan Empire, sources tell us only about Muslim missionaries or raids to and from this region. From the sixteenth century onward, it consisted of several kingdoms that were mainly restricted to valleys. The six main kingdoms were Kartaksho, Khaplu, Kiris, Roundu, Shigar, and Skardu, which were at times allies, enemies, or subjected to one or the other. It was only from roughly 1820 until 1840 that all kingdoms of present-day Baltistan were a part of one rule under Ahmad Shah. However, there is no evidence that Ahmad Shah used the term "Baltistan" officially for this territory; nor did he rule it centrally. In fact, the previous administrative structures were

maintained, and the population of these different kingdoms stayed under local rulers who were now subordinate to Ahmad Shah, mainly with regard to paying taxes to him and military fealty (ibid., 65f.).

We can only speculate about the self-perception of the population during that time, but without a geopolitical union, a centralized administration, or other factors that could have contributed to a common identity or even basic nation-building—for example, a common written vernacular language or shared cultural symbols—we can assume that the inhabitants of this region did not perceive themselves as belonging to one distinct group on the basis of shared cultural or ethnolinguistic factors. In other words, it is a stretch of the imagination to speak of *the* Baltis as a homogeneous group before the nineteenth century. The one circumstance that Shia Islam was dominant in the region for centuries—at least among the urban elite—might in fact have contributed to a sense of belonging across valleys on the basis of a common religion rather than ethnicity. It seems more likely that kinship networks might have been the most important factor linking inhabitants to one another during the precolonial period.

Becoming "Balti"

Despite this, several factors have led to the present-day self-perception of forming one ethnic group and nation. The latter term, in English, was used by many of my Balti informants themselves and can also be found in publications; for instance in a booklet for learning the Tibetan script, the following is written in broken English (Amacha 2001, 4):

> You belong to a nation who inherit[s] a complete social structure and a rich cultural heritage. Baltis, a smallest [nation] in number, can be counted as one of the nation[s] of the world who possesses all the qualities and cultural characteristics.

As is the case with many such identity-formation processes, we might assume that the emergence of a consciousness for a distinct Balti nation is related to, for instance, a misbalanced political interaction with some other ethnolinguistic group that might have fostered a perceived us/them dichotomy, leading to a perception of united Baltis "on the basis of their shared oppression" (Young 1990, 46) with a common language. In interviews I conducted, most Baltis referred to the Dogra rulers of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir as the first colonizers of their region. Many of them still harbor resentments against Dogri speakers and other ethnolinguistic groups often lumped together as "Kashmiris."[3] The main reason for these anti-Kashmiri sentiments is related to the new tax system established by the Dogra rulers, which has led to the impoverishment of the common people in Baltistan, who also became victims of forced labor (Schuh 2011a, 95–97) during Dogra rule (1846–1948). Hence, as soon as there was an opportunity to shake off any influence from the south—that is, from Jammu and Kashmir—the people of Gilgit-Baltistan took a bold chance. When Muslim tribal militias from other regions within Pakistan attacked the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir in October 1947 and its Hindu *mahārājā* accepted the accession to India in exchange for India's military support, it was the Gilgit Scouts, under

the leadership of the British Major William Brown, that only a few days later, on November 1, 1947, overthrew the governor Ghansara Singh, who was installed by the *mahārājā* in Gilgit. By August 1948, the Gilgit Scouts controlled Skardu and the rest of present-day Baltistan too. The region has been formally administered by Pakistan since 1949,[4] although several Balti activists told me that some locals preferred an independent geopolitical entity. According to many of my interviewees and in the opinions of publications that I consulted (for example, Sökefeld 2018, 135), however, the general population at that time, being Muslim, preferred to accede to Pakistan rather than to India. But here, too, there is a lack of sufficient studies from or about that critical period of time. What we can assess with certainty is that since 1949 sentiments toward Pakistan have gradually been worsening among specific strata of the Balti population, contributing to a growing sense of Baltiness. This development is based upon several factors.

Vague geopolitical status and limited citizenship

The contested geopolitical status of the region and hence limited Pakistani citizenship for its inhabitants has been engendering a growing sense of an us/them binary, fostering a Pakistan/Gilgit-Baltistan dichotomy. Between 1949 and 2009 the region was administered directly from Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan. It was renamed Gilgit-Baltistan and gained limited autonomy in 2009, but the fact that the region is neither fully integrated into Pakistan nor enjoys full autonomy leads to resentments among the indigenous population. For instance, although the people of Gilgit-Baltistan carry Pakistani national identity cards, they are not allowed to vote in the general election and have no representation in the National Assembly of Pakistan (see, for example, Bouzas 2017, 207). Today, four predominantly Balti-speaking districts of Gilgit-Baltistan are considered to form Baltistan: Ghanche, Karmang, Shigar, and Skardu, while some Baltis also perceive parts of Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir as an integral part of Baltistan—either only four villages that India seized from Pakistan during the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971, or the whole district of Kargil and even parts of the Leh district. The inclusion of these Indian regions is based either on linguistic reasons—the fact that Balti is spoken as far as Kargil and Leh and the close connection between Balti, Purki, and Ladakhi—or the fact that Shia Muslims also live in those regions. Sometimes both reasons are cited together. Another plausible reason lies in the fact that the regions of present-day Baltistan and Ladakh indeed formed one administrative union, known as *wazārat* in Urdu, between 1901 and 1948. As a result, in recent times some Baltis long for a (re)unification of these regions and an imagined Greater Ladakh (see Magnusson 2011). The growing sense of belonging to a neighboring region is, among other things, doubtless a result of the imagined and actual neglect by the Pakistani state, including the socioeconomic (under)development that has plagued this region.

Socioeconomic marginalization

The decades-long socioeconomic neglect of Baltistan can be observed in the daily lives of its residents, including the lack of infrastructure (for example, electricity, roads, telecommunications, etc.) that impacts upon every field, such as education,

healthcare, agricultural support, and so on. One reason for the obvious neglect would certainly be difficult accessibility to the region but maybe also its contested geopolitical status, which would lead investors to assume that any investment there could be considered a potential loss. This seems to have changed recently with Chinese investments in the construction of the so-called Karakoram Highway, which was completed in 1979. The highway has facilitated easier access not only from the region to the rest of Pakistan but also in the other direction toward China. Yet whereas, according to my interviewees in Gilgit in 2017, this highway raised hopes locally of investments in infrastructure and new job opportunities, today it is instead seen by many as a threat to the environment, a potential danger of Chinese domination, and enabling the influx of people from other parts of Pakistan that could contribute to further socioeconomic marginalization of the indigenous population. It could also contribute to more communal tension between the predominantly Shia local population and the largely foreign Sunni population.[5] The new Chinese and Pakistani plans for the region in the context of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), one of the biggest projects of China's Belt and Road Initiative (also referred to as the New Silk Road), seem to have increased these fears (see Howe and Hunzai 2019). In contrast to the construction of the Karakoram Highway, CPEC does not only include plans for roads, such as the one linking China with the seaport in Gwardar, but is an overall massive investment in rail and road networks throughout Pakistan, the energy sector, special economic zones, and even agriculture and science.

Many people I talked to in Skardu were extremely critical of CPEC and feared that the usual meager investments in Gilgit-Baltistan by the Pakistani state might now even go solely to the Gilgit and Diamer regions, China's "gateway" to CPEC investments, leaving Baltistan further marginalized. Whether justified or not, this fear seems very real and needs to be studied in more detail. In the long run, the expansion of the Karakoram Highway could foster a dichotomy not only between Pakistan and Gilgit-Baltistan but also between Gilgit-Diamer and Baltistan. This could be furthered by the fact that, though Baltistan is part of the present entity of Gilgit-Baltistan, the two socioeconomic and cultural centers of this region, Gilgit and Skardu, are separated by a car drive of at least six hours through what is almost a no-man's-land. Furthermore, compared to the rest of Gilgit-Baltistan, Baltistan is linguistically far more homogenous (Kreutzmann 2017, 257). This homogeneity, together with the growing fear of neglect, seems an ideal breeding ground for Balti nationalism.

In the context of emerging Balti nationalism, voices such as that of the Washington, DC–based Balti activist Senge Hasnan Sering merit particular consideration. Though he claims to speak for all of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan, his remarks in an interview from March 21, 2019 about the impact of CPEC on his home region and the potential future role of India exclusively reflect the sentiments of some Balti activists longing for a (re)unification with Indian-administered Ladakh (Ramesh 2019). M. Ramesh writes the following:

> Sering said that since India claims G-B [i.e., Gilgit-Baltistan] to be its own, it should help the region. . . . Now is the time for India to start claiming G-B. India should not miss this opportunity, he said, adding wryly that "India is known for missing opportunities." "The way it can be done is by establishing a relationship with G-B,"

he said. The people of G-B look at the developments in Ladakh, such as the establishment of a Hill Council, and hope to be a part of India. "Help G-B, help us enjoy the same constitutional rights as Ladakh," Sering said.

Being the Other in the rest of Pakistan

The way in which young men from Ghizer District, in the west of Gilgit-Baltistan, developed anti-Pakistan sentiments and a strong sense of belonging to their own linguistic group and/or home region during their studies in other regions of Pakistan, mainly Karachi, is well-known (Bodla 2014; Sökefeld 1999). This phenomenon also applies to young Balti men studying, in most cases, in Karachi, but nowadays also in Islamabad/Rawalpindi and Lahore (Magnusson 2006, 198f.). Interviewees told me, for example, that their fellow students confused Baltistan with Balochistan when they mentioned their home region. This kind of ignorance, paired with their own limited citizenship status, led not only to a sense of exclusion from other Pakistani students but also to stronger networking among Balti students, who started several initiatives in Karachi to strengthen their own culture and hence ethnolinguistic belonging. Thus, in 1986, the Baltistan Students Federation (BSF) was established in Karachi (ibid., 198). Nowadays this plays a very strong role in the Tibetan script movement, and many of the Tibetan script activists based today in Skardu have studied in Karachi or are still associated with the BSF.

Exclusion from nation-building based on Sunni Islam, and the influence of Iran

The nation-building around Sunni Islam by the Pakistani state (Nasr 2004) seems also to have contributed to identity formation among Baltis. The majority of them are Shia Muslims, so the growing violence against this minority group in Pakistan since the beginning of the 1980s contributes to the tangible fear of and estrangement from the Pakistani state among all ethnolinguistic groups in Gilgit-Baltistan, such as Shina speakers (see Sökefeld 2003b). Even today, people indigenous to Gilgit-Baltistan refer with fear to the so-called "Gilgit Massacre" of 1988 in which between 150 and 700 people were killed, mainly Shias, but also Sunnis (for example, Ali 2010; Grieser and Sökefeld 2015). As a result, throughout Gilgit-Baltistan, tension and violence between Shia and Sunni Muslims are still feared on a daily basis.

The presence of the Iranian state (see figure 4) in this region, which has unfortunately not been studied yet, might contribute to this rising conflict. According to several of my interviewees, many Baltis today live in Iran but still have strong ties to their home region. In addition to business and (religious) tourism, many Baltis also go to Iran for higher education. In fact, Iran not only supports local religious institutions in Baltistan financially and ideologically but also grants scholarships to Baltis for studying theology in Iran. They often return to Baltistan with a religious ideology standing in strong contrast to the slowly vanishing, more inclusive local religiosity. The idea that Persian Sufis converted Baltis many centuries ago is reinforced today by the activities of the Iranian state. At the same time, however, a very conservative form of Shia Islam is being spread. Nevertheless, many Baltis welcome such activities, since they lack other opportunities for creating networks of belonging and trade. Ultimately, this phenomenon seems to give many of them a sense of belonging to the

regions in the west, to the Islamic Republic of Iran, although neither Baltistan nor Gilgit-Baltistan shares a direct border with this state.

Nation-building among Baltis

All these different factors have helped strengthen the idea of a Balti nation and gave rise to Balti nationalism, especially among urban well-educated Baltis, though it is even today a very difficult endeavor to pin down "Baltiness" to a specific set of characteristics apart from the common Balti language. The fact that Baltistan was never a united geopolitical entity thus labeled and at the same time also administered or at least ideologically dominated exclusively by Baltis and/or a relatively homogenous idea of "Baltiness" prevented sustainable nation-building. One could argue that the term "nation" is, therefore, inappropriate for the Baltis, but the circumstance that it is today at times vehemently used by Balti activists/nationalists would justify its usage. Moreover, we need to keep in mind the well-known differentiation between nations with a state, so-called nation-states, in which the state usually actively promotes nation-building, and nations without states, in which groups not constituting states imagine themselves as nations for various reasons (see, for example, Chouinard 2016; Guibernau 2004). While ethnolinguistic factors are often the basis for such imaginings, a shared experience of oppression or disadvantage may intensify these, as seems the case for the Baltis.

Nations without states lack not only the tools for nation-building that official states possess, but they are also exposed to endeavors by other entities that try to include them in their own nations or to which their members themselves imagine they belong. In the case of Baltis, there are four such entities: Pakistan, the dominant political power in Baltistan that denies Baltis full Pakistani citizenship but nonetheless enforces its nation-building agenda on the local population; India, which claims Gilgit-Baltistan as part of its state Jammu and Kashmir; Iran, the state that exercises influence on the Baltis through various means on the basis of religious ties that may have existed in the past and the present; and the historic Tibetan Empire, of which the Baltistan region was apparently a part, and to which Baltis are linguistically linked. Thus, Baltis who long for self-assertion not only have to concentrate on nation-building from within but also have to consider these factors. Though the aforementioned factors may today be perceived to be external by many Balti activists, obviously depending on the different ideas of "Baltiness," they actually reflect the multiple belongings of Baltis in the past and present. In fact, the very particularity of "Baltiness" is that Baltis look back at various histories for legitimation. As a rule, they possess multiple group identities that are selectively activated. At any given point, they may assert a pragmatic political identity with regard to Pakistan, a religious one with regard to Iran, and a linguistic one with regard to an imagined "Greater Tibet" and/or the Tibetic-speaking regions of India, which would mean Greater Ladakh (see, for example, Magnusson 2011). It is thus difficult for Balti activists to construct a unique "Baltiness" and invoke ethnic symbols (see Smith 2009) that do not automatically relate to one or the other already established geopolitical entity (in

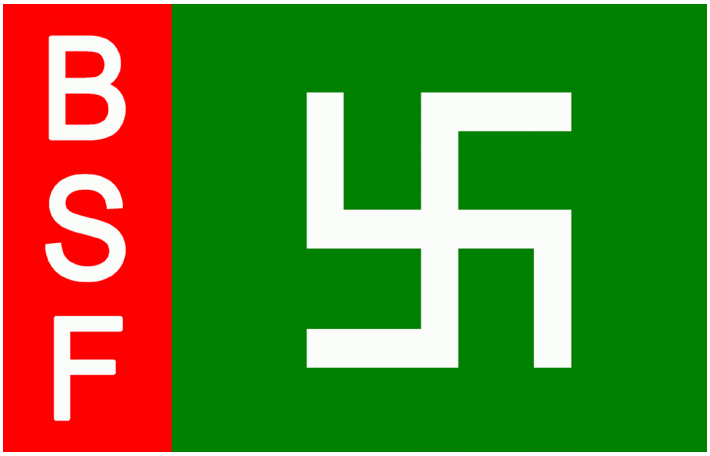

Figure 6. One version of the flag of the Baltistan Students Federation. Graphic produced by author.

the past or present). Additionally, they do not *prima facie* contradict the ideas of other Balti activists who imagine their nation differently.

Invoking the Tibetan past

One striking example of multiple senses of shared belonging is the flag of the Baltistan Students Federation (figure 6; see *Pamir Times* 2019). Although different variants of this flag exist, the *svastika* (Sanskrit) or *yungdrung* (Classical Tibetan and Balti) is always an intrinsic symbol.

This symbol can be seen also on the shop sign referred to in figure 5. It is a central element of Baltiness among a specific group of activists today. However, there are also Baltis who reject the *svastika* symbol vehemently, since they associate it with Tibet and, more importantly, Tibetan Buddhism, which is, according to them, not compatible with their Muslimness. However, interviews with activists invoking this symbol make it clear that they perceive it in a non-religious, solely cultural way, not constituting any contradiction to Islam, their lived religion.

Interestingly, global stereotypes of the "martial Muslim" and the "peaceful Buddhist" were justified by one activist based on grounds of ethnic belonging in the context of identity construction. According to him, in contrast to the rest of Pakistan, even in contrast to some other parts of Gilgit-Baltistan where communal clashes between Shia and Sunni Muslims are indeed more prone to happen, Baltistan is such a peaceful place precisely because Baltis are of Tibetan origin, and Tibetans are inherently peaceful people. Therefore, according to him, a peaceful religion such as Buddhism could flourish particularly among Tibetans. And even though the vast majority of Baltis are nowadays Muslims, their Tibetan descent still makes them inherently peace-loving people. Kenneth Iain MacDonald made similar observations during his field studies in Baltistan, though he observed that primarily the "Buddhist past, imbuing in people essential moral qualities" (MacDonald 2006, 204) and not the *Tibetan* past of the Baltis was invoked to construct their moral superiority over other groups in the region (ibid.). According to him, this is in line with the "stereotypical,

and largely Western, reading of historical Buddhism (which in its theocratic form was anything but peaceful)" (ibid.).

Preserving and invoking material culture

Other elements that members of the urban elite have been trying to invoke for nation-building purposes around Baltiness are less controversial. Most can be classified as elements of the region's material culture (see also Bouzas 2017, 219–22). One example is the Balti Museum in Skardu, privately run by the highly respected

Figure 7. The so-called Buddha rock close to Skardu. Photo by the author.

Figure 8. Close-up of the Buddha rock. Photo by the author.

local intellectual Yousuf Hussain Abadi. It houses an impressive collection of more than three thousand everyday objects from the region, such as old kitchen utensils, agricultural tools, oil lamps, locks and keys, chillums, and bells. Other locals collect audio and audiovisual material on Balti folk songs and photographs of Balti daily life in the past and present. In Khaplu, there is a fort that was restored between 2005 and 2011 with the help of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture that is the pride of many Baltis I talked to. The Baltistan Culture & Development Foundation (BCDF), founded as the Baltistan Cultural Foundation (BCF) in 1998, holds a key position as the vanguard for the preservation and revival of local culture; that is, the construction of Baltiness. Apart from supporting local crafts, such as carpentry, and facilitating the development of products based on local crops, such as apricots, the organization also initiates festivals to promote the local sport, polo. In addition, it takes care of archaeological sites, such as the Buddha rock located to the south of Skardu (see figures 7 and 8).

This rock relief, dating from between 700 and 1000 CE (Schuh 2011b, 338), also contains inscriptions in Classical Tibetan. It is today regarded as the most important evidence of a Tibetan and Buddhist past in this region. The inscriptions written in Tibetan script particularly serve the purposes of linguistic activists who interpret them as literary evidence for their language.

Nation-building, writing, and education

Apart from the elements already described, which are in general essential for the production of a common culture and ultimately for successful nation-building (elements of material culture, festivals, literature, music, symbols such as the *yungdrung*, sports, and so on.), the importance for nation-building of the vernacular language in its written form is especially well documented. A prime example of this is the translation of the Bible by Martin Luther into a specific variant of German and its spread through the printing press, invented only a few decades earlier. This radical event enabled Germans to imagine themselves as belonging to a single community (see Anderson 2016, 37–46). Similar examples for emerging nations utilizing language and the production of literature in vernacular languages for nation-building are also known from outside Europe. One prime example, from South Asia, is the role of the Bengali language and its literature in the rise of Bengali national consciousness in the nineteenth century, particularly in Calcutta, during the so-called Bengal Renaissance (Dasgupta 2011; Korom 1989), as well as in the independence movement in East Pakistan that led to the emergence of Bangladesh. The separation of East Pakistan/Bangladesh from West Pakistan/Pakistan in 1971 particularly illustrates the powerful role that language and ethnolinguistic belonging can play in opposition, subnationalism, and separatism (see, for example, Dil and Dil 2011; Hamid and Jahan 2015).

Since its emergence, the Pakistani state has been pursuing an exclusive language policy, forcing Urdu upon its ethnolinguistically heterogeneous population, of whom today not even 10 percent speak Urdu as their first language. Alongside English as the language of higher education, administration, and the urban elite, Urdu was at

the very beginning introduced as the medium of instruction at the primary level and in teaching materials in most educational institutions (except in East Pakistan). Mass education may be the most important tool for nation-building, not only for spreading a common language and linguistically homogenizing the inhabitants of a specific territory, but also for inculcating crucial elements of nation-building such as the invention of national symbols, history, enemies, and so on. However, whereas on the one hand the Pakistani state is very much aware that education can serve to integrate its many ethnolinguistic groups by uniting them through Urdu, Balti activists, on the other hand, fear the government's language policy as one of the most dangerous factors contributing to the endangerment of Balti in the long run. In fact, though there are around four hundred thousand Balti speakers (*Ethnologue* 2019), the language is listed as "vulnerable" by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2019).

Balti activists I talked to see their language as *the* crucial element for successful nation-building. Indeed, the Balti language is the only element with which all Baltis can easily identify, while other elements are either not exclusively Balti or do not apply to all Baltis.[6] Even though small initiatives have been implemented, for instance the broadcasting of radio and TV programs in Balti with the support of the Pakistani state, the main concern of Balti activists is that the Balti language is not taught in schools. Even in primary schools children are confronted with Urdu as the language of teaching materials and to some extent also the medium of instruction.[7] Since the Pakistani state has not yet taken the initiative to promote Balti in a written form, teaching Balti depends greatly on non-state actors. Thus, while radio and TV programs might contribute to the standardization of an oral form of Balti, the biggest challenge to promote Balti as a written language is the standardization of its orthography and script.

Script politics in South Asia

There is no doubt that the textualization of a language and particularly its script play an important role in identity formation and the politics of various other ethnic and religious communities too, especially in contemporary South Asia (Brandt and Sohoni 2018). While the separation of Hindi/Urdu in the nineteenth century is well known and much studied (e.g., Brandt 2016), scholars have in recent years also explored other cases of bi- and multiscriptality, script revivals, and script inventions (e.g., Brandt 2018; Murphy 2018; Sarangi 2018; and Tschacher 2018). The Balti language and the current endeavors to standardize its written form thus constitute only one of several examples that help us to understand the growing importance of script among many ethnolinguistic groups in South Asia.

In contrast to Europe, with its paucity of different scripts,[8] South Asia is the home of multiple scripts, although each South Asian state must be looked at separately, especially regarding language policy. For instance, the twenty-three official languages in India alone are written in thirteen different official scripts,[9] while the People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI) stated in 2013 that 780 languages are currently spoken and eighty-six different scripts are used in India (*Hindustan Times* 2013). The

administrative structure of the Indian Union allows individual Indian states to have their own official languages and scripts and implement measures to promote them. This inclusive language policy has also led to wide-ranging developments in the field of script politics in recent times, for instance a script reform for the Meitei language (officially Manipuri since 1992) in the Indian state of Manipur (cf. Brandt 2018).

In contrast to India, Pakistan, with its (until recently) exclusive language policy favoring Urdu (and English) over other vernaculars, has left hardly any space for decisions in this field on a regional level, leading to other vernaculars being heavily neglected. Exceptions are to some extent Pashto and, first and foremost, Sindhi, which has been the official language of Sindh since 1972 (Rahman 1995). Even so, changes for other vernaculars are possible in the near future since the 18th Constitutional Amendment of 2010 made education the responsibility of the provinces. However, besides the Roman script for English, the Perso-Arabic script is used for almost all vernaculars.[10] Pakistan can hence be considered for all intents and purposes homogeneous with regard to scripts. Nonetheless, activists from among ethnolinguistic minority groups are in many cases aware of the potential role that scripts can play in identity politics. This is especially the case for Baltis who embody multiple identities that seem *prima facie* to contradict each other. The issue of implementing a script for their language has thus become a serious challenge.

Balti script movements

There are currently various initiatives to write the Balti language and to implement a standardized orthography and script for it. During my field studies, I was able to talk to script activists from different factions to discuss their reasons for favoring a particular script, how they got the idea for the script they favored, what obstacles they face in implementing it, and so on. Most importantly, these different script initiatives are mostly in the hands of only a few members of the urban, educated, socioeconomically higher strata, located mainly in Skardu. Still, these activists have diverging backgrounds and networks that they can mobilize. There are representatives of the local cultural, economic, or political elite; local people with connections across international borders, especially through social networks such as Facebook (see also Magnusson 2016); Baltis who have lived for years, sometimes decades, abroad, either in other parts of Pakistan or in the so-called "West," for instance in the United States and United Kingdom; Baltis who have returned to Baltistan after receiving higher education in other parts of Pakistan (and marginally in the "West") and are now often employed in public service or the tourism sector; and, above all, a foreign woman, a Catholic nun, who has been living for many years in Baltistan and who is respected greatly by all of my interviewees for her knowledge of and about the Balti language. Keeping in mind that the Balti population is quite small, and the urban elite even smaller, all activists know each other, and, in some cases, work or have worked together, despite the fact that their ideas of Baltiness and script choice might diverge immensely.

Surprisingly, none of these script activists had suggested a unique endogenous script that can be exclusively identified with Baltis, at least not in any of my

interviews or discussions with them. According to several publications (Afridi 1988, 29f.; Ḥusainābādī 2009, 322; Pandey 2010), however, there were one or two other scripts in use in the region of present-day Baltistan that could qualify as unique endogenous scripts, yet none of the Balti script activists I talked to even referred to one of these or suggested one either as a potential standard script for Balti. Not much is known about the two scripts, which are labeled by Anshuman Pandey (ibid.) only as "Balti A" and "Balti B," but their spread was seemingly very limited. Nonetheless, it is indeed astonishing that although Balti activists often emphasize the uniqueness of their nation, there are no attempts at all to follow the strategy that can be observed among so-called "indigenous"[11] groups in other regions, for instance in India or Bangladesh. There, supposedly unique and endogenous scripts are often either revived or invented to support the development of a unique culture that needs to be protected and promoted (Brandt 2014, 88–94).

The Roman script

Although South Asia has a vast variety of endogenous scripts, mainly derived from the Brahmi script, the Roman script (also known as the Latin script) has played an important role in almost all parts of South Asia for centuries (see Brandt 2020). As well as being used for English, the language of the former colonial power, and languages of other Europeans controlling various regions in South Asia, the Roman script has also been used for local languages since at least the sixteenth century. While in many cases it was introduced for languages that were not written down until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—so-called "tribal" languages—mainly by Christian missionaries, in other cases it was applied to South Asian languages that already had their "own" script(s), such as Konkani, an Indo-European language spoken in Goa, India that was printed by the Portuguese in the Roman script from the sixteenth century onward. The introduction of the printing press in South Asia by Portuguese missionaries, in particular, led to the wider circulation of this script (Brandt and Sohoni 2018, 4).

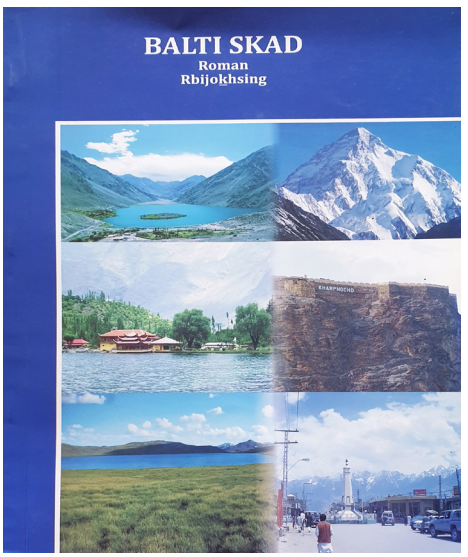

Figure 9. The brochure named *Balti Skad: Roman Rbijoḳhsing* (Ilhami et al. 2013) for learning Balti in Roman script, published, among others, by Eunice Jones. Image supplied by the author.

Its use in South Asia can thus be closely associated with Christian missionaries and their endeavors to spread the gospel among the local population, and in general with the languages of European colonizers, in particular English. Since that time, however, the Roman script has also come to be associated with new technologies and used in that context, for instance on social media

or the Internet in general, and for mobile phone communication. It continues to be used voluntarily by many people in South Asia for their languages today, irrespective of whether these are otherwise written in endogenous scripts, or at all. This is the case with Balti, especially among young people using mobile text messaging and social media. Otherwise, the Roman script for Balti is hardly in use or visible at all in the public sphere.

Still, there is one initiative for standardizing Balti in Roman script. A Welsh linguist and Catholic nun, Eunice Jones, who has been living in Baltistan for many years, started the initiative. In March 2013 she joined, among others, the local intellectuals Professor Hasmat Ali Kamal Ilhami, Mohammad Kamal Jamshed, and Sheikh Ghulam Hussain Sahar to publish an A4 brochure named *Balti Skad: Roman Rbijo̲khsing* (Ilhami et al. 2013; see figure 9).

It contains an overview on how to write Balti in the Roman script (including several diacritics), poems, short stories, and several articles about the culture of the Baltis, written in this variant of the Roman script. The fact that Jones could persuade even prominent intellectuals and activists who actually favor other scripts for Balti to contribute to this brochure not only confirms their respect for her but also reflects the friendly competition among these different script activists.

The main argument for the Roman script is that it is already widespread in Pakistan, where English is a mandatory subject in school. Thus, Balti children do not have to learn an additional script. Although the variant of the Roman script suggested by Jones contains several diacritics, for instance a dot under specific consonants to represent retroflex sounds in Balti, she assumes that children will learn how to read and write their mother tongue very quickly. Furthermore, Balti, like Tibetic languages in general, is very rich in vowels, and the Roman script, an alphabetic writing system, can reproduce these vowels more distinctly than the Perso-Arabic script, which usually does not render short vowels at all. In interviews, activists who favor other scripts for Balti brought forward the Roman script's association with English as one argument against it. But the main argument seems to be the perception that the Roman script lacks any "authentic" connection to their language. In fact, even though young people use this script voluntarily for Balti, especially on social media and for mobile phone messages, the chances seem rather low that it will be chosen as the standard script.

The Tibetan script

Similar prospects seem to apply to the Tibetan script. While the Roman script is nowadays used to render many different languages worldwide, and is not tied to any specific language, the spread of the Tibetan script is very limited and closely linked to Classical Tibetan, its successor languages, and Tibetan Buddhism. In contrast to old scripts in general, the creation of the Tibetan script is in emic historical traditions almost unanimously attributed to one specific person, Thönmi Sambhota (Schaik 2011, 49–51). It is said that Thönmi Sambhota was sent by Songtsen Gampo, the founder of the Tibetan Empire in the seventh century, to India to devise a script for Tibetan. Finally, he supposedly came up with this script, which was accepted as the

official script and then also used for translating Buddhist texts from Sanskrit into Classical Tibetan in the eighth century. Whereas the associations linking the Roman script with the Bible and Christianity, and the Arabic script with the Quran and Islam, are predominant but not exclusive (both scripts having been in use before the emergence of Christianity and Islam, respectively), the Tibetan script is thus tied exclusively to Tibetan Buddhism.

The close connection of Tibetan writing with Buddhism also includes the historic evidence for the script in Baltistan: the Buddha rock near Skardu (see figures 7 and 8). But the historic evidence used to support publications dedicated to the implementation of the Tibetan script (also called the Yige or Agay script) for Balti, namely that this script was used also for the latter and needs to be revived again (Amacha 2001, 4; Zakir 2017, 4), is controversial. Interestingly, some script activists I spoke to claim that the inscriptions on the famous Buddha rock are in Balti. This claim relates to how a predecessor of a modern language and the successor of a classical language are categorized and labeled. On the one hand, it is today taken as given that Modern Tibetan is *the* successor of Classical Tibetan, as is also reflected in the denominations of both languages. On the other hand, Balti is often perceived as being linguistically similar to Classical Tibetan (Backstrom 2002, 10n2), and thus it is often referred to as "archaic Tibetan" (Afridi 1988, 29) or "phonetically archaic" (Zeisler 2004, 222). Thus, why should the inscriptions of the Buddha rock not be perceived as being, actually, Classical Balti, or even Balti seen as the legitimate form of so-called Modern Tibetan? The lack of any continuous production of written Balti literature, the dearth of noteworthy Balti literary production in the Tibetan script, the small number of Baltis, and the fact that this region was never at the center of Tibetan Buddhism are four crucial factors that would seem to disqualify Balti from being *the* successor to Classical Tibetan. These facts, however, do not prevent Balti activists from perceiving the inscriptions on the Buddha rock close to Skardu as Balti. They thus use it in lobbying for the revival of what they see as the authentic script for their language.

The Tibetan script for Balti

The current endeavors to write Balti in the Tibetan script predominantly go back to initiatives by the aforementioned Yousuf Hussain Abadi. He told me in September 2014 that he had learned the Tibetan script in 1980, when he was thirty-two years old. It took him only one night to fully grasp the script, and from then on, he reported, he had been trying to convince others to use it for Balti. He told me that he had published a first book about the Balti language and the Tibetan script in 1984 and a second one in 1990. Many people, he said, learned the script with the help of his second book. He was also able not only to convince other Baltis that the Tibetan script is most suitable for their language but also to introduce several new letters, so that specific phonemes for words of Perso-Arabic origin too could be represented (Ḥusainābādī 2009, 330). Two of these new characters were recognized by the International Organization for Standardization in 2006, and are thus now part of the Unicode set for the Tibetan script.[12] But by 2006 Abadi had already changed his stance on the Tibetan script for Balti, and today he is one of the most vehement lobbyists for Balti in the Perso-Arabic

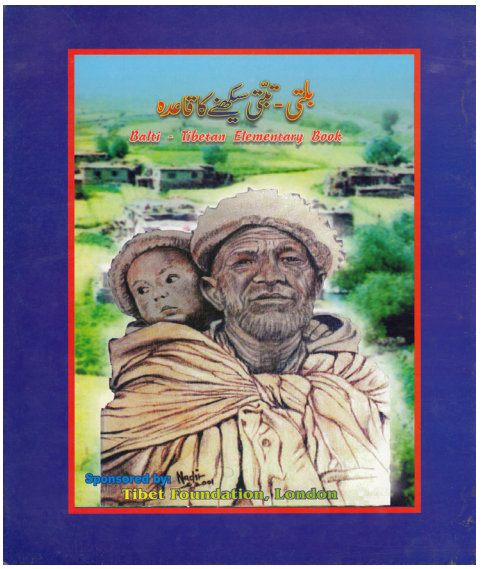

Figure 10. Elementary book for learning Balti in Tibetan script (Kāẓmī and Žharīng 2001), published by the Baltistan Cultural Foundation with the support of the Tibet Foundation, London. Image supplied by the author.

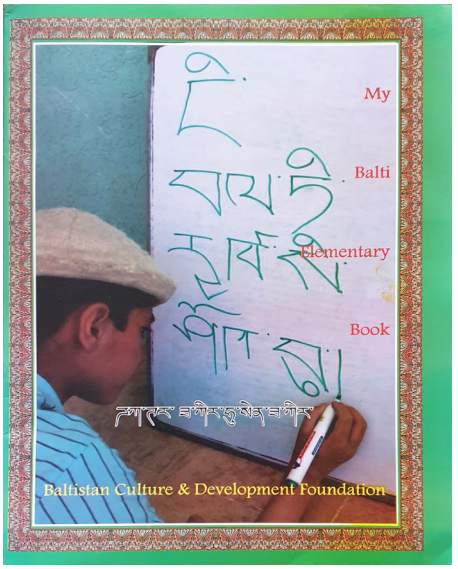

Figure 11. The latest elementary book for learning Balti in Tibetan script (Zakir 2017), published by the Baltistan Culture & Development Foundation. Image supplied by the author.

script. However, he told me that he is still convinced that the Tibetan script can represent the Balti language far better than the Perso-Arabic script can. Nonetheless, he expressed his sympathies toward the Tibetan script and the current initiatives supporting it. The main reason behind his change of opinion is that he considers the Tibetan script as not being "practical" for the situation on the ground: the local people, he told me, are "too attached" to the Perso-Arabic script.

The activists responsible for the textbook on learning Balti in Tibetan script, published in 2001 (Kāẓmī and Žharīng 2001; see figure 10), and the shop sign in Tibetan script (figure 5) are accordingly disappointed in him. Interestingly, they no longer all work together. While the initial enthusiasm of the Tibetan script endeavors brought together various Baltis with diverging backgrounds, though all were urban and formally well educated, today they are divided into different groups: some, like Abadi, backed away from the idea of writing Balti in the Tibetan script, while others are looking for diverging strategies and support to implement its use. The supporters for the Tibetan script can roughly be divided into two groups: the first is comprised of people trying to implement the script for Balti in a very organized and structured way, while the second group consists of individuals trying to spread it through private initiatives. As already mentioned, all these people know each other and have at times also worked together, regardless of their diverging opinions on various aspects of writing and preserving the Balti language.

Formally organized script activists

The Baltistan Culture & Development Foundation (BCDF), described earlier in this article, is the best-organized group of Balti activists. Today, according to its website (see references), it runs fifteen projects and receives funds from several national and

international non-government organizations (NGOs) and government institutions, such as the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP), the INSAF Network Pakistan (INP), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, USAID, and the Government of Pakistan. The projects are dedicated to various causes, as earlier described. However, the first project carried out by this organization and the main reason for establishing it was the promotion of the Tibetan script. With the funds of the Tibet Foundation, London (TFL), around one hundred shop signs like the one in figure 5 were hand-painted and distributed for free among shop owners in Skardu and Khaplu in 2001.[13] An elementary book for learning Balti in the Tibetan script was published during the same year (Kāẓmī and Žharīng 2001; see figure 10).

The promotion of the Tibetan script is still one of the organization's main aims, as reflected in the fact that in 2017 another elementary book (Zakir 2017; see figure 11) for the same cause was published. But the results of promoting the Tibetan script between 2001 and 2017 have been very limited. One of the main factors seems to be that adults do not learn this script, even when they support its promotion, and children cannot learn it officially at school. According to the foreword of the elementary book from 2017, the latter might change in the near future: "Recently the Legislative Assembly of Gilgit-Baltistan has passed a resolution to introduce local languages in primary school curriculum. After this development BCDF started a winter course of Yige [i.e., Tibetan] script to teachers of different schools and 25 teachers attended this course" (Zakir 2017, 4). Furthermore, it is suggested that this textbook be introduced to students in "grade 3 to 5 of English medium schools where children have learnt basic literacy of English" (ibid., 5). Keeping in mind that there are only a few English-medium schools in Baltistan, and only in urban areas, the results of such measures might be very limited too.

Private initiatives by script activists

Besides the script endeavors of the BCDF, there are also several individuals who are not formally organized and who promote the Tibetan script through private initiatives. While most script activists have an urban, formally well-educated background, one of the most dedicated activists seems to be an exception. He is Nisar Ali Khsman (born in 1976), who is not associated with any organization but is, especially among young Baltis, well known for acting in Balti TV dramas and as an anchor at a local radio station. His formal profession is painting. He was actually one of the two painters responsible for the shop signs in the Tibetan script. In contrast to the other painter, he told me, he knew the Tibetan script, having learnt it in 1999 from a Shina speaker with great interest in the Balti language and Tibetan script. Additionally, he worked regularly as a cook for mountaineers climbing K2, where he met two Tibetans from China in 2005. He told me that this encounter, in which he discovered many commonalities between the language of these two mountaineers and Balti, triggered his endeavors to motivate other Baltis also to learn the Tibetan script.

The fact that Khsman did not study at all and is not a member of the socioeconomic and intellectual elite as, for instance, Yousuf Hussain Abadi is, illustrates that the endeavors to revive the Tibetan past are also being taken up by other Baltis outside the usual spectrum of activists. These others are, on the one hand, not formally

organized and, on the other hand, trying to implement the Tibetan script through alternative means. Currently, Nisar Ali Khsman teaches this script now and then to students in a college in Skardu, who attend his class voluntarily after regular classes. Furthermore, along with some allies who are also not associated with any official organization, he offers regular Tibetan script classes on the weekends, where other locals, mostly adults and some children (all male), learn the script voluntarily. Unlike the activities of the BCDF, these grassroots endeavors also target people from lower socioeconomic strata. Their highly motivated approach and continuous dialogue with people contributes to create some awareness concerning the Tibetan past among people the BCDF has not yet been able to reach. Moreover, some people have indeed learned the script in this way, though whether they will actually apply it is another question altogether. The lack of Balti publications written in the Tibetan script doubtless constitutes an obstacle for any sustainable script-teaching momentum at present.

Diverging orthographies

Apart from the different approaches to spreading the Tibetan script, there is another major, crucial difference. While the script activists linked to the BCDF prefer an orthography close to the pronunciation of modern Balti, Nisar Ali Khsman and his allies prefer an orthography that goes back to a standardization of spoken Old Tibetan from the eighth century and is still used for other modern Tibetic languages. To a great extent this orthography does not reflect the current pronunciation of these languages, but the arguments for this appear quite reasonable. These activists network with people in Ladakh, the Tibet Autonomous Region, and other Tibetic communities abroad. While they can hardly understand each other orally, they cherish their common heritage in social networks where they can communicate with each other thanks to using the same orthography. A new orthography would make their current communication far more difficult. In contrast, lobbyists for the Tibetan script and a new orthography exclusively for a Balti in line with its pronunciation seem to emphasize the uniqueness of Balti and Baltiness. Although activists from this group are aware that their present identity came into being due to various influences over the course of time, some of them believe that today it has its very own particularity, of which Baltis can be proud without activating belongings to other geopolitical entities. Moreover, these activists also believe that the old orthography hampers people learning how to read and write Balti, saying that a new orthography reflecting the pronunciation would be easier for Balti learners (Zakir 2017, 5).

Diverging orthographical preferences constitute one of several aspects illustrating the fragmentation of Baltis and their dilemma of nation-building, even though both activist groups have a major interest in preserving and promoting their language, which both deem as essential for sustainable nation-building. After all, while a new orthography might help the Tibetan script spread among Baltis, the old and standard orthography for many Tibetic languages helps them connect to other linguistically related communities globally. It also provides them with easier access to Old Tibetan sources. Thus, while the old one emphasizes Tibetan heritage and belonging to the Tibetan Empire in the past, nurturing links to other former "citizens" of this empire,

especially in the Indian-administered region of Ladakh, the new one enables people to read and write Balti better but hampers their relations with other Tibetic groups. The Pakistani state, which supports some projects of the Baltistan Culture & Development Foundation, would most likely prefer the new orthography over the old one, because it has great interest in preventing any cross-border nation-building among Baltis. Especially in view of India's geopolitical claim on Gilgit-Baltistan, the idea among some Balti activists that the "actual" Baltistan contains Indian regions, too, and Balti activists such as Senge Hasnan Sering lobbying recently for the integration of Gilgit-Baltistan into India, the Pakistani state is on the alert regarding any separatist activities in Baltistan. For that very reason, Pakistani state institutions have also supported the Perso-Arabic script for Balti in the past.

The Perso-Arabic script

Activists who lobby for the Perso-Arabic script are aware that Pakistan will neither surrender Gilgit-Baltistan to India nor grant this region full autonomy in the near future. They believe that they can preserve their mother language only by working together with the Pakistani state and compromising on the script; otherwise, the Tibetan script would be the only one for any Pakistani language that hints at potential belonging to a neighboring geopolitical entity. Furthermore, Balti children overwhelmingly have to learn Urdu first at school and thus learn a variant of the Perso-Arabic script in any case. Script activists also told me about threats from religious leaders against the Tibetan script. These leaders identify the Tibetan script with Buddhism and hence consider it "un-Islamic." Above all, all Baltis are, as far as is known, Muslims, and many are thus also familiar with the Quran in the Arabic script. Thus, the Perso-Arabic script for Balti is not only a compromise with the Pakistani state but also a symbol for Muslimness in general and, in the case of Baltis, potential belonging to Iran and Shia Islam. The limited amount of Balti literature available today is actually in the Perso-Arabic script, although in a non-standardized orthography. There is, for instance, the local poet Ehsan Ali Danish who publishes his poetry in Balti in the Perso-Arabic script (Dānish 2012). There are collections of Balti folk songs (Khargrōng and Ḥasrat 1985), proverbs (Ḥasnī 2004), some prose (Rawish 2005), and some teaching materials to learn Balti in the Perso-Arabic script. The latest booklet was published in 2015 (Baltistān Dāʾirah-i Muṣannifīn 2015; see figure 12) and is based on an elementary book (Ḥusainābādī et al. 2004; see figure 13) published eleven years before. While the one published in 2004 only teaches the Perso-Arabic script for Balti and some basic vocabulary, the second also has short prose texts to practice reading Balti in the script. Interestingly, it also contains a few pages of Balti prose texts in Roman script and an introductory overview on how to use the Roman script for Balti, based on the initiative and publication by Eunice Jones previously mentioned. This obviously again reflects the respect for her and friendly competition between the Perso-Arabic and Roman script for Balti.

The main difference between the existing Balti publications in Perso-Arabic script and these two booklets (figures 12 and 13) is that some additional letters have been created to represent Balti phonemes better, which are otherwise unknown in

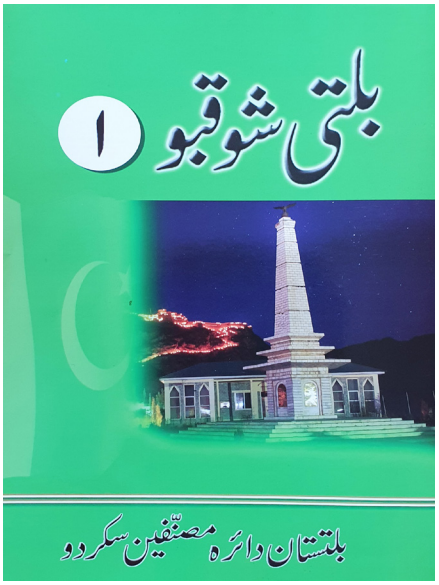

Figure 12. Textbook for improving reading skills in Balti in Perso-Arabic script and to a minor extent in Roman script (Baltistān Dāʾirah-i Muṣannifīn 2015), published without state support. Image supplied by the author

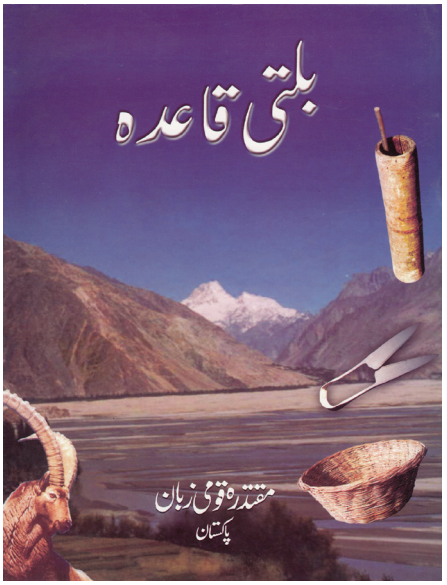

Figure 13. Elementary book for learning Balti in Perso-Arabic script (Ḥusainābādī et al. 2004), published with the support of the Pakistani state. Image supplied by the author

the script variants used for Urdu and Persian. These letters were devised by adding diacritics to existing letters known from Urdu, such as by adding an extra dot to the letter *šīn*. As in the case of the additional letters for the Tibetan script representing phonemes for Perso-Arabic loanwords, these letters too were devised by Yousuf Hussain Abadi, who had already used them in his Balti translation of the Quran, published for the first time in 1995.

According to some Balti activists also preferring the Perso-Arabic script, Abadi's Quran translation was a major and praiseworthy endeavor but is very difficult to understand for most Baltis, especially because of their unfamiliarity with these extra letters. I also learned from some activists, for instance the elderly and well-respected scholar Hashmat Ali Kamal Ilhami, that the Perso-Arabic script has been in use for the Balti language for more than a century. In the past, he told me, members of the royal families of Baltistan, in particular, used this script for their poetry in Balti. Unfortunately, I could not locate any documents as testaments to his recollections. At any rate, some activists do not see the necessity of adding any letters or diacritics to the variant of the Perso-Arabic script used otherwise for Urdu. But this seems to be the smallest problem in regard to standardizing a written form of the Balti language, as long as all script activists do not act in concert and Balti is not taught in any standardized form in schools with the support of state institutions.

Conclusion

The endeavors to standardize a written form of Balti no doubt illustrate the struggle of nation-building among members of a community that is torn between

its multiple identities, multifaceted pasts, and imagined belongings, which all ignore contemporary state borders. Due to the lack of any centralized identity formation in the past or present, and today's disputed geopolitical status, along with the circumstance that other communities have already incorporated specific elements they share with Baltis within their own nation-building, it is difficult for Baltis to emphasize any particular identity—by activating specific symbols—without automatically evoking belongings to other communities or geopolitical entities. For many Baltis, the question of which script should be the standard one for Balti, which is currently only sparsely written, is a highly emotional matter, as I also witnessed during a discussion in August 2017 at the University of Baltistan, Skardu, during which various teachers at this newly established university defended either the Perso-Arabic or Tibetan script vehemently, and at times heatedly. Interestingly, some other teachers who joined the discussion, but were seemingly confronted with this matter for the first time, could not follow the various lines of argumentation at all. The dispute at the university made it quite clear that even many quite well-educated Baltis have hardly any interest in standardizing a written form of their mother tongue. They are satisfied with the options they have to express themselves in Urdu and English. Having received their higher education in other parts of Pakistan and elsewhere, there is no doubt that they perceive themselves as citizens of Pakistan and strive for the complete integration of their region into the Pakistani state. This is also the case for most script activists I spoke to, although all of them believe in strengthening their ethnolinguistic identity, preserving and promoting their language, and nation-building endeavors to make Baltistan residents proud of their historical culture, while also promoting the recognition of the region outside of their homeland. Further, comparing the contents of the elementary books dedicated to the Roman, Tibetan, and Perso-Arabic scripts for Balti reveals slight differences reflecting diverging attitudes toward the Pakistani state. While all textbooks emphasize the uniqueness of Balti culture, especially by invoking elements of its material culture (for example, clothing, food, and woodcarving), only the two lobbying for the Perso-Arabic script contain clear references to the Pakistani state. They cite the flag (figure 12) or a prose text about Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan (figure 13). These script activists evidently compromise on the geopolitical status of Baltistan and do not doubt that it belongs to Pakistan. Their form of nation-building and nationalism can thus be classified as subnationalism, while in the case of activists preferring the Tibetan script it is less clear how they imagine the geopolitical future of Baltistan. Pakistan's future policy toward the region in question, and the steps taken to improve its constitutional and socioeconomic status, could decide whether the script activists discussed in this article will further emphasize their Tibetan past and potential belonging to the region east of Gilgit-Baltistan or come to perceive themselves more strongly as Pakistani citizens.

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Notes

1. For studies on the Baltis in Kargil see Gupta 2014 and Magnusson 2011.

2. For an enlightening publication on *Kashmir as a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Belonging across the Line of Control*, see Bouzas 2019.

3. In this case, "Kashmiri" is used as a denomination for almost all inhabitants of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir living to the east of Baltistan and in today's Indian union state of Jammu and Kashmir, and not for the actual ethnolinguistic group of Kashmiris, who only inhabit the Kashmir Valley.

4. Although the so-called Karachi Agreement was signed by representatives of India and Pakistan on July 27, 1949, and a ceasefire achieved on December 31, 1948, fights still went on in the regions of present-day Baltistan and Ladakh (Bouzas 2017, 198n1). See also Martin Sökefeld's article on the role of Gilgit-Baltistan in the so-called Kashmir dispute (Sökefeld 2018) and Hermann Kreutzmann's article with a similar focus (Kreutzmann 2015).

5. See the studies by Martin Sökefeld on the impact of the construction of the Karakoram Highway on the local population, for example, Sökefeld 2003a.

6. The latter circumstance refers especially to the material culture, for instance to clothing, such as the traditional caps made out of wool, which vary in style and color from valley to valley.

7. In primary schools especially, teachers often use Balti as a bridge.

8. Besides the Roman script, only the Greek script, the Cyrillic script in East and Southeast Europe, and the Armenian and the Georgian scripts in the Caucasus regions are still in use.

9. The so-called Bengali, Gujarati, Gurmukhi, Kannada, Malayalam, Meitei, Nagari, Oriya, Ol Chiki, Perso-Arabic, Roman, Tamil, and Telugu scripts.

10. For instance, Brahui is also written in the Roman script.

11. Here the term "indigenous" refers to the meaning in the sense of the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

12. Abadi designed five letters for the Tibetan script representing phonemes used for words of Perso-Arabic origin (Ḥusainābādī 2009, 330), of which /ɽ/ and /q/ were included into the Unicode set for the Tibetan script (Unicode 2019, 4).

13. During my last visit in 2017, the shop sign in figure 5 was actually the last surviving one. All the others had been replaced with new ones by the shop owners. None of the new ones are in the Tibetan script.

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