An Inter-Ethnic Conflict in the Cultural Environment of the Baloch National Movement in Present-day Afghanistan*

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Abstract
This article focuses on strategies of inter-ethnic conflict resolution in southwest Afghanistan under the circumstances of social changes in a tribal society. Field research was carried on in September and October 2008 in Kabul and Zaranj, the province centre of Nimruz. During ethnographic fieldwork focusing on transnational identities of the Baloch people in the Afghan-Iranian border region, I observed an informal inter-ethnic trial. The location of this trial was the town of Zaranj, the administrative centre of the south-western Afghan province of Nimruz. This province, beside Pashtun and Tajik populations, has a compact Baloch settlement area bordering the Baloch areas in Iran and Pakistan. The trial took place between my host, the chief of a Baloch cultural centre, and an Uzbek defendant. As my host was a representative of an emerging Baloch self-confidence since the decline of the Taliban regime, the trial has to be analysed in the broader socio-cultural context of the Baloch people in present-day Afghanistan.

The paper first presents the sequence of events during the trial; then it deals with the social context considering some new developments in the self-conceptions of the Baloches in Afghanistan. Finally, the trial is analysed in the framework of this context.

Keywords
Baloches, Baloch Identity, Uzbeks, Pashtuns, Afghanistan

THE ARREST
In early autumn 2008, I was staying with my Baloch host family in Zaranj. The second day of the ‘Eid celebrations (1 October, 2008) my

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host and I came back from one of the countless meetings with Baloch tribal elders being held during the celebrations following the fasting month of Ramadan. On our way back to the house, my host suddenly asked the driver to stop the car, exited and brought back a poorly dressed man who drove home with us.

**The Accusation**

At home, I was told that the man was an Uzbek who had worked in my host’s gas cylinder business from the time of the Taliban until the invasion of NATO. He was accused of the theft of 120 gas cylinders during the absence of my host seven years ago. Afterwards, it was alleged, he fled to the Afghan province of Faryab and was never seen again. This offence almost ruined my host family.

**The Internment**

Despite the anger of my host family against the defendant, there was—contrary to my worst expectations—no physical force used against the Uzbek. As the Baloch concepts of honour require a man to protect the persons under his care, such as women, children and guests, the use of force in this case was quite legitimate. Especially as the economic security of the family was seriously threatened by the theft (see Orywal 1991). On the other hand, violence is not practiced in the host’s own house as a rule, but either at the place of capture or at a remote place in the desert. As a common Baloch proverb says: “Don’t beat anybody on your own carpet” (Watī kōnte sarā hič kasā nağant). Thus the internment in the house was already indicating that a physical punishment was not planned.

There was no threat or application of violence, but the threat to transfer the defendant to the police, what would have resulted in custody of several years under disastrous circumstances. After an attempt to escape, the Uzbek was detained in a small washroom during the first night. In a discussion on the internment of the defendant in the second night, the wife of my host said the Uzbek was a human being and that considering this, he couldn’t be locked up alone for another night. So, eventually, her husband had to keep guard over the defendant the whole night.

**The Trial**

During the hearing, my hosts first tried to convince the arrested Uzbek to admit his guilt. He denied his guilt vehemently in the beginning,
trying to blame others for the offence and insisting that he only fled because he was afraid to be punished for an offence he had not committed. There were some humiliations and intimidations of the defendant by the visitors of the ‘Eyd-celebrations in the form of jokes and remarks on the captured and his ethnic group, the Uzbeks. There were ironic comments aimed especially at the missing support of other Uzbeks, including General Dostum who was obviously seen as the embodiment of all Uzbek characteristics. Some relatives from a rural background proposed a kind of labour service in their village, which was considered to be even tougher than the local jail. The view that the Uzbek actually deserved the hangman’s rope was also expressed openly by some visitors.

Beside the offence itself, negotiations were held on the financial situation of the captured, his son, and his wife, as the Uzbek was accused of having spent all the money he had earned from the theft on a marriage. The fact that he was living his life under poor conditions at that moment was seen as convincing proof that a less virtuous way of live would be punished by Divine Providence in the end. During the whole internment the defendant was treated with emphasised hospitality, and he was supplied with excellent food to show him the generosity and fairness of his deceived hosts.

THE CONFESSION AND STRATEGIES OF PROBLEM SOLUTION

On the second day, the defendant confessed his partial guilt. Both parties then tried to find a possible form of compensation. As there were no relatives of the Uzbek available in the province for compensation payments, another Uzbek who was not involved in the case at all, was asked to mediate on the issue. He was neither a relative nor an acquaintance and he felt obviously uncomfortable in his role as the defendant’s mediator and solicitor. He did not feel in any way responsible for the defendant, which the Baloches considered unsuitable behaviour towards a tribal brother. After the mediating Uzbek had left, the defendant was asked rhetorically, which group he would have preferred to defend him. They asked the question just to tell him that a Baloch under the same circumstances would have helped his tribal brother.

CONSEQUENCES

On the third day, my hosts decided to release the Uzbek. They didn’t rely on his promises to pay off his debts, because his “dishonourable-ness” had already been proven by his offence. Even so, they decided to set him free. Without telling him about the planned release, my host
brought the Uzbek to a Baloch cultural centre. From there the Uzbek escaped in an unobserved moment. In retrospect this was seen as another indication for the dishonourableness of the Uzbek and even of his whole ethnic group.

**CONTEXT**

The question is now, in which cultural background this case is located and what meaning does it have? My aim is less to reconstruct the different patterns of identification of the two parties of conflict, their different ethnic backgrounds and the individual and collective motivations resulting from it. I would rather like to show the aspects of recent patterns of identification under the Afghan Baloches, and how the motivations of the complainant, the leader of an emerging Baloch national movement, influenced the proceeding. The cultural background of the accused Uzbek was of minor impact on the process of the tribunal, as probably the Baloches would have treated any member of another ethnic group the same way.

The very remarkable point about this incident is that the moral concepts of the Baloch code of honour and notion of tribal solidarity were imposed on the Uzbek in an idealised way. During the inter-ethnic trial, it became clear that the Baloch concepts were not accepted by the Uzbek in the way it had been anticipated by the Baloches. An ethnic separation took place in a competitive way.

This competitive aspect was particularly pronounced by the accentuated hospitality towards the captured Uzbek. It also became apparent when my hosts consulted the uninvolved Uzbek from the bazaar, which resulted in a cultural comparison to the benefit of their own group. They were trying to point out to the Uzbek that his ethnic group was inferior regarding its morality, solidarity, and honour. The emphasising of Baloch solidarity as a basic element or ideal of their self-image became very clear in this situation of inter-ethnic conflict.

**CHANGES IN THE SELF-CONCEPTIONS OF THE BALOCHES**

There have been several crucial changes in the self-perceptions of the Baloches since the 1970s, which had an impact on the described trial (cf: Orywal 1982). The super-ordinated tribal structures, such as a group of dominant landowners, and the inheritable function of the tribal leaders, the sardârs, have almost vanished or become considerably small-structured as a result of the nationality policy of the Soviets, the chaos of the
civil war, the settlement of Pashtuns in the region during the Taliban regime, and even some ecological changes.

The beginnings of the Baloch national movement in Afghanistan and the accompanying ethnicisation can be traced back to the Soviet occupation.\footnote{One of the two leaders of the present-day Baloch national movement is a parliamentarian, who, during the Soviet occupation, had the function of a province governor. The deceased Baloch intellectual Abdurrahman Pahwal, the pioneer of the Baloch national movement, had also contributed to the conception of radio and television programmes during this time.} In this time the great land owners lost a considerable part of their estates in a land reform. During the civil war, a Mujaheddin faction formed, that still dominates the political sphere in the province.\footnote{The former minister for tribal and border affairs, Karim Brahui; the Pashtun province governor, Dastegir Azad, and a considerable part of the present province administration had been members of the so called ǧabhe nimrūz (Front of Nimruz).} At the same time, the Baloch group of the Brahui advanced from a marginal role compared with other Baloch tribes in the 1970s to a dominant economic and political force. The Brahui who speak a Dravidian language in addition to Balochi, were living as pastoral nomads until the time of the Soviet invasion. Today, they play a key role in smuggling, the most important economic activity in the province.

Since the Soviet occupation, but also during the civil war and the authoritarian rule of the Taliban, which was accompanied by a long period of drought, a huge part of the population left the province (see Orywal 1996: 87). Because of this, the familiar ties between the Baloch populations on both sides of the Iranian-Afghan border were reinforced, and presumably illegal mobility in the border region has increased.

The Baloch national movement rose in Afghanistan from a small group of Baloch intellectuals in Kabul, who cultivated the Baloch language and culture in the climate of the Soviet nationality policy. They collected and published several texts and popular ballads, the first Baloch novel from Afghanistan was released, a Baloch dictionary (Pahwal 2007) was composed, and textbooks were compiled by the ministry of education. Programmes in the five national languages, among them Balochi, were broadcast from Radio Kabul every day (Rzehak 2003). These ideational preliminary works can be regarded as the foundation of a national movement, which has formed after the decline of the Taliban. These activities also played a crucial role in the development of the imagined community of a “Baloch nation” (cf. Anderson 2005),

Today, Baloches from the southwest of Afghanistan are aspiring to unite with their compatriots from other parts of the country, who are
characterising themselves as Baloches but do not speak Balochi as their first or second language. Their long-term aim is to transfer the “Baloches” from the other parts of Afghanistan and even Turkmenistan to Nimruz. This movement has an inclusive character. Some of the integrated groups have hardly any linguistic or cultural patterns that point to the Baloch origin. These groups are being “Balochised” virtually and accept this label willingly, because at least since the meeting of more than a hundred Baloch representatives with Karzai in 2008, this label is associated with political and social prestige.

Spokespeople of the national movement calculate the Baloch population of Afghanistan at more than one million, even though Western authors estimated their number, at the end of the 1970s, to be between 20 and 207,000 (Orywal 1986: 34-35). Since only the Baloches who speak the Baloch language affiliate themselves with one of the Baloch tribes, solidarity under the label “Baloch” is pronounced by the members of the national movement, while the traditional inner structure of tribes, clans, sub-clans and lineages is minimised.

The integration of foreign groups in Baloch tribal structure is not completely new. There are several examples of Pashto or Yadgal groups who were “Balochised” in the past. Brian Spooner (1969), who did his research with Iranian Baloches in the 1960s, describes how in Baloch history different groups of immigrants had been integrated in the tribal structure consistently. According to him, Baloch is a supra-tribal term resulting from the perception of pastoral nomads by the sedentary population. But in contrast to this kind of “Balochisation”, that occurred in the Baloch tribal areas, today the integration takes place in Afghanistan, in the regions remote from these areas. While the former concept of integrating foreign groups extended the tribal structures by the incorporation of new subgroups, for the time being, the tribal inner structure is seen as an obstacle for the national idea. Representatives of the national movement try to replace the fragmented self-concepts by an imagined ethnic identity.

Within the framework of these aspirations, the incorporated groups whose Baloch identity often does not reach beyond the acceptance of the label “Baloch”, are being “Balochised” by an education programme. A Baloch Cultural centre is serving as the starting point of this programme. From there it is planned to build up a network of educational institutions in all of the thirteen provinces of Afghanistan where Baloches are believed to live.
So, how is the Baloch national movement related to the above described tribunal? In this regard, I would like to add another question: why did the accuser abstain from using force?

Although, according to customary law, my hosts were authorised to use force by any means and, from their perspective, it was desirable to get compensation by force, they abstained from this option. Compensation and satisfaction of the deprivation of honour caused by the theft seemed to have played a secondary role in this situation. Probably several reasons had an impact on this decision. My presence, it may also be assumed, had some influence on the situation. The killing of the Uzbek was also seen as dishonourable behaviour, as he was not an incorporated member of a tribal society like the Baloches and Pashtuns, and so, he was not a coequal.

It is noticeable though, what an important role the competitive cultural comparison plays during the trial, although it is not important for the solution of the conflict. It is more about creating a positive self-perception by a negative perception of foreign groups. The mentioning of ethnic criteria (Baloch versus Uzbek) points to the strong ethnicisation in the group perception of the Baloch national movement in Afghanistan. The stressed group solidarity under the Baloches shows how particular patterns of identification between the Baloch subgroups are downplayed for the benefit of an imagined Baloch solidarity group. So, the accusers are promoting the Baloch identity by asking the Uzbek which ethnic group would be preferable during the tribunal.

The Baloch national movement became definitely established through the Afghan state institutions, and the meeting of its representatives can be seen as an important step in consolidating the group. However, its followers see it completely independent from the Afghan state, the aim is to create an independent Baloch state. Likewise, the relationship to state institutions during the trial was quite ambivalent; on the one hand, it was not under discussion to solve the conflict with the help of state institutions; on the other hand, state prison was proposed as a punishment. At the same time, customary institutions of conflict resolution were renounced apart from the consultation of the Uzbek from the bāzār.

In the context of the aligning Baloch national movement, the trial can be seen as a representation of social change from a regional, particularised self-perception to a supra-regional ethnic identity with a strongly inclusive character. The fact that this change started in Kabul, the centre of the Afghan state, is especially remarkable.
Bibliography


