

Folksongs: The Real Portrayal of Baltistan's Culture

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Abstract

This article describes the folk literature of Baltistan particularly Balti folksongs of eighteenth and nineteenth century Baltistan. Most of the folksongs date back to the epoch of The Great Ali Sher Khan (he is called Anchan in Balti language), the most able and gallant king of Baltistan. Folk songs are not mere poems but exhibit the real experiences of people of Baltistan depicting genuine Balti culture, traditions, norms, values and their peculiar lifestyle. These songs are a medium to know the historical, geographical, political, religious and ethnic accounts of Baltistan. In the present study, some of the songs and their significance are being discussed to highlight Balti literature vis-à-vis its culture.

Introduction

Literature has been the major source to document political and social development of peoples; it is as old as the history of mankind. In primitive times, when there was no facility or resources to record the history in written form, usually it was recorded and transmitted through oral literature. Oral literature was then the basic tool to preserve the cultural and traditional mode of living of a nation.¹ There are several

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1 Karl Reichl, ed., *Medieval Oral Literature* (Berlin; Boston: Walter De Gruyter, 2012).

examples in rich literatures of the world like in English *Beowulf*², in Italian *Decameron*³ and so on and so forth. Such literary pieces very adeptly present the norms, values, customs, traditions and peculiar life style of the people of that era. This paper seeks to identify the cultural reflection in Balti literature disseminated far and wide through folksongs of Baltistan.

Every living nation is being known and distinguished by its unique history, culture and tradition; making it significant in contrast to any other culture and tradition. Usually, cultural, social, political and religious accounts of any nation are recorded through writing history in chronological order. But there is another source through which the happenings and evolution of any civilization can best be documented, and it is called literature. Literature is perhaps the most appropriate medium to record the socio-cultural, socio-political and religious developments of a civilization.⁴

The historical and geographical statuses of peoples play a very important role in flourishing art, literature and culture of the region, because these factors not only affect the nature of people but strongly influence the cultural traditions of that area as well. Thus as the geographical locations vary from region to region, the literature also becomes unique even being in a particular vicinity, for example, Canadian and American literature, Italian and French literature. Even though, these countries are bordering each other yet their literature varies, no matter the subject matters and themes are the same; they have different cultural backgrounds. So just like the European literature, the literature of Baltistan, Tibet (China) and Leh or Ladakh (India) is different from

² An Old English epic poem celebrating the legendary Scandinavian hero Beowulf.

³ A work by Boccaccio, written between 1348 and 1358, containing a hundred tales supposedly told in ten days by a party of ten young people who had fled from the Black Death in Florence. The work was influential on later writers such as Chaucer and Shakespeare.

⁴ Roger D. Sell, *Literature as Communication: The Foundations of Mediating Criticism* (Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publishing Co., 2000).

each other although the geographical and geological stipulations are almost same. People of these areas share the same cultural characteristics but there are some idiosyncrasies and uniqueness which make them distinct from each other.⁵

Baltistan is one of the most important regions of Pakistan as it shares borders with China and India. In earlier times Baltistan was spread to Tibet (China) and Ladakh (India). Gilgit, Chitral and Hunza were also included in the territory during the reign of Great Ali Sher Khan, the valiant and powerful leader of Baltistan. He invaded Gilgit, Hunza, Chitral and annexed them with Baltistan and made Skardu the capital of Baltistan.⁶

Banat Gul Afridi states about Baltistan as:

Baltistan was also known as Tibet in olden days and in course of time this name was extended to include the area of Ladakh as well. Later on, in order to differentiate it from Ladakh, Baltistan was called little Tibet whereas Ladakh was known as Great Tibet. But locally Ladakh and Tibet were known as "Maryul" (Red Area) and "BaltiYul" (Balti country), respectively.⁷

Before the advent of Islam, Buddhism was the religion of Ladakh and Baltistan. Afridi supports this statement and says that "the people of Tibet and Baltistan professed Buddhist religion. This is proved by the presence of one sculpture of Buddha in Harghissa Nullah and another in Parkuta Nullah".⁸

5 Ahmad Hasan Dani and B.A. Litvinsky, *History of Civilization of Central Asia: The Crossroads of Civilization, A.D. 250 to 750* (Paris: UNESCO, 1996).

6 Syed Muhammad Abbas Kazmi, *Balti Lok Geet* [Urdu: Balti Folk Songs] (Islamabad: Lok Virsa, 1988).

7 Banat Gul Afridi, *Baltistan in History* (Peshawar: Ejmay Books International, 1988), 8. See also, Sir Alexandar Cunningham, *Ladak: Physical, Statistical, and Historical* (London: WM. H. Allen and Co, 1954), and Maulvi Hashmatullah Khan, *History of Baltistan* (Islamabad: Lok Virsa Research Translation, 1987).

8 Afridi, *Baltistan in History*. See also, Parvez Dewan, *A History of Ladakh, Gilgit and Baltistan* (Ladakh: Menas Publications, 2008); and Ahmad Hassan Dani, *History of Northern Areas of Pakistan* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2001).

Molvi Hashmatullah, wrote about the history of Jammu Kahmir and also discussed the history of Ladakh and Baltistan. He states that Islam came to this region with the arrival of Amir Kabir Syed Ali Hamdani and his disciple Shah Syed Muhammad Noorbakhsh, who visited Baltistan between 1438 and 1448 A.D. The majority of inhabitants of Baltistan embraced Islam through Shah Syed Muhammad Noorbakhsh. The people who were converted to Islam by Syed Ali Hamdani and Shah Syed Mohammad Noorbakhsh called themselves as Noorbakhshi. It is said that Islam came to the region through these two remarkable religious figures.⁹ So in the folk literature of Baltistan one can find the influences of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam respectively. As the name itself suggests that such literature is the literature of primitive times, so there are the superstitious beliefs, supernatural elements and mythical characters such as Hlebu Kasar, Rgialu Stralbu and Braq Mayor Cho (mythical characters in Kesar Saga—the famous epic in Balti language) are of significance.

Baltistan is situated in the lap of Karakoram and Himalya. Thus, this region of Pakistan is blessed with mighty mountains and the world's highest peaks and glaciers. Since earlier times there was no transport facility and no road, therefore people used to trade or go to adjacent regions by crossing labyrinth like mountain passes. While travelling they came across many wonderful and unpleasant experiences, and preserved them in the form of folk stories and folk songs. Therefore, these songs are not mere songs or stories but a real projection of the lives of Baltis.¹⁰

Folk literature or oral tradition is the traditional belief of particular communities having no written language. It is

9 Shahzad Bashir, *Messianic Hopes and Mystical Visions: The Nāurbakhshāiyya between Medieval and Modern Islam* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003). Also see Anna Akasoy, Charles Burnett and Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim, *Islam and Tibet: Interactions along the Musk Routes* (London: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011).

10 Uxi Mufti and Hassan Hasrat, *Pakistan ka Saqafati Encyclopaedia: Shumali Ilaqajat* [Urdu: Cultural Encyclopaedia of Northern Areas of Pakistan] (Islamabad: Lok Virsa and Al-Faisal Nashran, 2004).

disseminated from generation to generation by words of mouth. It consists of riddles, proverbs, songs, folklores and lullabies etc. These are the production of people of those communities having peculiar features in it.¹¹

Before the invention of printing press, mankind did not had any source to jot down the daily occurrences into written materials thus oral literature was the main source to transmit cultural and traditional heritage of the primitive society. Folk literature narrates the cultural and social experiences of any particular ethnic group. It is the medium through which our forefathers used to transmit and disseminate their norms and values, codes and conducts and ways of life to their offsprings in natural settings or ways. Hence, this literature aptly projects the culture of any group.¹² Referring to this fact, Hafeez-ur-Rehman says:

In primitive society folklore played an important role in shaping lives of people. Folklore was the source of education in transmitting cultural traditions, values and histories of any nation. Folk songs and folklores portray any community or group of people in a realistic manner. This also shows the place of that community in the world. In primitive society folklore or folksongs were the medium to educate, instruct and sometimes to entertain the public. Such forms of folklore contain myth, lullabies, riddles, proverb, folksongs and nursery rhymes.¹³

Like written literature folk literature is also divided into different types for instance, folk songs, folk stories, riddles, ballads and proverbs etc. Major forms of folk literature include folk songs, ballads, fables, folk tales and proverbs. Among them folk songs are the most significant. It is typically a song that lives in oral tradition and is transmitted through hearing. It is then passed on within families and restricted social network. Folk songs are the narration of routine

11 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 16 (Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2003).

12 Flora Anne Stell, Howard Kingscote and Pandit Nayesa Sastri, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Folk Literature* (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 2000).

13 Hafeez-ur-Rehman, "The Lore of Folklore: An Anthropological Perspective," *Journal of Asian Civilization* (May 2010).

activities of a particular social network. These songs aimed at preserving the cultural heritage and history of a race or nation.¹⁴ These songs were not found in written form in earlier times, as people used to express their inner feelings through songs. Such genre of literature does not follow any kind of meter because these are the feelings and emotions of common people in their usual settings. These are the day to day conversations of men and women living in oral culture of any group. It is safe to say that folksongs are disseminated through oral tradition.¹⁵

Literature of Baltistan is as old as the region itself. It has long and significant historical records, and rich cultural civilization, contributing to rich literary background. Literature of Baltistan is unique in nature. People of Baltistan were not literate; this region was not exposed to the world of education and developments even though they had the knowledge of the world and worldly wisdom.¹⁶ Thus Balti literature could not prosper the way it deserved to be flourished and prospered. Baltistan has been isolated and neglected and it was one of the unknown empires of the world. Unfortunately, there is no such evidence that when did oral literature start in Baltistan and who were the pioneers in this field.

Baltistan possessed world's longest and oldest epic named as "HlebuKesar" (Kasar Saga). This is the combination of literary, cultural and historical heritage of Baltistan and Ladakh. This epic is divided into twelve parts. The protagonist of the epic is the Hlebu Kesar, who is said to be the omnipotent mythical character came to earth, in order to spread virtue, justice, honesty, and kindness towards fellow human beings. Such kinds of folklores and folk songs exhibit the primitive culture, tradition and civilization of Baltistan.¹⁷

14 Rehman, "The Lore of Folklore".

15 Reichl, *Medieval Oral Literature*.

16 Mufti and Hasrat, *Pakistan ka Saqafati Encyclopaedia*.

17 Muhammad Nazir, "Baltistan Adab o Saqafat" [Urdu: Baltistan's Literature and Culture] (Skardu: 1998); Mumtaz Manglori, *Mukhtasir Tareekh-e-Zaban*

Folksongs do not have grand theme but are about the daily occurrences of a restricted social network including their modes of life, customs and traditions.¹⁸ Mostly, Balti folksongs are narrated by women. Earlier, as Baltis had no source of living other than agriculture, the men used to go to different neighbouring states to get livelihood. Women usually stayed at home and dealt with house chores. There were no means of communication at that time so women used to send their messages to their men or loved ones through songs. They voiced their inner feelings, happiness, sadness, and problems in the form of songs. The women narrating songs were not educated, yet they presented the songs in such a way that one would wonder and could not believe that these are the production of people from a very backward and neglected area.¹⁹

Muhammad Hasan Hasrat, one of the literary giants of Baltistan, says that Baltistan is the land of literature; every Balti is an artist, writer and a poet instinctively, for peace and tranquillity are the basic elements for enriching literature, poetry and art. Baltistan is blessed with all these natural entities that's why it is rich in this regard.²⁰ Banat Gul Afridi writes: "Balti poetry made its first appearance in the form of what is called 'Regia Khulu' meaning 'Royal Songs' and now this word has been corrupted into 'Regian Khulu'. It is a sort of folklore and is in blank verse".²¹

o Adab Gilgit Baltistan [Urdu: A Brief History of Language and Literature of Gilgit Baltistan] (Islamabad: Muqtadira Quomi Zaban, 2009); Mufti and Hasrat, *Pakistan ka Saqafati Encyclopaedia*; also see, K. Sagaster "The Kings of Baltistan and Other Kings: Some Remarks on Balti Folk Literature" (*Journal of Central Asia*, 1984), K. Sagaster "Tales from Northern Pakistan: The Discovery of the Folk Literature of Baltistan" (S. Zingel-Ave Lalleman & W.P. Zingel: 1993).

18 Mufti and Hasrat, *Pakistan ka Saqafati Encyclopaedia*.

19 Kazmi, *Balti Lok Geet*.

20 Manglori, *Mukhtasir Tareekh-e Zaban o Adab Gilgit Baltistan*.

21 Afridi, *Baltistan in History*, 166; See also, K. Sagaster, "Tales from Northern Pakistan: The Discovery of Folk Literature of Baltistan," *Journal of Central Asia* (1993): 83-92.

Folksongs of Baltistan depict the events and occurrences of Baltis of pre-independence era. At that time, Baltis were not familiar with reading and writing. Baltistan did not have any connection to the world except of those mountainous neighbouring countries or states such as Ladakh, Tibet, Chitral, Hunza and Gilgit. There were no means of communication. Thus folksongs became the powerful tool of communication among those who lived far away from their near and dear ones. Most importantly, it became the major tool to preserve culture and tradition of Baltistan. People used to send their messages through songs; Bono Maryam is one of the best examples of such songs.²²

One of the renowned scholars of Germany, Dr. Renate Sohnen talks about Balti folksongs and puts them into different categories:

There are at least three historical layers to which the different parts or kinds of Balti music and folklores belong, indicated on the names on the one hand, by stylistic specialties on the other hand. For outsiders like me the most genuine folkloristic traditions seem to be those bearing originally Balti names, for instance the ancient folksong (rgyang-khlu), the dancing tune (hrtsekhar) bearing names like 'Mindog Hltanmo' (that is the flower festival) etc., and, of course the epical songs (Balti zdrungkhlu).²³

Then she focuses on Balti folk songs and says:

Now back to the layer of genuine Balti folklore especially to the rgyang-khlu and zdrung khlu, the folk songs and the epic songs. Both have a long tradition and pre-Islamic roots, through the well-known songs named 'Skine', 'Shingkhan Kufapa', and 'Bono Maryam' certainly came into existence after Balti people embraced Islam. But especially in their tunes they show a remarkable difference to the neighbouring musical styles as well as to the modern ghazal tunes, which points to the genuineness of the species. This is further supported by

22 Mufti and Hasrat, *Pakistan ka Saqafati Encyclopaedia*.

23 Renate Sohnen, "Treasure of Literary and Musical Tradition in Baltistan," *Journal of Central Asia* (1983): 39-48. See also, K. Sagaster, "Some Remarks on Balti Folk Literature," *Journal of Central Asia* (1983): 49-55; and Renate Sohnen, "On Reflections of Historical Events in Balti Folk-Songs," *Ethnology and History* (1983), 582-601.

the topics of songs; for instance in a great number of songs a girl or a woman addresses either her husband or lover such as in Shingkhan Kufapa, in Arzu, Rgyal Malik Cho or other men such as in Bono Maryam, Shah Behram Cho, Jan Ali Mir etc., a feature which is only seldom found in diwans and never in ghazals, as far as I could see. As for the topics, folk songs are either reflecting the historical events or describing personal feelings at an incisive event of individual life.²⁴

Folksongs of Baltistan not only voice the personal feelings and sentiments but these are the real documentation of socio-political and socio-religious accounts of Baltistan. These folksongs appropriately depict the indigenous culture of Baltistan and the living style of its people during the reign of the Great Ali Sher Khan.²⁵

Folksongs are not mere poetry or a literary art but the spontaneous feelings, emotions, and the sentiments of Baltis chanted at different occasions. These songs skilfully give impressionistic sketch of the area and its dwellers. The transmission of oral literature of the region is done through old people like grandparents, but usually women managing the household chores at home sing lullabies and songs in the fields. The women of the society play vital role in preserving the culture unintentionally.²⁶ With the advent of technology, Baltis seldom bother to think about their cultural and traditional heritage, of late. Baltistan's rich, beautiful and unique folk literature is not only a source of entertainment, but also proved to be the real depiction of Baltistan and Balti culture.²⁷

Bono Maryam is one of the songs of early nineteenth century in which the story of a girl, named Maryam, married to a dumb and deaf man of a poor family, is narrated. It was

24 Sohnen, "Treasure of Literary and Musical Tradition in Baltistan," 39-48. See also Kazmi, *Balti Lok Geet*, 43-192.

25 Afridi, *Baltistan in History*.

26 A.H Francke, *Antiquities of Indian Tibet* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1992), and Farida Azhar-Hewitt, *The Other side of the Silence: The Lives of Women in the Karakoram Mountains* (Bloomington: Universe, 2011).

27 Mufti and Hasrat, *Pakistan Ka Saqafati Encyclopaedia*.

the era of political suppression and turmoil, Baltis had lost power and Dogra forces invaded Skardu, the capital of Baltistan. The cruel king of Kashmir made it compulsory to pay tribute in form of girls. Unfortunately, the ill-fated girl was chosen to send to Dogra Raj as a tribute. Her in-laws were given handsome money, so they did not resist. Her husband protested against the base act, but all in vain. She was taken to Kashmir through Burge Nullah. She sung this song to a shepherd, who transmitted her feelings and the complaints to the ruler of the time and people of Skardu. Her song stirred the emotions and the feelings of Baltis, and a strong sense of patriotism spread in the entire region. The ruler sent forces to bring her back to her home town. Dogra forces were defeated at the hand of Baltis, and not only Bono Maryam was brought back but Baltis also refused to pay any kind of tribute in future.²⁸

Bono Maryam

I see three persons at Ghuri Changra; one of them must be my deaf and dumb husband and the others my father and mother in-laws;

If you meet my deaf and dumb husband, tell him I am going away with tears shedding; if you meet my father and mother in-laws tell them that I am going away happily;

Bono Maryam is being carried off beyond Burge (Koshmara Nullah);

I shall be in the kingdom of Kashmir spinning silk thread, playing with silk cloth; but there was no, no wazir and no public in Skardu; for no one raised his finger in protest; no one said 'she should not be sent, she should not be sent'.²⁹

It was the age of political mayhem and turmoil, and Skardu was being ruled by the Dogra Raj. They had devised their own system. Baltis were subservient to them and were politically suppressed. Kazmi mentioned the age in which this song was sung. Through this song a common girl brought a momentous change. She not only saved herself

28 Mufti and Hasrat, *Pakistan Ka Saqafati Encyclopaedia*.

29 Afridi, *Baltistan in History*.

from Dogra forces but also saved other Balti girls from that base act.³⁰

Another song named as *Hilal Bagh*, also shows the political situation of entire region, as how women were being used in order to gain political supremacy within the states. This song is about a princess of Ladakh who was married with Ali Sher Khan Anchan. She was the daughter of Raja of Ladakh. Ali Sher married her for political purposes. He controlled Ladakh by marrying the Ladakhi princess. After gaining power on Ladakh, he divorced the princess. On the way back to her parents, she voiced her feelings in form of the song. She wished goodwill for the ruler of Baltistan.³¹

Hilal Bagh

Behold' the red rose is blossoming in Broq Maqpon's Hilal Bagh:

Oh', it is not the red rose; it is Maqpon Ali Sher Khan.

When the queen was being brought, hundreds of men and horses accompanied her;

But, when the queen is sent back (to her father's house) there is none to accompany and honour her

Despite this (indignity showered on me) O' Anchan Ali Sher Khan, let my life be sacrificed for your sake.

It is a tradition of Baltistan that when a princess gets married her parents send servants and horses along with her in order to give her honour and dignity. In this song, the heartbroken princess voiced her dejection and disrespect she suffered by the ruler of Baltistan. But she did not say anything bad against her husband rather prayed for his long life. This shows the strong fidelity of women of Baltistan towards husband, and it is also seen in another song named *Lang Dukpa*.³²

Lang Dukpa is name of a person who was the dweller of Biacha village in Rondu. He was supposed to marry a girl of his parents' choice. After the birth of a son, he married to

30 Kazmi, *Balti Lok Geet*, also Afridi, *Baltistan in History*.

31 Kazmi, *Balti Lok Geet*.

32 Mufti and Hasrat, *Pakistan Ka Saqafati Encyclopaedia*.

another girl of his own choice. Within few days he was imprisoned by the Raja of Rondu. The first wife suggested the second one to see their husband. They both went to see him. On their way, they came across a rope bridge, but the second wife refused to cross it saying that she would not risk her life. The first wife crossed the bridge with her son on her back and the meal. She expressed her feelings as follows:³³

Lang Dukpa

I do not want to cast even a glance at you but my seeing eyes cannot help doing so;

I do not wish to think of you, but my thinking cannot help doing so,

The wife you loved (second wife) the wife of your own choice has put on the gorgeous clothes and is roaming the world;

The wife you detested is crossing the dangerous rope bridge and in doing so she is carrying her child on her back and the pot containing food for you, in her lap. And thus she is supplying the bread and butter for you.

O Maqpon who is all powerful as the mountains, let Lang Dukpa my husband be released from the dungeon and let the dungeon be converted into place of worship. Then I shall pray to God to grant the great Maqpon the life of Steel.³⁴

This song is a blend of cultural and religious aspects. During 1900s, Baltistan was divided into different states; every state was governed by a royal family. Rondu was one of them. Raja of the state was all powerful that he had his private cell and could punish anyone. Nobody dared to question his decision. *Lang Dukpa* became victim of his wrath. In this song the unflinching faith of Baltis can be witnessed. The wife wished to convert the dungeon into sacred place which may provide her husband with serenity and comfort. After the advent of Islam in fourteenth century, Baltis became its staunch followers. There is a Balti proverb used in the song *Hlechaqsi Tse* means 'the life of steel'. In Balti culture people say this in form of prayers for the one who has done a very brave and credible act or this is given

33 Afridi, *Baltistan in History*.

34 Afridi, *Baltistan in History*. Also see Abbas Kazmi, *Balti Lok Geet*.

to dear and near ones. So in this poem a wife is pleading the king to release her husband then she would pray to The Exalted for the king's long life. Her song was so expressive that the king released Lang Dukpa.

As folksongs reflect the cultural accounts of any nation, so the song *Khari Sultan Cho*, depicts cultural and social aspects of Baltistan. *Khari Sultan Cho* is the plea of an orphan to the king of Kargil Kharmang. It is a Balti ritual that whenever there is a marriage in royal family, everyone in the state is invited. Khari Sultan Cho was the king of Kargil during seventeenth century. At his marriage ceremony, every individual of the state was gathered in front of king's palace to witness the event, but the orphan girl could not come because her step-mother asked her to graze the animals in mountains. In Baltistan, people go to the upper fields which are located between mountains. Khari Sultan Cho was known for his kindness and soft-heartedness in the region; the orphan girl expressed her emotions in such words. This is divided into two parts:

Khari Sultan Cho

I am coming to meet you, but I cannot cross the high pass;
 I am coming to meet you, but the hills and mountains are
 standing in my way'
 I am coming to see you, but I cannot cross the great river.
 I am coming to meet you, but I am powerless before the
 children and boys; I am totally at a loss in the presence of
 world dam (woman).³⁵

In this part, she desires to attend the marriage of the king and narrates the obstacles in her way. The obstructions were the high passes, hills and mountains and most importantly her step mother. She further expresses in the second part:

The stars that are shining in the expanse of the sky exist in the
 hue of the vast sky;
 I, the dancing girl who comes off the Bekar family, live in the
 hope of my king Khari Sultan of Kharche and Purig (that he
 would shower favours on me).

35 Afridi, *Baltistan in History*.

The hill goats (Markhor and Kel) are living because the high mountains provide provision for them. I, the dancing girl of Kharche, depend on my beloved king Khari Sultan of Kharche and Purig.

The 'chakors' and the 'ram chakors', live on the bounties of the grass land.

I, the dancing girl of Kharche, live on the bounties of my beloved king Khari Sultan Cho of Kharche and Purig.

The chakor and ram chakor; all the birds go to take part in the marriage ceremony of great Khari Sultan of Kharche.

But I the unfortunate girl; living on the bounties of my king Khari Sultan of Kharche.³⁶

In the song, the orphan girl expresses her vulnerability in front of her step-mother. She says that every creature in the universe is there to enjoy the matrimonial ceremony of her great king but the unfortunate girl is unable to witness the marriage ceremony of her king. She was an ordinary girl but she knew how to convince the contemporary king through her words. Her words were so powerful and dramatic that the king Khari Sultan Cho sent his queen to her parents and asked his workers to arrange the marriage ceremony as if it had not taken place before. The orphan girl was invited by the king. She was dressed and ornamented with the most beautiful and precious clothes and jewels and was seated with the king and the queen.³⁷

Cho Amir Haider, is the song in which one finds the amalgamation of cultural and political accounts of Baltistan. Cho Amir Haider Khan was one of the great leaders of Maqpon of Skardu. This song is of 1835 A. D. Raja Ahmad Shah of Skardu had several sons. Muhammad Shah, the eldest, was disclaimed by his father. Cho Amir Haider Khan was the youngest one and given the power. Ahmad Shah fled to Kashmir and with the help of Dogras he started plotting against his brother and Baltistan. He succeeded in doing so. Dogra force invaded Skardu and Amir Haider Khan was imprisoned by them. This song is enunciated by his

36 Afridi, *Baltistan in History*.

37 Ghulam Abbas Khargrong, *Balti Rgyang Khulu* (Skardu).

foster-mother, when Amir Haider was killed while trying to save women of his family and crown from the ruthlessness of the enemy.³⁸

Cho Amir Haider

What a hard time has come when tyranny in all its shape and form is being perpetuated; O Prince Amir Haider;

Let your unfortunate sacrifice her life if it can be of any help to you; Prince Amir Haider.

Your enemies are marching with their forces through the Burgey Nullah, Prince Amir Haider.

Let your unfortunate mother be sacrificed, if it can be of any use to you; O Prince Amir Haider.

At the Ghorī Changra, the Yabgo of Khapluare riding roughshod;

If it can be of any help to you, let your unfortunate mother be sacrificed. O Amir Haider.

In the Durbar Hall of your Kharfocho fort, the people of Kharmang are gathered,

Let your unfortunate mother make a sacrifice of her life to you, if it can be of any use to you. O Amir Haider.

Your Lion Gate is plundered and carried away by your enemies; O Prince Amir Haider.

Let your unfortunate make a sacrifice of her life to you O Amir Haider.

Your dearest princesses are being carried off bare-headed by the enemies, O Amir Haider;

Your dearest princesses are being carried bare-footed O Amir Haider;

What are you guarding in the MindoqKhar (Flower Palace) wherein there is not a single soul, O Amir Haider.³⁹

There is a clear indication that Baltistan was in grave political mayhem. There were conflicts between the states. During the tenure of Ali Sher Khan Anchan, Baltistan was politically strong and he took control on Ladakh, Chitral, Gilgit and Hunza thus Baltis politically and culturally became sound. After Anchan, his sons fought for the crown so the

38 Afridi, *Baltistan in History*.

39 Afridi, *Baltistan in History*.

Rajas of Baltistan became against each other and Baltistan lost its power even in its centre. In the song the foster mother talked about the reality of Baltistan that Raja of Khaplu and Kharmang sided with Dogra force, and they started plundering Skardu.

It was the custom of Baltistan that princes and princesses of Baltistan had foster-mother in order to look after them. Their mothers or the queens used to be busy in the states' affairs thus they were nurtured by the foster-mother. Nowadays this custom seems obsolete.⁴⁰

Women in the Balti culture are much venerated, as clearly shown in the song that the ruler of the time did not even hesitate to sacrifice himself for the sake of women. The foster-mother is expressing the melancholy and vulnerability in the song; she is addressing the valiant king and wishes to sacrifice herself so that her king could save the princesses who were being carried away bare-footed and bare-headed by the enemy. She uses the language very carefully so that there would not be any sign of disgrace towards her foster-son. This also shows the respect and honour given to royal family in Balti culture.⁴¹

Lion Gate or 'Singe Stagho' in Balti, is placed at the entrance gate of Khaplu Fort. It is said that the Lion Gate was brought from Skardu. This song is sung in Khaplu with the particular traditional music in the remembrance of their victory and the defeat of Maqpon of Skardu.

Just like *Cho Amir Haider* points towards the defeat of Maqpon of Skardu, *Shah Behram Cho* is about the defeat of Raja of Khaplu and is generally sung in Skardu with special music.⁴² Shah Behram Cho was one of the rulers of Khaplu, and contemporary of Abdal Khan known as 'Mizos' in Baltistan because of callousness he rendered upon the public. Abdal Khan was the ruler of Maqpon of Skardu. He defeated Shah Behram of Khaplu and got killed and his

40 Afridi, *Baltistan in History*.

41 Afridi, *Baltistan in History*.

42 Mufti and Hasrat, *Pakistan Ka Saqafati Encyclopaedia*.

family members were imprisoned in Skardu there he treated them awfully. The princess of Khaplu and the sister of Shah Behram were also imprisoned in Skardu. In the imprisonment she voiced her sentiments in the form of a song entitled, *Shah Behram Cho*.⁴³

Shah Behram Cho

I shall ever feel sorry and repent for not having drunk the crystal clear icy water flowing from the Ghanche brook of my father land during the reign of my brother Shah Behram Cho, when now during the reign of Abdal Khan, the man eater, I am denied even the muddy water of stagnant marshy pool, in the country of Skardu.

I shall feel sorry for and repent upon not having become the queen of my father's fort Thorche Khar, during the reign of my brother Shah Behram Cho but now during the reign of Abdal Khan, the man eater, my status has been reduced to that of a maid servant in the court of Skardu.

I shall ever feel sorry and repent upon not having used the white and superior wheat grown in Hanjor brook of my father land but now during the reign of Abdal Khan, the man eater, I am denied even the flour of 'Trumba' and 'Kangni' in the country of Skardu.

Let my life be sacrificed for you, O' my beloved and blessed brother Shah Behram.⁴⁴

The princess expresses the repentance upon not having enjoyed the luxuries provided by her dear brother king Behram. Ghanche is the most important brook in Khaplu which divides Khaplu Bala and Pine. Ghanche Nullah is famous for its clear crystal and pure water. So the princess in the song repents upon not having drunk the pure water of Ghanche, but in Skardu she was not provided even with the muddy water. Thus she is recalling the happiest time spent in her brother's state.

Thorche Khar⁴⁵ is the place in Khaplu which was built on a rock at the upper side of Khaplu Fort. The princess was

43 Afridi, *Baltistan in History*.

44 Afridi, *Baltistan in History*.

45 Name of a place in khaplu, it is pronounced as Thoqsi Khar but it is written as Thorche Khar in the book by Banat Gul Afridi.

supposed to be the queen of Thorche Kharbut in the imprisonment she was treated so awfully as if she was the maid of that cell. Hanjor is the vast agricultural area in Khaplu, known for its fertility and growing best wheat in the region. Majority of people rely upon these fields for their living. She is recalling all the kindness and blessings rendered upon her by the King Shah Behram Cho.

Other songs such as *Shingkhan Kufapa*, *Yato*, *Madi*, *Broshalpa*, *Rgyal Malik Cho*, *Biana Naqpo*, *Marup Tanzin*, *Balti Baghdoor*, *Lingspa Arzu*, *Tsunche Mulbek* (small Mulbek), *Alde*, *Facho Shafi*, *Manafu*, are also the real narrations of Baltis.

Conclusion

All the above mentioned songs depict the socio-cultural and socio-political arena of Baltistan. Songs like *Bono Maryam*, *Shah Behram Cho*, *Hilal Bagh* reflect how women were used in order to gain political supremacy. Other songs like *Khari Sultan Cho*, *Lingspa Arzu* and *Balti Baghdoor* show the culture of Baltistan. *Cho Amir Haider* is another song which reflects the Balti culture that how Balti men were concerned about their relations with females that they would not hesitate to sacrifice their lives, as Cho Amir Haider did to save his foster-mother. There are no imaginative places or events which had been narrated just for the sake of the songs rather they were the true feelings of Baltis of pre-independence era. Thus all the places and events described in the songs are real. One can find the places and signs of those events such as Singhe Stagho, Thorche Khar and Kharpocho etc., are still there, narrating the story of Baltistan.