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# **The Women Tradition Bearers of Kalpourgan in Iranian Baluchistan**

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## **Abstract**

The art of pottery is one of the most ancient living crafts practised in different parts of the world. Sistan and Baluchistan province located in South East Iran has some important centres of native pottery. Sharing a common border with Afghanistan and Pakistan, Sistan and Baluchistan remains one of the poorest and the most deprived provinces of Iran. Sistani in the north, which is in minority and the Baluch who are a majority are two main ethnic groups spread over a larger area of this province. Known to be Aryan descendants, the majority of the Baloch are Sunni Muslims who have a rich culture and language of their own. Traditionally, most Baloch living in the central and northern parts of Baluchistan were nomads, and this nomadic culture gets reflected in their ways of life even to this day. They are strongly class-conscious people who have always followed old social structures of cast systems.

Handmade pottery has very strong roots in Baluchistan where most potters are women. Cultural taboos prohibit these women from participating in agricultural practices or engaging in field work. They remain confined to their homes restricted by the shackles of a male dominated society. Conventionally, they engage in needlework craft and pottery that could be practised from the four walls of their home. Their hardships and unfulfilled desires find expression in their craft. They use the language of art to communicate with the world outside.

This article is a study on the hardworking women potters from Kalpourgan village of Baluchistan. The diligence and dedication with which these women potters managed to break the traditional boundaries was recognised by the World Crafts Council (WCC) in the recent past. They declared Kalpourgan as 'The World Craft City' in 2017.

**Key words:** *Nomadic, Baluch Pottery, Woman Potters, Kalpourgan, Baluchistan, World Crafts Council.*

### Where is Baluchistan?

Baluchistan is a land for the Baluch, who are a group of tribes that have pastoralist nomadic characteristics and live in Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan (Khan 2017). In Iran, they live in the Sistan & Baluchistan province which is the second largest province and one of the driest regions of Iran. This province is the least developed zone in Iran. Most Baluch people are Sunni Muslims and speak Baluchi which is one of the oldest living languages of the Western Iranian group among the Indo-European languages. (Britannica n.d.).



*Big Baluchestan (pakistantoday.com n.d.)*



*Kalpourgan village in Iranian Baluchestan (Google n.d.)*

According to the available archaeological evidence, Baluchistan in Iran was one important area for making pottery in the Parthian Empire (247 BC – 224 AD). This craft is continued till today. The form, decorative techniques and kilns are similar to those in the

past. Pottery is now made in Kalpourgan, Kohmytag, and Holanchakan villages (Reza 2013). The Kalpourgan potteries are the same as the ancient pots of 3000 B.C in Baluchistan (Gluck 1976). In this article, we will discuss the pottery of Kalpourgan village.

### **Kalpourgan village**

Kalpourgan village is located on the border between Iran and Pakistan. The distance between Kalpourgan and the province capital Zahedan is three hundred and ninety kilometres. In this village, people make some handicrafts such as mat-weaving, needlework and pottery (wccinternational n.d.). These crafts were first mentioned by Jay Fred Gluck, an American archaeologist, who was invited to study Iranian handicrafts in 1975. At the time, the Queen of Iran was interested in using the Baluchi needlework on her official clothes and made several exhibitions of Kalpourgan pottery in Iran and outside. The Government established a pottery centre with an oil kiln in Kalpourgan and invited potters from different villages to settle down there and produce pots. Elina Sorainen, a Finnish art professor, wrote her Ph.D. thesis about making the Kalpourgan pottery centre, a live museum. She was a visiting faculty at the University of Art in Tehran in the 1970s. The research was published in Alto University in 2006. Later, the Iranian government also introduced Kalpourgan Clay Living Museum in the village. In 2017, the village was identified as World Craft City by the World Crafts Council (WCC).



***Kalpourgan Pottery Centre***



***Women potters in the Pottery Centre***

**In most of the book and articles which are about Baluch women potters, it is mentioned that here, potters are considered to be the keepers of the ancient heritage and art of pottery. The motifs of Kalpourgan potteries are influenced by the beliefs and faiths of the Baluch race and have symbolic functions created by women. The style and ethnic patterns have been passed down through generations since ancient times. But the most fundamental role in the pottery process is played by gender that makes a significant difference in both form and decoration (Iman 2015) (wccinternational n.d.). There are many women potters across the world that follow primitive methods but none of them looks like Kalpourgan pottery. A similar kind of Baluch decoration of pots can be found in Gujarat in India where women decorate pots with the black and white colours. There, potters are men who work on the wheel. Baluchistan is a place where pots are made and decorated by females, and they have feminine impressions. The author tries to look into why women are making and decorating them in a specific way that are so different from others. So, besides the method of making and style of decorations, the role of women in Baluch society and different crafts made by females will also be studied.**

### **Making process**

***It is the Dhvary tribe women who are engaged in making pottery in Kalpourgan. They call pot *Kapal* and *Hapalkshan* means potter.***

The men carry the soil from some heap near by the village which is known as 'Moshtok', and then they use a sieve to spread the extra materials. The soil is kept in a pool and mixed with water, after which the watery clay is poured through a fine sieve and put in another pool to dry till the extra water is evaporated. It takes two days in summer and longer in winter for the clay to be ready. When it is finally ready, the potters knead it and if required, add some soil powder to it (Amir 2014). The color of the clay is green which turns red after baking because of rich iron oxide octant in it. The clay has a high plasticity character rendering it very difficult to make pots on wheels. The potters with experience never use pottery wheels and pots are kept in sunlight immediately after giving the shape for drying. The form, technique and decoration of Kalpourgan pottery are based on the raw materials and the tools they use. Women take a clump of clay and put it on a deep plate (*Bono*) which acts as the wheel in this kind of pottery. In this style, the potters use their toes to turn the plate and keep the hands free to give shape to the products. The plate is filled with soil and covered with a piece of cotton cloth that can absorb the moisture of the clay so that the base of the vessel is hard enough to carry the walls. Potters use pinch and coil methods to make pots. They first use the pinch method to shape the bottom or the base of the product. Then by adding coils, the pot is formed. They use a wooden paddle to beat the walls with one hand inside the product for support. Beating helps the coils join and guide the clay to other parts till the thickness of all the parts becomes the same. If the vessels need any additions like handles, it is added in the leather-hard time (before drying completely). There are very few tools that women use for pottery such as wooden paddles, a bowl of water and a plate of soil with a cotton cloth.



*First stage of making the base*

When the pot is made, it is kept in the shade to help evaporate the extra water and let it become leather hard. The potters trim the products using a sharp metal tool and keep it later in the sun for drying. Apart from utility products, women make clay toys for their children. The horse and camel are common toys. Potters decorate all the pots and toys by drawing different motifs on them, so they need a soft surface to get better results. When the pots reach the bone-dry stage, potters wet the surface with a wet cloth and then burnish the pot with the help of a stone. Then they polish the surface again with an oily piece of cloth. As a result, the surface becomes slightly waterproof and it becomes easier to control the link. The colour is made by adding a few drops of water to two black stones called '*Tituk*' and rubbing them against each other. It is a kind of dark black ink which is rich in manganese oxide and iron oxide. Women cut a small narrow stick from a native palm, the size of a matchstick. They hold the stick between the thumb and the index finger. The index finger is dipped in the ink so that some amount of ink gets stored in between the fingers and the colour reaches the surface through the stick. The potters can control the amount of ink with their fingers.



***Trimming and burnishing process (isna.ir 2016)***



***The stone which produces colour***



***Drawing motif on pot with the stick***

**They decorate their pots by repetitive patterns. The patterns are geometric and have symbolic impressions. Circle, triangle, lozenge and lines are some of the patterns which potters use as motifs for decorating their pots.**

**The next stage is baking the products. The kiln made by bricks has a separate fireplace at the bottom and a chamber with four chimneys at the top. The fireplace is a small channel about 40 cm to two meters through which the oil pipe is passed till the centre, where there is a round hole (20 cm diameter) connecting to the chamber. A circular oil burner is there to fire the chamber. The chamber is above the fireplace and is about two by two meters and two and a half meter high covered by a dome. There is a cylindershaped space inside along with a fixed shelf of one-meter distance from the base of the chamber. As potters put the vessels on top of each other, they don't need any other shelves. There is a hole on top with a 70cm diameter. During firing, it is covered and after firing, the cover is completely removed for cooling. The**



thickness of the walls is one meter and the roof is about 30 cm. The chamber has a small gate 30 cm by 70cm high and one metre deep so that the potters can go inside to load pots; the kiln has four cross drafts around. Potters with experience know when they have to stop the fire, average 10 hours. There is no mechanical measurement, and for these products the temperature goes up to 800 - 900°C. Firing process is always done in oxidation atmosphere All the products are baked at single firing and women do not use any slip, glaze and double firing.












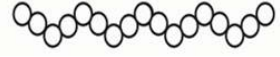



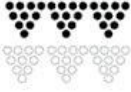






*The chamber gate*









*Loading pots in the kiln*

### **Motifs on Pots**

After baking, the pots turn red because the clay body has Hematite ( $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ ). The ink is rich in manganese (III) oxide ( $\text{Mn}_2\text{O}_3$ ) but has less silica ( $\text{SiO}_2$ ). So, with use, the motifs disappear. The best way to fix the colour is to add some silica or increase the temperature which will change the feature of Kalpourgan pottery (Farhad 2010). For decoration, potters use different motifs that reflect their environment and their culture. They draw abstract and symbolic motifs that represent the mountain, flower, butterfly, lock, wheat cluster, etc. Some motifs are made by repetition of simple forms as circle and some are made with a combination of simple forms that create new patterns, for example the flower pattern is made by combining some circles together.

Number	Name	Meaning	Original Motives	Motifs
1	Tekkok	Red point		
2	Tekkok Gardin	Flower		
3	Gilu	Circle		
4	Gilo Gardin	Flower		
5	Chutel			
6	Kobl	Lock		
7	Sarok	Mountain		
8	Khoshe Gandom	Wheat Cluster		
9	Balok	Butterfly		
10	Khoshe Gandom Konrak	Wheat Cluster and Konrak		

11	Srzih	Border		
12	Chat	Repulsed the Repelled Spirits		
13	Konarok	lozenge Shape		

*The Kalpourgan's pottery motifs (Iman 2015)*

In the dry nature of Baluchistan, plants, water, and even mountains are the sources of water flow and life. The expression of Baluch people about mountains, water, plants and even butterflies are shown in abstract forms and are the medium for decorating the pottery. Eventually, these elements become signs. The triangle, which is related to the sun and wheat, is also a symbol of fertility. In this desert area, fertility for both agriculture and humans is very important and people use these symbols in different crafts and products.

The lozenge shape is a Mesopotamian motif which is used to discharge the negative energy (Amir 2014). The Baluch people draw this motif on most their embroidery products and pots as well.

The wheat cluster is another motif on pots. The wheat is one of the most important agricultural products for Baluch that they grow in their farms. In the past, wheat wasn't just food. It was the money and currency. People used to buy or exchange their products with that.





*Balok* or butterfly is only an animal motif in Baluch pots. People believe that it is a symbol of mystic and positive power known as

'Mollaok' (Amir 2014). They made that motif to give a nice and clean energy to them.

It is a fact that crafts and artworks from a traditional region have common roots and influence on each other. Sometimes an artisan would make different crafts so that the motifs could be transferred to another craft. Apart from pottery, women in Kalpourgan make very fine needlework. There are so many similarities between the motives which are influenced by Baluch beliefs and nature.



**Baluch Needlework (Burbur 2018)**

Number	Name of Motif in Needlework	Needlework's Motif	Name of Motif in Pottery	Pottery's Motif
1	Goarkesh		Srzih	
2	Shaida		Khoshe Gandom Konrak	

3	Parivar palivar		Chat Parivar	
4	Kesh Sadeh		Tekkok	
5	Jok Chutel		Konarok Chutel	

*Some Common Motifs in Baluchi Needlework and Pottery*

Baluchistan is dry and hot by nature, so there are fewer green lands or gardens. People are more introverted specially women who spend their lives at home restricted by religion and culture. Women are more engaged in household works and making handicrafts. By tradition, they are busy with needlework and pottery. Almost every potter in Kalpourgan knows how to make Baluchi embroidery as well. So, some motifs get exchanged within these crafts. Women share strong bonds together and have regular gatherings in their houses where they can sit and have discussions or gossip. At the same time, they teach the crafts and keeps the traditions going. Also, knowledge is transferred from older to younger members of the community. Only after opening the pottery centre, women have come out of their houses and started working outside. At the Centre, most of the workers are

women and only one or two men help them carry the soil to the workshop and load products in the kiln. They always have to wear their hijab and cover their face in front of visitors. It is difficult to distinguish one from the other. One way to identify them is by the colour of their cloth embroidery as each one would have different motifs and colours on their sleeves. The young ones have bright colours and old people have darker colours. Baluchistan has a religious fanaticism in the environment. Men can indulge in polygamy. Girls are forced to marry at an early age, so the number of girls who can actually continue their education is very few.

According to The Ministry of Health and Medical Education of Iran, the second largest population of women smokers are in Baluchistan (17.8%). They form a group of their own and smoke hookah in their gatherings at home. The reasons can be stress reduction, lack of entertainment and the interest in continuing with the membership of their group (Atiyeh Azarshab 2019). Women are always worried about their position in the family as their husbands are allowed to have more than one wife.

The effects of social consequences such as insecurity, migration, mass conflicts, class divisions, cultural delays, underdevelopment, discrimination against women, violation of civil rights and cultural stagnation have affected the people of this region over the years (Asma 2020). Some research showed that compared to other ethnic groups such as Sistani and Fars who also live in Baluchistan, the Baluch women have poor mental health because of high-stress conditions, feelings of deprivation and lower socio-political background (Osman Kord 2018). There are multiple reasons why women feel stressed and deprived. Living with the husband's family, superiority of son to daughter, the permission of divorce being in the hands of men who can do divorce without any valid reason, having an addicted husband, marriage for the

sake of bloodshed, continuation with life for the sake of children, fear of remarriage, different kinds of psychological, physical and economic violence are some of them. The society always insists that women be patient and discourages them from leaving home, which sometimes leads to suicides (Somayeh 2021).

## **Conclusion**

Even to this day craftsmen use pottery as a medium for transfer of ideas and expressions. There are many places in the world where women by tradition are potters, but it is rare to find this kind of the symbolic expressions using geometric motifs. By the studying the motifs, it can be derived that because of the desert climate and their culture, Baluch women are mostly introverts. They make very tiny motifs on their pots which are similar to their needle works motifs. Both have duplicate patterns and symmetrical composition. The designs are different because materials used are not the same, but they have an overall similarity. The main difference, however, is that needlework has colours which decorate some parts of the Baloch women's clothes. Yet both the artworks help the Baluch women to interact with external surroundings. The colours and motifs of needlework change according to the age of the customers.

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