Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

The Bakhtiaris: an anthropological-linguistic lexical study of Haft Lang nomads of southwestern Iran

Zolfaghari, S.

Citation
Zolfaghari, S. (2017, October 18). *The Bakhtiaris: an anthropological-linguistic lexical study of Haft Lang nomads of southwestern Iran*. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/62921

Version:	Not Applicable (or Unknown)
License:	Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden
Downloaded from:	https://hdl.handle.net/1887/62921

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page

Universiteit Leiden

The following handle holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation:
http://hdl.handle.net/1887/62921

Author: Zolfaghari, S.
Title: The Bakhtiaris: an anthropological-linguistic lexical study of Haft Lang nomads of southwestern Iran
Issue Date: 2017-10-18

PREFACE

When I was six years old, my father took us from Ahvāz, where we lived in an NIOC[1] complex, to Masjed Soleimān, to visit his younger brother for the first time after some seventeen years. It was a reconciliation meeting and many family members and relatives were gathered together to celebrate this happy occasion in my father's sister's house. There, for the first time, I saw several cousins that I didn't know even existed. At that time, I was my father's youngest child and the only daughter and as such the center of attention for all who had not seen my father's family for several years. I noticed that almost all of them would address me as /*dor šæh*/ while caressing or kissing me. I knew that *dor* means 'girl', and, considering my father's highly respected position in his big extended family, I figured that /*šæh*/, as I had learned in my first school year Persian book, should mean 'king', therefore I am for them a princess! I was immensely content with the way they received me, up to the moment that I overheard my mother's complain to dad that they could address her little daughter better than 'the black girl'! What? So *šæh* is not *šah* in Persian but *sia* 'black'? I can still remember my disappointment and I guess I even got some watery eyes being teased for my dark brown skin tone, which was so much adored by my own parents. This is the first linguistic contemplation and cultural shock that I can remember.

After that family reunion, my father decided to take his 16 year-old niece, Massume, to Ahvāz to live with us. Massume became paralyzed in one leg due to polio when she was very young. My father's persistence to get the consent of Massume's father to hospitalize her in England with the help of a British colleague, had been all in vain, mainly because according to her Bakhtiari father: "Death in one's own country is better than wandering in an unfamiliar and pagan land". My father was still very sad and wanted to do something for her, which is why he decided to put her to school in Ahvāz. She was very caring and nice to all of us children and in her free time she would help mom in her daily chores while dad was away on his geological duty trips for the NIOC oil exploration section. Massume was a bit shy to speak in broken Persian and vulnerable to teasing because of her physical condition. I loved her so much and wanted her to feel more at home, so, I decided to start talking like her. In this way, she became my first Bakhtiari teacher. Everybody at home liked and adored my imitation of the Bakhtiari language and gestures, and so I became even more encouraged to learn from Massume and amuse the whole family. Later, when we would go to family visits or picnics in the nomadic areas, I could communicate more with the kids and every time I would come back home with a better command of Bakhtiari.

1. National Iranian Oil Company.

In 1980, when the Iran-Iraq war broke out just a day before the start of the school year and on my 13th birthday, my father who could not leave his work, took us one night to Masjed Soleimān which was farther away from the Iran-Iraq border, to stay with his brother's family for a while until the war ended. Just two days later we saw and suffered the deafening sound of the Iraqi French Mirages and Russian MiGs over the sky of Masjed Soleimān. As children we were both terrified and excited to see fragments of their bombs in the yard among the broken window glasses and discarded pieces of furniture. It was not safe there any longer, so my uncle decided to take us with his family to a village in the countryside of Masjed Soleimān to be at least protected by surrounding mountains. There, I had one of the most adventurous and happy times of my life and my first anthropological experiences! My mother, although a Bakhtiari herself and even from a more prestigious tribe than my father's, had always been considered an outsider by my father's family. Her sister-in-law even used to call her an *azærbayeǰuni* 'an Azerbaijani[2]' to express her discontent of her brother's choice of marriage from a faraway city and not choosing a girl of his own blood. Mom had always been a city girl, with a comfortable life in her loving father's house. She was a bit spoiled for her new situation, finding herself in the middle of nowhere with overwhelming stress and worries for her husband and two older sons working in the war zone. I remember her trying her best to be as active and tough as other Bakhtiari women around her to make a deserted cottage and pen clean and comfortable enough for us spoiled urban kids. But my youngest brother and I, as curious and restless as we were, could not relate to our parents' hardships and could not help exploring our new environment and learning and adopting the survival skills from village kids.

We would run to the springs to fetch water in whatever container that Mom could provide us with and get absolutely wet and drenched when back at the camp. Then we should go and wander around hills to collect sticks and dried branches for firewood, receiving instructions by local kids about which one is good and dried enough and which one would be too smoky. In this way, we would build up a lot of new vocabulary for which we didn't even know the Persian equivalents. I particularly remember that one day we were sent to pick up animal dung and droppings, which locally was the first and major fuel. I learned, reluctantly, how to examine them to see if they were dry enough to prevent the risk of having hands or feet covered with excrement. At that occasion I both learned the different terminology of the whole variety of animal droppings and developed the skill to distinguish a dried dung from a wet one by looking for a trail of ants underneath it which was an almost certain sign that the targeted treasure is dry and ready to be taken away by ants to their home. Then we needed to develop a skill how to combat the very big, yellow and at times even flying ants over dung and to escape their bites. The next skill was how to pile our collected treasures up in a huge gunnysack and carry them along to the camp. There we learned special knots, the names of different kinds of ropes and the verbs for different modes of fastening a load.

2. In the past, to a Bakhtiari, Azarbaijan was the farthest distance, both culturally and geographically, that a person could think of.

I clearly remember when for the first time in my life I truly enjoyed the taste of freshly baked bread. One day after dung hunting and water fetching we arrived at the camp and saw my mom and aunt Huri baking Tiri bread[3]. I didn't like to eat bread or rice and similar belly filling food, and used to eat only fresh fruits and well cooked meat. But there, we were not in a place to complain about food or ask for sweets or other goodies. When back from the mountains, my mom rolled one whole Tiri bread and gave it to me. I devoured it as if I was eating the most delicious cake in the world.

After two weeks of fun and hardship in the mountains, our parents came to the realization that apparently the war was not going to stop in the near future and that they had to think of a substantial solution for our schooling. They finally decided to take us to Tehran to live with my mom's family at least during the running school year.

There, in my last year of the secondary school, I had my second major linguistic awareness and cultural shock. The primary language spoken in my family was Persian or, to be more specific, the *ǰonubi* or southern variety[4] of Persian. Through my new classmates' mild teasing, I realized that I have a very high-pitched intonation at the end of my interrogative sentences which always made them laugh. Then there were times of misunderstanding because, to their surprise, I had other words in my lexicon for several objects: *cop* instead of *fenǰun* for 'cup'; *gilas* instead of *livan* 'glass'; *tæmate* instead of *goǰe færængi* 'tomato'[5], etc. As a *ǰæng zæde*[6] child I was vulnerable to teasing and being bullied, but my very good grades after the first round of exams made me popular as a very clever new student that became the top student despite being away from the school for the first two months of the school year. This gave me the opportunity to be more accepted in their Tehrani circle and I got the chance to quickly adopt their intonation, vocabulary and other sociolinguistic behavior of a Tehrani teenager.

These first encounters with other languages and cultures sparkled my interest in learning and studying languages; hence, I did a B.A. in English literature. Later in 1996, as an M.A. student in General Linguistics, I had no doubt that I wanted to study Bakhtiari from a sociolinguistic point of view. This study was the first of its kind in Iran, according to my supervisors, mainly because doing linguistic research in a non-structuralist way and coming from a social perspective was not a very

3. See 2.6 below.

4. *ǰonubi*, in Iranian society, refers to all the people and varieties of languages along the Persian Gulf to the western border of the country, including the variety spoken in Ahvāz, where I grew up. But from a linguistic point of view, this area has very diverse linguistic communities consisting of several distinct languages. The variety spoken in the province of Khuzestān and especially spoken in Ahvāz, the center of the province, and Ābādān, one of the major cities of the area, has mainly phonetic differences and of course there are words and expressions and some sociolinguistic characteristic specific to that area and at times not fully comprehensible for other Persian speakers.

5. These and many other words are all English loans that exist in many southern varieties in Persian. See also 2.3 and appendix 1 below.

6. War-struck.

prevalent tendency among Iranian academics of the time. I surveyed the practical status of the language in Masjed Soleimān. The title of my thesis was "Bakhtiari Language, Maintenance or Shift?", and I found it useful to include some parts of it and its results in section 2.4 of the present research.

My fieldwork research during 1995-1997 was the beginning of my close encounter with the nomads' harsh way of life and their social and administrative problems. To respond to their plea for my help, I have been immersed in a marathon of humanitarian activities, which continues to the present. This has obviously affected my academic interests. During the last eight years of living, migrating, planting, and fighting with governmental organizations for the rights of Bakhtiari nomads over their hereditary land and pastures. I have acquired a very deep knowledge of the nomad's culture and lexicon. I became very much interested in anthropology, and started working with Iranian sociologists and anthropologists to discuss the nomads' situation and issues, and strove to help them to have better education, a mobile library, training courses and the like.

Meanwhile, I started my second M.A. in Old Iranian Languages and Cultures at Tehran University. Fascinated by the archaic treasury of Bakhtiari language and culture, I decided to write my thesis, again, on Bakhtiari, and this time to include my new experiences and data in the work. I chose the field of Anthropological Linguistics and started working on "An Anthropological Survey of Bakhtiari Vocabulary, in comparison with Middle Persian". I worked two whole years on the subject, gathered lots of data including many pictures and videos, attended several summer schools in Leiden and a conference and workshop in Germany (Hamburg and Kiel) in 2007, which focused on documenting Iranian languages. I tried to equip myself with the latest technology and techniques such as Toolbox, ELAN, PRAAT among others, and with Iranian linguistics in general. However, for personal reasons I decided not to defend my almost complete thesis in Tehran. I moved to The Netherlands to continue and pursue my education and research on Bakhtiari, which I now consider to be my academic mission in life.