Tribes of Arasbaran and Qaradaghis in Iran

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Abstract: Arasbaran (Persian: ارس‌بّران, also Romanized as Arasbārān and formerly known as Qarājādāgh, Qaradağ, Karadağ, Karacadağ, or Qaraja dagh, is a large mountainous area stretching from the Qīshā Dāgh massif, south of Ahar, to the Aras River in East Azerbaijan Province of Iran. The region is confined to Aras River in the north, Meshgin Shahr County and Moghan in the east, Sarab County in the south, and Tabriz and Marand counties in the west. Since 1976, UNESCO has registered 72,460 hectares of the region, confined to 38°40' to 39°08'N and 46°39' to 47°02'E, as biosphere reserve with the following general description. This biosphere reserve situated in the north of Iran at the border to Armenia and Azerbaijan belongs to the Caucasus Iranian Highlands. In-between the Caspian, Caucasus and Mediterranean region, the area covers mountains up to 2,200 meters, high alpine meadows, semi-arid steppes, rangelands and forests, rivers and springs. Arasbaran is the territory of about 23,500 nomads who are mainly living in the buffer and transition zones (2000).

Keywords: Arasbaran, History, Demography, Qaradagh.

I. Introduction

If we want to do a study in the social, political and economic structure of a country, we should pay attention to important and fine points and consider demographic issues as well as issues related to cities and villages. Iran is a country that due to climate variability, presence of rivers and pastures, not only includes urban and rural life, but also the third type of living called nomadic life which has a major contribution in the economic sector, population, political structure and security in the military. Of course, concerning the nomads and mentioned issues, some studies have been done by Iranianscholars and scientists. But given that the researcher is living in East Azerbaijan which is located in North West of Iran, he has tried to do further studies about tribe called Arasbaran (Qaradagh) that are living around there and little research has been done on them. Therefore, the researcher has prepared a paper entitled “the History and social-political structure of Arasbaran tribe (Qaradagh) tends to have a brief history of these nomads and their communities as well as their influence in the country."

II. History of Arasbaran tribe (Qaradagh)

There is no mention of Arasbaran as a geo-political entity in written sources dating prior to Safavid era. There is a speculation that the region referred to as Syah Kuh by the 10th-century Muslim geographer, Ibn Hawqal, corresponds to the present day Arasbaran. However, the said Syakhkoh has more similarities with Mangshishlaq in the eastern shores of Caspian Sea. Therefore, Arasbaran's history should be considered in the context of its two main towns, Ahar and Kaleybar. Kaleybar, formerly known as Bedh, was the stronghold of Babak Khorrarmad who, in 816 AD, revolted against Islamic Caliphate and was defeated in 836 AD. The events of the two decades long tumultuous times have been extensively reported by Islamic historians of the epoch[7]. The first report is by Al-Masudi in The Meadows of Gold; Babak revolted in Bedh region with the disciples of Djavidan. Following a series of defeats Babak was blockaded in his native town..., which even now is known as Babak's country. Ibn Athir in his book, The Complete History, has devoted many pages to the description of battles. Yaqut al-Hamawi, writing in early thirteen century, describes Kaleybar in the following words, County between Azerbaijan and Erran... This county produces pomegranates of incomparable beauty, excellent figs and grapes that are dried on fires (because the sun is always obscured by thick clouds). In the 12th-13th centuries, Ahar was a minor and short-lived, but prosperous emirate ruled by the Pishteginid dynasty of Georgian origin (1155—1231). Yaqut al-Hamawi, describes Ahar as very flourishing despite its small extent. Both towns lost most of their importance during the rule of Ilkhanate. Hamdallah Mustawfi, writing in mid fourteenth century, describes Ahar as a little town and Kaleybar as A village of Azerbaijan, in the woods near which comprises a fortress. Ahar was in the focus of Safavid dynasty's agenda for casting of Azerbaijan as a Safavid dominion[1]. Thus, Shah Abbas rebuilt the mausoleum of Sheikh Shihab-al-din in Ahar. Arasbaran region suffered enormously during Russo-Persian War (1804—13) and Russo-Persian War (1826—28) due to its proximity to the war zone. Western travelers in 1837-1843 period had found Ahar, a city with around 700
houses, in wretched condition. Arasbaran was one of the epicenters of Persian Constitutional Revolution. Arasbaran tribes were heavily involved in armed conflicts; the revolutionary and anti-revolutionary camps were headed, respectively, by Sattar Khan and Rahimkhan Chalabianloo, both from Qaradağ region. When in 1925 Rezā Shāh deposed Ahmad Shah Qajar and founded the Pahlavi dynasty, Arasbaran's gradual decline started. The new king insisting on ethnic nationalism and cultural, implemented policy of cultural assimilation. He renamed Qaradağ as Arasbaran to deny the Turkic identity of the inhabitants. Consequently, Arasbaran is no longer in the focus of national politics. Still, many books and articles are being written on the contribution of Arasbaran region and its inhabitants in the contemporary history of Iran cannot be underestimated. The interested reader may refer to the following scholarly books and articles[4].

III. Arasbaran ecotourism potential

The declaration by UNESCO of Arasbaran as a UNESCO Biosphere reserve in 1976 was a great endorsement for the region's ecotourism potential. More recently, visitors from places as far away as Canada have expressed their amazement with approving words. The planned promotion of the Biosphere to the National Park status may further enhance Arasbaran's environmental significance. Arasbaran is home to 215 species of birds, notably the Caucasian black grouse grey partridge, black francolin, and common pheasant, 29 species of reptiles, 48 species of mammals, notably wild goat, wild boar, brown bear, wolf, lynx, and leopard, and 17 species of fish. There is an effort going on to revitalize the extinct sub-species of Caspian red deer local to the area. The local flora include hornbeam, sumac, and Berberis[3]. A unique characteristic of Arasbaran forests is the ubiquity of edible wild trees. For instance, a patch of forest between Aghaweye and Oskolou includes hazelnut trees. The large walnut and Cornus mas trees, which grow wild alongside streams, provide an important income source for inhabitants. More exotic plant species, such as redcurrant, truffle and herbs with application in traditional medicine significantly add to the ecological importance of Arasbaran region. A recent study has indicated that three sites have the highest potential for ecotourism. These sites, which are located alongside the road connecting Kaleybar to Asheqlu (Abbasabad-Aynaloo-Vayqan direction), include Mikandi valley, Aynali forests and Babak Castle. There are, however, more unexplored touristic potentials. One example is a holy mountain located at the coordinate (38°55'16.64"N,46°47'24.62"E). Most inhabitants of the now abandoned village, Garmanab, were Izadis, the followers Yârsân religion. They used to slaughter sacrificial animals in the site, which is located at the slopes of a hill. Nobody bothered to ask the reasons behind the holiness of the site. However, the pleasures of an occasional feast was so tempting that the followers of the Shia' sect attended the holy site, too[5]. Nowadays there is few worshipers and the centuries long tradition are almost forgotten. The revival of these rituals may attract cultural visitors. Another potential touristic attraction is the summer camps of semi-settled Tribes of Arasbaran, known as Ilat, who spend the 5 months of year in uplands for grazing their livestock. A tourist, while enjoying the fresh thin air of mountains, may get a chance to observe the age-long traditional living styles of locals. Some of the attractive sites are Aliabad mountains, meadows above Shojaabad, East Azerbaijan village, and Chaparli and Aqdash summer quarters, all located in a driving distance from Kaleybar. Numerous hot springs, scattered all over the region, have been considered as attractions for promoting tourism. One example is Motaaløq Hot spring therapeutic facility, which is the largest of its kind in Iran. The facility, with an area of 12870 m2 includes bathing areas, coffee-shop, restaurants, prayer room, and gymnasium. In recent years, the local government has organized Zoğal festivals in Kaleybar as a means of promoting tourism. In addition, every year, in the second half of October, a Pomegranate Festival is organized in by the provincial authorities in Mardanaqom village. The main program of the festival is performance of ashugh music. Nearly every village in the region has a landmark in its territories. Some of these are potential tourism attractions. For instance, there is a landmark ancient plane tree in the Kavanaq village, whose photo is presented here. The tree is about 3 meter in diameter and is said to have lived for 500 years. The villagers have developed interesting oral narratives around the events experienced by the tree[2].

IV. Demography

In the wake of Russo-Persian War (1804–13) a significant fraction of the inhabitants lived as nomadic tribes. The major tribes included; Chalabianlu 1500 tents and houses, Karacurlu 2500, Haji-Alilu 800, Begdillu 200, and various minor groups 500. At the time Ahar, with 3500 inhabitants, was the only city of Qaradağ By the beginning of twentieth century the settlement of tribesman were growing and in 1920 there were more than four hundred villages, less than thirty of which were Armenian. However, the nomadic way of living has survived to the present. Nomadic population at present has been estimated to be about 36000, and is not significantly different from the 30000 estimate of 1960. The defeat of Azerbaijan People's Government and the following tragic events, resulted in mass migration of inhabitants to Tabriz and Tehran. Most of these migrants settled in the shanty towns and worked as painters. The land reforms of 1962–1964 accelerated the migration. The case of a typical village, Abbasabad, is a good example to demonstrate the population depletion; the number of families dropped from 60 families at 1970 to 12 at 2006[6].
V. Language and Religion

The spoken language is Azerbaijani, which belongs to the western group of southwestern, or Oghuz, branch of Turkic language family. It has a high degree of intelligibility with Anatolian Turkish. Most inhabitants are familiar with Persian language, which is the official language of Iran and the sole language of education. Until 1980, the elders of four villages (Chay Kandi, Kalasor, Khoynarood, and Arazin) were communicating in Tati, a language which was the Iranian language of Azerbaijan before the arrival of speakers of Turkish in the time of Mahmud of Ghazni (around 1000 AD)[8]. The majority of people are followers of Shia Islam. The last Armenian person died in 1978. The region is also home to a large number of the followers of the Yarisan religion (Shamloo)[1].

VI. Mythology

The inhabitants of every village attribute spiritual importance to at multiple sites, scattered throughout the village territory. These places, generally known as Ojaq, are located in areas with rapid variation on the land topography, and are in some way linked to Djins via established narratives. Most of these sites possess any significantly conspicuous landmark. At some sites, which are considered sacred by many villages, people will occasionally gather to slaughter sacrificial animals or offer a simple meal of freshly baked bread and cheese with tea. At some sites, they have collected medium sized rocks around some trees and hang color treads or ribbons from the trees. In most villages, there are more sites with narrative associations, which are not considered sacred. These sites are in secluded locations formed by natural topography of the landscape. Often the narratives involve bears as the principal subject. The main theme of the narratives is the following. A male bear kidnaps a blackberry picking pretty girl and takes her to his den. A hybrid child is born, but the girl runs away at the first opportunity leaving the lamenting bear entreatingly crying for his lost wife. According to a myth wolf is found as a symbol of merciless power that is able to destroy everything. If a human being touches it, whatever frightens him/her will be frustrated[2].

VII. Arasbaran dogs

Orhan Pamuk in 2001 Turkish novel, My Name Is Red, gives a vivid description of Turkic people’s love-hate attitude towards dogs. Every summer, the real life version of this description is in display in Chaparli. Each family has 2-5 dogs, all with characteristic cropped ears and tails. The dogs are fed generous portions of milk soaked breads. When the sheep herds are brought back for milking near tents, dogs sleep around the camp most of the day. The inhabitants treat the beasts with utter respect, a manner which is loathed by more pious villagers of the region as a pagan act. Between dusk and down dogs regain their vicious character; strangers have to avoid crossing campsite otherwise the attacking dogs cannot be controlled even by their owners. Fending off the dogs by beating is considered an act of aggression towards the owner and should be avoided. In fact most of the feuds between settled villagers and pastoralists is about dogs[4].

VIII. Arasbaran carpet

Carpet weaving stands out as the acme of Azeri art and people of Arasbaran have significantly contributed to this artistic tradition. Arasbaran carpet was a hybrid between Persian carpet and Azerbaijani rug. Still, there were indigenous style, too. For instance, carpets, known as Balan Rug, had a size of approximately 1x4 m² and a characteristic pattern. The acme of carpet weaving art in Arasbaran is manifested in verni which was originated in Nagorno-Karabakh. Verni is a carpet-like kilim with a delicate and fine warp and woof, which is woven without a previous sketch, thanks to the creative talents of nomadic women and girls. Verni weavers employ the image of birds and animals (deer, rooster, cat, snake, birds, gazelle, sheep, camel, wolf and eagle) in simple geometrical shapes, imitating the earthenware patterns that were popular in prehistoric times[6]. A key décor feature, which is intrinsic to many vernis, is the S-element. Its shape varies, it may resemble both figure 5 and letter S. This element means “dragon” among the nomads. At present, verni is woven by the girls of Arasbaran Tribes, often in the same room where the nomadic tribes reside, and is a significant income source for about 20000 families. Verni weavers employ the image of birds and animals in simple geometrical shapes, imitating the earthenware patterns that were popular in prehistoric times.

IX. Results

The Arasbaran biosphere reserve is situated in the north of Iran at the border with Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Caucasus Iranian Highlands. The reserve encompasses mountains, high alpine meadows, semi-arid steppes, rangelands and forests, rivers and springs. Arasbaran is the territory of one of the oldest tribes of the country, namely the Qaradagh or Arasbaran tribe. Economic activities in the biosphere reserve consist mainly of agriculture, animal husbandry, horticulture, apiculture, handicrafts and tourism, while business activities can be found in urbanized areas [8].
References