

Kurdish or Luri?

Laki's disputed identity in the Luristan province of Iran

by Erik John Anonby

The quest for self-definition of the virtual Kurdish nation-state leads naturally to questions of linguistic, cultural and—more delicately—political inclusion.¹ The so-called »Laki« peoples of Iran and Iraq present a classificatory challenge to such an initiative: who are the Laks? Are they Kurds, or are they Lurs? Or neither? What language do they speak, and what are the implications of this concerning their ethnicity?

The present article examines the cultural and linguistic affiliation of the »Laki« populace. These peoples are situated in southwestern Iran and southeastern Iraq, at the frontier between the Kurdish and Luri ethnolinguistic blocs. After examining contradictory positions regarding Laki ethnic identity and linguistic affiliation, this study contends that a distinction between Pish-e Kuh Laki and Posht-e Kuh Laki is valuable in understanding these positions. Pish-e Kuh Laki is chosen as an object of in-depth investigation. The author concludes that although this group is ethnically associated with the Luri population of Luristan, their distinctive Laki vernacular is actually a North-western Iranian language with a close genetic relation to Kurdish.

The Laki ensemble

Scholars agree that a large proportion of the inhabitants of contemporary Iran and its neighbours are descended from the group of Aryan tribes that made their way from Central Asia into Iran by a route which went north of the Caspian Sea, through the Caucasus and finally into the present locations of these peoples. Indo-Iranian groups such as Kurds, Lurs and Persians are descendants of these migrants. There has been a massive integration among these groups as well as with other peoples: both with prior inhabitants of Iran such as the Elamites, and with those that successively invaded Persia after the establishment of the Indo-Iranian peoples.²

1 I wish to dedicate this article to Reza Fazeli, a Laki speaker with a wide knowledge of and profound attachment to his mother tongue. I also wish to thank Barrie Evans, whose technical assistance and insights on the status of Laki—often contrasting with my own—have advanced the present research. His translation of and comments on parts of Fattah's 2000 publication (personal communication 2004) have been especially helpful. Any errors are, of course, my own responsibility.

2 Cf. Amanollahi 1991: 8, 45.

A heterogeneous ensemble of peoples which have been called *lak*, »Laks« (adjective: *lakī*, »Laki«) is found at the centre of this field of ethnic brassage, in southwestern Iran and southeastern Iraq. More precisely, the Laki area is wedged between the southeast edge of the Kurdish cultural complex and the northwest edge of the Luri complex. Indeed, the area is defined by the multifaceted interaction of the two major groups.

The population of the Laki ensemble, which may reach as high as a million people,³ is concentrated in the Luristan and Ilam provinces of Iran as well as immediately adjacent areas in Iraq. There is also a significant population reported from Kermanshahan province, and smaller groups are reputed to live in other provinces.⁴

The peoples called »Laks« do not comprise a single cohesive unit, and different »Laki« groups associate themselves with each of their massive neighbours—Kurd and Lur—to varying degrees. Two main divisions of Laks (themselves belonging to areal groupings which are more commonly associated with Luri ethnicity but which transcend narrow ethnic and linguistic boundaries) may be identified: the Pish-e Kuh⁵ population is found in the Luristan province of Iran and some small adjacent areas in neighbouring provinces; Posht-e Kuh, on the other hand, comprises the rest of the Laki population and is found in the Ilam and Kermanshahan provinces of Iran, and in an area in Iraq across the border from Ilam. Those belonging to Pish-e Kuh identify strongly with the Lurs, and those known as Posht-e Kuh show strong cultural ties to both Lurs and Kurds. In addition, the Pish-e Kuh Laki grouping is somewhat homogeneous, whereas the configuration and cohesion of the Posht-e Kuh grouping is unclear. Finally, the two groups are relatively independent of one another.⁶

In fact, the very existence of a Laki ethnic group has been called into question.⁷ Further, the disjunction between cultural and linguistic labels in the area is the rule rather than the exception. The literature contains accounts of whole groups of Lurs speaking Luri, Laki, and Kurdish; Laks speaking Luri, Laki, Kurdish and Gurani (Hawrami); and Kurds speaking Kurdish and Laki.⁸ The only common denominator in the use of the term »Laki« is an intimation of an ethnolinguistic reality which approaches but falls short of being either truly Kurd-

3 Fattah 2000: 4.

4 The ethnic and linguistic distribution of Laki is described in further detail in subsequent sections.

5 Literally, »in front of the mountain«. Posht-e Kuh means, literally, »behind the mountain«.

6 See Amanollahi 1991: 77ff.

7 Izadapanāh 1978; Amanollahi 1991; contra Fattah 2000.

8 Windfuhr 1989a; Blau 1989; Amanollahi 1991; Fattah 2000; Blau (personal communication 2002); see discussion below.

ish or truly Luri, or both. The ethnic identity and linguistic affiliation of »Laki« groups thus demand further clarification. A division which takes into account a distinction between the »Laki« groups of Pish-e Kuh and Posht-e Kuh is promising in this regard, but has not yet, to my knowledge, been pursued. This question will be revisited below.

Laki: An ethnic reality?

Reports of an ethnic grouping known as »Laki« have appeared consistently in the literature on southwest Iran and southeast Iraq. However, accounts are not unified. A sampling of these diverse accounts will be reviewed here.

Sources most commonly locate the elusive Laki »tribes« in the Luristan and Ilam provinces of Iran and the area immediately across the border in Iraq.⁹ Some of the names of the Laki tribes which appear include Bajilan, Mafi, Zand, Kalhur and Zangana. However, at least some of these names have been assigned to Kurdish and Luri ethnic complexes as well, so any classification of the groups as uniquely Laki is inconclusive.¹⁰

Minorsky, calling the Lak the »most southern group of Kurd tribes in Persia,« locates them in Luristan as early as the reign of Shah Abbas, who ruled at the end of the 16th century and into the 17th century. The author explains:

»The Lak now living in northern Luristān [...] are sometimes confused with the Lur [...], whom they resemble from the somatic and ethnic point of view. The facts of history, however, show that the Lak have immigrated to their present settlements from lands further north. [...] According to Rabino, the Lak were settled in Luristān by order of *Shāh 'Abbās*, who wished in this way to create some support for the new *wāli*.«¹¹

He continues, noting that according to an early 19th century writer, »Laki tribes« were also found outside of what was then known as Luristan. These included the Bajilan, Mafi, and Zand. A second 19th century writer is cited as listing the Kalhur among the Laki tribes, but does not specify their location.¹² Elsewhere, Minorsky adds the name Zangana to the list of Laki tribes.¹³

The scholar Fattah provides a detailed but politically charged overview of Laki ethnicity. Apparently intent on consolidating ethnic outliers within the virtual Kurdish nation-state, he corroborates

9 Field n.d. [1939]: 655; Minorsky 1986a; Lazard 1992: 15; Fattah 2000: 10, 56–7.

10 Fattah 2000.

11 Minorsky 1986a: 616–7.

12 Minorsky 1986a: 617.

13 Minorsky 1986b: 825.

the contention that the groups known as »Laks« are in fact Kurds rather than Lurs. However, he puts a twist on the situation: although he defends their Kurdish identity, he acknowledges that Laks have more commonly been considered by scholars as belonging to the Luri ethnic complex, and in fact often »mistakenly« consider themselves Lurs. This situation, he claims, is in fact a case of designedly erroneous identity propagated by western scholars.¹⁴ It should also be noted that Fattah's information on the Posht-e Kuh Laki population is much more complete than that of Pish-e Kuh.

Two key sources take a starkly contrasting approach, namely, that of a close association between Laks and Lurs. Amanollahi and Izadpanāh, both originating in Luristan, are ideally situated to rectify any alleged misinformation. Amanollahi is, in addition, an anthropologist specializing in Luri culture, and Izadpanāh speaks the Laki language as a mother tongue. Their analysis of the ethnic situation is coherent but startling: they claim that the primary ethnic identity of Laki speakers is neither Laki nor Kurdish, but rather Luri! For them, Laki is a uniquely linguistic term, whereas Luri is an ethnic term as well as a linguistic term. Their claims are not only well-researched, but have been arrived at independently. Still, the scope of their observations deserves caution: while their portrayal of ethnicity among the Pish-e Kuh Laki-speaking populations of Luristan and its immediate surroundings is above reproach, it has been – admittedly – generalized to include the larger and more complex Posht-e Kuh Laki population.¹⁵

My own interaction with speakers of Pish-e Kuh Laki, which took place during research on the Luri language continuum,¹⁶ confirms this final analysis exactly. However, my understanding of contours of ethnicity among the Posht-e Kuh Laki population is, like theirs, unclear.

Issues in a linguistic classification of Laki

Just as the discussion of a »Laki« ethnicity raises important questions, so does the investigation of a »Laki« language. Two major themes emerge. Firstly, the genetic affiliation of the language is disputed. Secondly, the unity of a single »Laki« language is open to debate. Only after the second question has been addressed can the genetic status of the language be adequately accounted for.

14 Fattah 2000: 44–8, 59–61.

15 Amanollahi 1991: 55–7; Izadpanāh 1978: vii.

16 Anonby 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2005 (forthcoming).

Obstacles to classification

Two major difficulties attend a discussion of the genetic classification of Laki. First—despite the dizzying complexity of the language situation in the Laki-speaking area—existing sources are content to speak of Laki as a single language variety. Because the range and distribution of variation within this abstract »unit« are nowhere accounted for, the literature contains competing classifications based on an (ideally) reliable but incomplete sample. This problem will be taken up in more detail below. A second impediment to classification of Laki is a lack of empirical support for the assertions that exist. Although some of the existing classifications may be accurate, they are generally supported by intuitive claims, including native speaker perception, rather than comparative and historical data. While ethnicity may defy discrete and impartial categorization, linguistic relationship is the stuff of objective analysis and should be treated as such.

This study will attempt to cope with these obstacles to classification by limiting its scrutiny to a single variety of »Laki«: that of Pish-e Kuh, spoken in the Luristan province of Iran and adjacent areas. Further, data will be provided to support classificatory claims.

Existing classifications

Although existing classifications of Laki are limited in the ways mentioned above, they nonetheless provide an indispensable starting point for a reasoned treatment of the topic.

Discussions of Laki consistently place the variety within the context of the Western group of Iranian languages. The Iranian languages themselves comprise a node of the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European language phylum.

As Laki is located at the frontier between the Kurdish and Luri language blocs, these two groupings provide the most likely candidates for lower-level language families with which Laki may be genetically affiliated. The two default candidates for classification, both of which are found in the Western group of Iranian languages, are thus: the Northwestern family, which includes Kurdish and related varieties such as Talysh, Tati, Gilaki, and Baluchi;¹⁷ and the Southwestern family, which includes the Luri continuum,¹⁸ Farsi (including dialects), and other closely related languages.¹⁹

Since the split between the Northwestern and Southwestern families has been traced back to a historical stage well before Middle Persian,

17 Oranskij 1977; Amanollahi 1991: 52; Grimes & Grimes 1996.

18 Anonby 2003b.

19 Grimes & Grimes 1996: 56–7.



Map 1: Distribution of the Pish-e Kuh Laki language (based on Izadpanāh 1978, *Peoples of Iran* 1982, Amanollahi 1991, Fattah 2000, and Anonby 2003b)

the structural divide is significant. Thus, Laki's genetic association with one of the two groups should be traceable in spite of a rapprochement due to centuries of areal influence from both directions.

Northwestern or Southwestern?

The benchmark *Peoples of Iran* map divides the country into ethno-linguistic groups. In this simplistic equation of language and culture, all ethnic Luri areas (including most or all areas where Laki is spoken) are labelled as Luri-speaking, thus falling under the umbrella of the Southwestern language family.²⁰

The *Ethnologue* similarly placed Laki, with the alternate names of Alaki and Lekī, among the dialects of Luri.²¹

Windfuhr, in contrast, assigns Laki to the Northwestern group of Iranian languages, along with Kurdish and closely related varieties.²² Although he does not support this proposal with data, his breadth of knowledge in the field makes this classification worth considering.

Windfuhr is followed by Amanollahi and Fattah, who reach the same conclusion, apparently independently. Although Amanollahi

20 *Peoples of Iran* 1982.

21 Grimes 1996: 677. This view, however, was reversed in the current, 15th, edition (Gordon 2005) which labels Laki a Kurdish—and thus Northwestern—language.

22 Windfuhr 1989a: 248; Windfuhr 1989b: 294–5.

is an anthropologist rather than a linguist, he is a fluent in Kurdish (Kurmanji of Kurdistan, Iran), Luri (Luristani), and Modern Standard Farsi.²³ Consequently, his classification of Laki as a Northwestern language within Oranskij's wider framework of Iranian languages is worthy of notice.²⁴ It should be noted, however, that his information is much more complete concerning the Laki variety of Luristan than concerning other varieties.

Fattah, himself a Kurd, echoes the classification of Laki as Northwestern, and labels it as a Kurdish language related to but distinct from other Southern Kurdish dialects. Although his claims are backed up with some typological data (an ergative verbal construction is, for him, the most significant distinguishing feature), his knowledge is more complete for Posht-e Kuh than for Pish-e Kuh Laki-speaking groups.²⁵

Other anecdotal classifications consistently place Laki in the Northwestern family, sometimes as a language distinct from but nonetheless related to Kurdish,²⁶ and occasionally as a dialect of Southern Kurdish.²⁷

Two Laki language groupings: Posht-e Kuh and Pish-e Kuh

Although some aspects of the linguistic and cultural situation seem almost miscellaneous, a recurring theme is the division of the »Laki« ensemble into Pish-e Kuh and Posht-e Kuh. In addition to their status as somewhat independent cultural units, a recognition of Pish-e Kuh and Posht-e Kuh as linguistic realities may help solve some of the apparent contradictions between existing accounts of the language, since satisfactory accounts are typically limited to one of the two groupings.²⁸

Because of the complexity of the Laki ensemble, an attempt to define the linguistic situation must be both broad as well as thorough.²⁹ The remainder of this study will be dedicated to the language variety associated with Pish-e Kuh, since it forms a single manageable focus. The delineation of the Posht-e Kuh Laki language varieties is outside the scope of this paper, but may be carried out along the lines applied to Pish-e Kuh in the sections that follow.

23 Amanollahi (personal communication 1999).

24 Amanollahi 1991: 52, 55; Oranskij 1977.

25 Fattah 2000: 7, 10, 56.

26 Izadpanāh 1978; Amanollahi 1991: 55–7; Mann, cited in Minorsky 1986a: 616.

27 Blau 1989: 328; Lazard 1992: 215. In most sources cited in this article, the term »dialect« is used loosely and refers not to level of intercomprehension but rather to membership within a linguistic bloc such as Kurdish, Luri or Farsi. The degree of historical divergence exhibited by Laki in comparison to other Kurdish varieties, as outlined in these sources, is thus open to interpretation.

28 See annotated references in Fattah 2000: 58–9.

29 Fattah (2000: 4) has promised such a study, but I am not yet aware of any such publication.

The Pish-e Kuh Laki language

Pish-e Kuh Laki is the mother tongue of a significant proportion of the Luristan province of Iran. The language area covers about a quarter of the province and is concentrated in the province's northwestern and western districts (see Map 1). Major population centres in the area include Aleshtar, Kuhdasht, Nurābād-e Dolfān, and the upper city of Khorramabad.³⁰ Additionally, Pish-e Kuh Laki is spoken in a few towns in the adjacent areas of Ilam, Kermanshahan, Hamadan, and possibly Markaz and Qazvin provinces. A rough population estimate based on the maps and clan distribution descriptions found in Izadpanāh and Amanollahi indicates that there are likely over 100,000 speakers of Pish-e Kuh Laki (this compares with a total population of 1.6 million in Luristan).³¹

One sobering facet of any discussion of Pish-e Kuh Laki is its uncertain social status. Pish-e Kuh Laki is poorly known outside of Luristan. In contrast to Kurmanji Kurdish, which enjoys a high level of prestige in Iran despite official efforts to promote Farsi in formal domains,³² Pish-e Kuh Laki is associated with cultural conservatism, rurality and economic deprivation. Even Luristani Luri, which is experiencing major pressure from and shift toward Farsi,³³ is considered by many speakers of Laki as more valuable than their own language; reports of Laki-speaking parents who teach their children Luri to help them »get ahead« are not uncommon. Language shift is, predictably, most advanced among the Laki-speaking population of Khorramabad. Further, bilingualism in Luri is almost ubiquitous. This pattern of recession is historically confirmed in the present-day geographic distribution of the language, which shows the patchy spread characteristic of a language in the process of contraction. Taken together, these factors suggest that the future of the Pish-e Kuh Laki language is threatened.

Despite its uncertain future, Pish-e Kuh Laki speakers have maintained a nostalgic affection for their language. This is evidenced in the production of what Amanollahi calls an »abundant literature«: cultural and linguistic studies as well as poetry in both recorded and print media.³⁴

30 Izadpanāh 1978: vii; see also his map in the index of the same volume.

31 Izadpanāh 1978; Amanollahi 1991: 55; personal communication with Laki speakers of Luristan province, 2000.

32 *Time*, 1 April 1991, cited in Grimes 1996: 676.

33 Cf. Anonby 2003a: 13.

34 Amanollahi 1991: 55. Linguistic and cultural studies: Izadpanāh 1978, Ghazanfari-ye Emrā'i (2 separate works) cited in Amanollahi 1991; printed poetry: Ghazanfari-ye Emrā'i 1972, Mollā Parishān 1982.

The most complete linguistic account of Pish-e Kuh Laki is that of Lazard.³⁵ Although little information on the language's social and linguistic context is given, he provides a concise sketch which includes aspects of phonology, morphology and syntax, as well as some texts of the language.³⁶

In contrast to Posht-e Kuh Laki, Pish-e Kuh Laki as spoken in Luristan is manifestly uniform.³⁷ In a previous study, Pish-e Kuh Laki wordlists from two different parts of the language area show a level of lexical similarity (92 per cent) which is unmatched between any other two wordlists in the whole Luri language continuum.³⁸ Possible causes for this uniformity include a rapid expansion at some point in history, or the presence of a centralized political formation in which the ancestor of Pish-e Kuh Laki was a dominant language. Since there is no record of such a political structure, a rapid historical expansion may well account for the uniformity of the language.

Toward a classification of Pish-e Kuh Laki

In addition to this apparent internal homogeneity, Pish-e Kuh Laki exhibits a strong resemblance to its linguistic neighbours, and in fact fits neatly into the Kurdish-Luri-Farsi continuum that runs along the northwest to southeast axis of the Zagros mountains.³⁹ A surprisingly high level of lexical similarity with the Khorramabadi dialect of Luristani Luri,⁴⁰ itself a member of the Southwestern family, is evidence of either genetic relation or the levelling effect of areal contact. This phenomenon will be addressed further below.

Even within Luristan, perceptions of the linguistic affiliation of Laki are varied. Although some Luri-speaking Lurs consider Posht-e Kuh Laki a variety of Kurdish, speakers of the language claim that it is a language distinct from Kurdish as well as Luri. Speakers who have an awareness of language varieties in other Laki-speaking areas insist further that these are distinct from the language of Pish-e Kuh. Amanollahi states additionally that Pish-e Kuh Laki shows a high level of similarity with Gurani (Hawrami) and the Kermanshah dialect of Farsi, both of which are in the general vicinity. Some similarity with Posht-e Kuh Laki, Kurmanji Kurdish, and Southern Kurdish, all of which are contiguous with the Pish-e Kuh Laki area, is also to be expected. The relationship among these varieties needs to be pursued further.

35 Lazard 1992, based on data gathered in 1949.

36 Lazard 1992: 219.

37 Amanollahi 1991: 55; Izadpanāh 1978.

38 Anonby 2003a.

39 Anonby 2003b.

40 For a description of this dialect, see MacKinnon 2002.

Pish-e Kuh Laki and the Khorramabadi dialect of Luristani Luri

The actual linguistic proximity between Pish-e Kuh Laki and the Khorramabadi dialect of Luristani Luri, a language variety classified as Southwestern, is enough to warrant consideration of Pish-e Kuh Laki's inclusion in the same family. As the previous section indicates, the lexical similarity between the two varieties is high, even conspicuous. As the 225-item wordlists in Anonby show, 78 per cent of Pish-e Kuh Laki lexical items are similar to their Khorramabadi counterparts. This is a higher level of lexical similarity here than among the Luri languages Luristani, Bakhtiari, and Southern Luri.⁴¹

In addition to elevated lexical similarity, a number of shared phonological characteristics deserve consideration in a discussion of the relationship between Pish-e Kuh Laki and the Khorramabadi dialect of Luristani Luri.⁴² In fact, several features which are shared between the two varieties are not found in Luri languages other than Luristani. These include the presence of /x^w/ and /ž/ as phonemes; lack of softening of /d/ in postvocalic position; rounding of vowels before historical /w/; and vowel fronting before historical /h/ and in closed syllables (see Table 1 below). In the following tables, Bakhtiari has been chosen as a representative of other Luri varieties.

In contrast, there are several phonological differences between Pish-e Kuh Laki and Luri languages, including the Khorramabadi dialect of Luristani Luri. These include the fronting of velar consonants /k, g/ before front vowels, the admission of long vowels before /h/, and the palatal realization of /l/⁴³ (see Table 2 below). As in the previous table, Bakhtiari represents the other Luri languages.

Although the phonological evidence is inconclusive, there is at least some typological support for an affiliation between Pish-e Kuh Laki and the Khorramabadi dialect of Luristani Luri, a Southwestern variety. A broader picture of relevant aspects of structure is therefore needed to determine whether Pish-e-Kuh Laki's membership lies in the Northwestern or Southwestern family of Western Iranian languages. Just such a comparison is made possible by subjecting Pish-e Kuh Laki data to the algorithms for classification established by the linguist Oranskij.⁴⁴

41 Anonby 2003b. Percentages of lexical similarity among the Luri languages range from 66 to 86 per cent; as is the case with Pish-e Kuh Laki and Khorramabadi Luristani, higher lexical similarity is associated with geographically contiguous dialects of these languages.

42 Data in this section are taken from Anonby 2003b.

43 Lazard (1992: 216) indicates that a velarized lateral approximant /l/ is contrastive in Laki. The need for a clear acoustic distinction between the two may have motivated the historical palatalization of the »normal« /l/ (cf. Lazard, *ibid.*).

44 Oranskij 1977.

Table 1: Phonological similarities between Pish-e Kuh Laki and the Khorramabadi dialect of Luristani Luri

Phonological characteristic	Sample lexical item	Pish-e Kuh Laki	Khorramabadi	Bakhtiari
/x ^w / as phoneme ⁴⁵	»sister«	<i>x^weɣa, xoɾwa</i>	<i>x^war</i>	<i>day, daḏu, daḏi, xāar</i>
/ž/ as phoneme	»woman«	<i>žan</i>	<i>zan</i> (ž in other items only) ⁴⁶	<i>zīna, zan</i>
Softening of /d/ in postvocalic position	»bad«	<i>bad</i>	<i>bad</i>	<i>baḏ, bay</i>
Vowel rounding before historical /w/	»night«	<i>šö</i>	<i>šö</i>	<i>šəw</i>
Vowel fronting before historical /h/	»two«	<i>dö</i>	<i>dö</i>	<i>do, dö</i>
Vowel fronting in closed syllables	»tail«	<i>döm</i>	<i>döm</i>	<i>dom, domb</i>

Table 2: Phonological differences between Pish-e Kuh Laki and the Luri languages, including the Khorramabadi dialect of Luristani Luri

Phonological characteristic	Sample lexical item	Pish-e Kuh Laki	Khorramabadi	Bakhtiari
Velar fronting before front vowels	»when?«	<i>key</i>	<i>key</i>	<i>key, k^vey</i>
	»do (3s past)«	<i>körd</i>	<i>körd, kerd, kard</i>	<i>k^ve</i>
Long vowels before /h/	»moon«	<i>māh, muḥ</i>	<i>ma</i>	<i>mah, mā</i>
Palatalization of /l/	»head«	<i>kal^va</i>	<i>kala</i>	<i>kala, sar</i>

Oranskij's algorithms for the classification of Western Iranian languages applied to Pish-e Kuh Laki

Oranskij acknowledges that the relationships between branches of the Iranian languages are complex. However, he has established a number of algorithms for distinguishing between the Northwestern and Southwestern families. Essentially, he shows that certain basic lexical items exhibit consistent phonological forms defined by the family to which a

45 Contra Lazard 1992: 216.

46 Izadpanāh 1964.

given language belongs. While he admits that the selected phonological distinctions are not infallible, he backs up each algorithm with comparative data from about twenty language varieties.⁴⁷

Pish-e Kuh Laki was not covered in his work, so it is appropriate to examine it here. I will examine its genetic status using data gathered in my own research, along with those of Izadpanāh.⁴⁸ A full range of languages in the Kurdish-Luri-Farsi continuum is represented for comparison.⁴⁹ Lexical items from other language varieties are from Anonby, Oranskij, and Madadi.⁵⁰

In the four examples that follow, each instance of conformity to prototypical features of the Northwestern and Southwestern family is telling; taken together, the evidence is conclusive.

1. /z/-/d/ alternation in **Dān*- »know«.

In Northwestern languages the root »know« begins with /z/.

In Southwestern languages the root »know« begins with /d/.

Language variety	NW group trait	SW group trait
Kurdish	<i>zan-</i>	
Laki, Pish-e Kuh	<i>zōn-</i>	
Luri, Luristani		<i>dōn-</i>
Bakhtiari		<i>dūn-</i>
Luri, Southern		<i>dūn-</i>
Farsi, Modern Standard		<i>dān-</i>

2. /z/-/d/ alternation in **Dāmād* »groom«.

In Northwestern languages the root »groom« begins with /z/.

In Southwestern languages the root »groom« begins with /d/.

Language variety	NW group trait	SW group trait
Kurdish	<i>zava</i>	
Laki, Pish-e Kuh	<i>zōmā</i>	
Luri, Luristani		<i>dowmā</i>
Bakhtiari		<i>dowā, dūmā</i>
Luri, Southern		<i>dūmā</i>
Farsi, Modern Standard		<i>dāmād</i>

3. /ž/-/z/ alternation in **Zan* »woman«.

In Northwestern languages the root »woman« begins with /ž/.

In Southwestern languages the root »woman« begins with /z/.

47 Oranskij 1977: 211.

48 Anonby 2003b; Izadpanāh 1978.

49 This continuum, including constituent language labels, is discussed in detail in Anonby 2003b.

50 Anonby 2003b; Oranskij 1977: 204–7; Madadi 1996.

Language variety	NW group trait	SW group trait
Kurdish	<i>žan, žin</i>	
Laki, Pish-e Kuh	<i>žan</i>	
Luri, Luristani		<i>zīna, zan</i>
Bakhtiari		<i>zīna</i>
Luri, Southern		<i>zīna, zan</i>
Farsi, Modern Standard		<i>zan</i>

4. /j/, /ž/-/z/ alternation in *Zan- »hit« (imperfect).

In Northwestern languages the present root »hit« begins with /j/ or /ž/.

In Southwestern languages the present root »hit« begins with /z/.

Language variety	NW group trait	SW group trait
Kurdish	(unrelated root)	
Laki, Pish-e Kuh	(unrelated root)	
Luri, Luristani		<i>zan-</i>
Bakhtiari		<i>zan-</i>
Luri, Southern		<i>zan-</i>
Farsi, Modern Standard		<i>zan-</i>

In three of four cases above, Laki shows characteristics of the Northwestern group. In the fourth case, Laki uses a root which is unrelated to the prototype of either group.

Subjected to Orankij's algorithms for classification, Luri varieties as well as Farsi show characteristics of Southwestern languages, whereas Laki consistently patterns as Northwestern. I submit these examples as evidence that Pish-e Kuh Laki is indeed a Northwestern language.

Supporting cognate sets

A comparison of Pish-e Kuh Laki with Kurdish and Luri varieties shows a significant number of Laki items for which cognates are absent in the other languages. However, a number of cognate sets support the present assertion that Pish-e Kuh Laki is aligned with Kurdish (Northwestern) rather than Luri (Southwestern) (see Table 3 below). These include the following basic lexical items:⁵¹

51 I present these examples with the realization that counterexamples exist. However, these are less numerous than supporting examples and often occur when Pish-e Kuh Laki has two terms for the same item (an indicator that one of the apparent cognates may be borrowed, likely from Luri or Farsi). Further, unlike Orankij's algorithms, these examples are really limited and are intended to illustrate a position that has already been, it is hoped, satisfactorily established. Note, however, the Kurdish/Laki/Southwestern b/v/g correspondence in »hungry« and »say«; this has not been followed up but appears to be a regular correspondence between these three varieties, and could be a further genetic argument for Laki's proximity to Kurdish rather than Southwestern varieties. Kurdish examples, taken from

Table 3: Cognate sets in which Pish-e Kuh Laki is aligned with Kurdish rather than the Southwestern languages

Sample lexical item	Kurdish, Kurmanji	Laki, Pish-e Kuh	Luri, Khorramabadi	Luri, Bakhtiari	Farsi, Modern Standard
salt	<i>xwê</i>	<i>xöwa</i>	<i>nəmak</i>	<i>nemek</i>	<i>namak</i>
oil	<i>řûn</i>	<i>rîn</i>	<i>reğo</i>	<i>rūğe</i>	<i>rowğān</i>
fire ⁵²	<i>agir</i>	<i>āgör</i>	<i>taš</i>	<i>taš</i>	<i>ātaš</i>
go	<i>č^hû</i>	<i>šī, ra</i>	<i>ra</i>	<i>ra</i>	<i>raft</i>
come	<i>hat</i>	<i>hawt</i>	<i>ōma</i>	<i>ovey</i>	<i>āmad</i>
fall	<i>k^het</i>	<i>kat</i>	<i>oftā</i>	<i>vas</i>	<i>oftād</i>
say	<i>bêj</i> (impf.)	<i>vöt, göt</i>	<i>got</i>	<i>go</i>	<i>goft</i>
hungry	<i>biřč^hî</i>	<i>vörsönî, versörnî</i>	<i>gosna</i>	<i>gosna</i>	<i>gorosne</i>
here	<i>vir</i>	<i>īra</i>	<i>īčö</i>	<i>īčö</i>	<i>īnjā</i>
there	<i>wir</i>	<i>ūra</i>	<i>ūčö</i>	<i>ūčö</i>	<i>ānjā</i>

Reflections on classification and ethnicity

The evidence given in the previous section substantiates the contention that the similarity between Pish-e Kuh Laki and Luristani Luri is the product of areal contact rather than close genetic affiliation. It is likely that each variety has influenced the other, although the impact of Luristani Luri on Pish-e Kuh Laki is more pronounced today. This realization is relevant to an additional discussion, namely that of the ethnic origins of the Lurs, who have at times been considered close relations of the Kurds.⁵³ Did the ancestors of today's Lurs once speak a Northwestern language?⁵⁴ Is Laki the last Northwestern variety spoken by Lurs to succumb to the spread of the Southwestern language family which has been going on for millenia?

Bailey & Bailey 2004, are in the Kurmanji variety and are transcribed using a Latin script which reflects the phonemic Cyrillic Kurdish orthography used in Armenia, Georgia and Russia. Verbs are given as perfective roots unless an imperfective form is indicated.

52 The Southwestern varieties appear to have taken over a Turkic root for »fire« early in the development of the family.

53 Anonby 2003b contains an overview of different positions.

54 Although I am unable to provide decisive evidence at this point, similarities between Kurdish and Luri (such as the Kurdish and Laki /-al/ plural suffix which is found sporadically as far south as Southern Luri) may indicate that the Luri peoples once spoke Northwestern varieties (see Lazard 1992: 217 and Anonby 2003a: 99–100 for a discussion of this suffix).

Concerning Laki, two central questions remain. Importantly, the ethnic and linguistic connection between Pish-e Kuh Laki and Posht-e Kuh Laki remains poorly understood. Additionally, the exact position of Pish-e Kuh Laki within the Northwestern family has yet to be defined. Is it closer to the Kurmanji of Kurdistan and Kermanshahan provinces of Iran, Southern Kurdish, or to Gurani (Hawrami)? Or to something else? Such matters call for further investigation.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to address issues of ethnicity and linguistic affiliation of the peoples commonly called »Laki.« Both topics remain uncertain as concerns Posht-e Kuh Laki, but the status of Pish-e Kuh Laki has been clarified in the present study. While members of the latter group have at times been considered ethnically Kurdish or Laki, they in fact define themselves as Lurs. The genetic affiliation of their language, which has also been the object of contradictory accounts, has been located within the Northwestern family of Iranian languages. Pish-e Kuh Laki is thus more closely related to Kurdish than to the Luri languages.

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