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Pastoral Technology and Social Process in Baluchistan

Brian Spooner

University of Pennsylvania, spooner@sas.upenn.edu

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Abstract
What little anthropological research has been carried out so far in Baluchistan or in the larger Indo-Iranian borderland area between the north Indian plains and the Iranian Plateau has been little related to general South Asian concerns, and anthropologists working there have mostly not been area specialists. They have been attracted by the reputation of the tribes and the isolation of the country. Nevertheless, the work has been important and two insights in particular that it has generated have general interest for historians and anthropologists.

Disciplines
Anthropology | Human Geography | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Comments
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What little anthropological research has been carried out so far in Baluchistan or in the larger Indo-Iranian borderland area between the north Indian plains and the Iranian Plateau has been little related to general South Asian concerns, and anthropologists working there have mostly not been area specialists. They have been attracted by the reputation of the tribes and the isolation of the country. Nevertheless, the work has been important and two insights in particular that it has generated have general interest for historians and anthropologists.

Firstly, working among Brahui-speaking pastoral nomads, Warren W. Swidler [1968, 1972] noticed that the camping group was a basically unstable social grouping, and that the continual reshuffling of camp group membership was primarily a function of the traditional pastoral technology. This insight proved valid for pastoral nomads generally, and allowed a significant advance in our understanding of the formation of social groups in pastoral societies. It allowed the further insight that cultural and social identity among nomads might be expected to inhere in a more stable social grouping than the camp. In most cases, this was a larger tribal entity [Sponer 1973: 23-26].

Secondly, on the northern borders of Baluchistan, F. Barth [1964] noticed that the boundary between Baluch and Pathans had moved at the expense of the Pathans. Along the boundary many Baluch groups were known to be of Pathan origin. As an explanation, he suggested that although the Pathans were generally more aggressive and better armed, in times of upheaval when social groups disintegrated, they re-formed as Baluch for reasons that derived from structural differences between Pathan and Baluch society. Pathan social structure is "horizontal": to be a Pathan, a man must be accepted as an equal in the tribal council. Baluch structure is "vertical": each man knows his place in an asymmetrical hierarchy of relations and encapsulated groups. It is easy to lose a place in Pathan society, difficult to
join. To become a Baluch, it is necessary only to offer allegiance to a chief. Membership of the society implies membership of a linguistic community. Ethnic change and linguistic change are closely related. The use of a particular language as a lingua franca has the effect of extending the associated cultural identity.

Baluchistan is a borderland. The 650,000 square kilometres of mostly mountainous country between the Indus and the central deserts of the Iranian Plateau have constituted the borderland between Indian and Iranian cultural poles throughout the historical period. Neither has had more than partial and temporary success in controlling it. Extremes of climate and paucity of exploitable resources have made it impossible for any internal center to control the whole except with outside help, and the history of Baluchistan can only be told against the background of a variety of exogenous factors. The political development of the Kalat Khanate provides an interesting illustration. The interaction of internal and external factors in this development has been well-demonstrated by Nina B. Swidler [1969, 1972].

Baluchistan is therefore a special example of a type of geographical area where cultural identities tend to be relatively unstable, and social processes can therefore be more easily extrapolated from them. Recent work on traditional pastoralism has led to insights concerning these social processes---insights which will prove valuable in the study of modern social and political problems, both here and in other cultural borderlands.

References


