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Who are the Baluch? A Preliminary Investigation Into the Dynamics of an Ethnic Identity From Qajar Iran

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Foreign powers' intervention

16. Sir Percy Sykes' personal recollections of his service are incorporated in his A History of Persia, 11, chs 87, 89.
17. Ibid., ii, 510.
21. Experiences of this mission were recorded in personal memoirs; Lt.-Col. P. T. Etherton, In the Heart of Asia, Boston and New York 1925; F. M. Bailey, Mission to Tashkent, London 1946; and Blacker, op. cit.
22. Thus Peter Avery, Modern Iran, London 1965, 192; Sir Percy Sykes: '... every governor is a robber and cares nothing whatever for the welfare of his subjects ...', ii, 484. Also Sykes, ii, 449, 467, 475, 478, 519.
23. Niedermayer, 43.

Who are the Baluch? A preliminary investigation into the dynamics of an ethnic identity from Qajar Iran

1. The Baluch in time and space

Many of the distinctive patterns of modern Iranian life can be traced back through the Qajar period. Often it becomes difficult to follow the trail further because of a drop in the amount of social-historical information as one pushes back further. Where the trail does continue, it often supports the impression that many modern Iranian social patterns and cultural meanings were set in the eighteenth–nineteenth centuries, partly as a function of Qajar political practice and related events during the same period.

Baluch society as we know it ethnographically appears to be a product of the Qajar period. Although the Baluch arrived in what is now known as Baluchistan long before the Qajars came to power, many of the characteristic and distinctive forms of Baluch social life today can be traced to the effects of Qajar influence and, to some extent, of direct Qajar intervention. Because of the expansion of British interests northwards from India, the beginning of the Qajar period also coincides fairly closely with the beginning of European travel literature on the Baluch, which provides a much clearer window onto the area than had been available before and shows us a heterogeneous society significantly different from what the odd scattered references in earlier historical texts might lead us to expect. It is remarkable that although the Qajar period saw the formal division of Baluchistan among Iran, Afghanistan and India (much earlier than many other similar divisions of tribal societies among two or more states that have since occurred throughout the Middle East), the area remains culturally homogeneous today. That is, all Baluch – despite obvious differences in occupation and status – agree on what it means to be Baluch. In what follows I suggest reasons for this combination of social diversity and cultural homogeneity by reference to the peculiar natural conditions of Baluchistan and the political conditions of the Qajar period.

Let me state the problem in more detail. The majority of the present population in some 300,000 km² of western Pakistan, 200,000 km² of southeastern Iran and (at least until 1980) some 100,000 km² of south-
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western Afghanistan call themselves Baluch and are so called by their neighbours and fellow countrymen. (There is also a significant Baluch
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Although it would be interesting to pursue these questions with regard to any of the tribal societies of the Iranian world, the Baluch are especially interesting because of the frustrating nature of the scattered historical references to them, the great size and heterogeneity of Baluch society and
territory, the confusing evidence for the history of the Baluchi language,
and (in the context of this volume) the role of the Qajar regime in the
attitude of social and political history of Baluchistan, particularly in the attempt of
Muhammad Shah, after a period of relative neglect, to extend his government
through it. Compared to most of the other tribal or ethnic minorities
in Iran the Baluch (in Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan) are probably more
linguistically diverse, socially stratified, and numerous - they are estimated presently at four million - and constitute the majority population in

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over half a million square kilometres. Why, given their internal diversity in everything except ideology, which they anyway largely share with
tribal neighbours, do they maintain such a marked ethnic identity?

The explanation I suggest below depends on a mixture of structural and
historical components. Any one is Baluch who fits into the Baluch politi-
cal structure, which, at the local level, survives independently of the
Afghan, Iranian and Pakistani administrations. The Baluchi language is
the medium of political communication. The structure is a product of the
combination of two factors: (1) tribalism which may be glossed as the
emphasis on kinship and descent as organising principles, in the absence of
significant resources or other capital on which to base economic and
political relationships; (2) small scattered agricultural settlements, that
provided a relatively stable but local basis of power for political leaders.
Most of the major agricultural populations of the area, although they
speak of themselves in tribal terms, are in fact not tribally organised: they
are concerned not with genealogies and group boundaries but with net-
works of kin and other personal relations which they extend as far as they
can in all directions. Tribalism seems to have become the pervasive idiom of
social organisation with the arrival of Baluch, whose leading families
were able to take over some of the settlements and acquire a new basis of
power (though they lost some of them to later immigrants). Before their
arrival, both India and Iran had lost the ability to maintain governments in
the area. The identity of Baluchistan developed in the eighteenth
century as a result of the rise of a linguistic tribal minority to a status that
was maintained only by outside powers. The geography and ecology are
directly related to the settlement pattern, which places special constraints
on political development and offers particular opportunities to outside
influence. The structural factors are a function of both the settlement
pattern and the cultural history of the populations that came to the area.
The final result could not have come about if the history of Iran and India
had not led to particular types of interference and withdrawal at particu-
lar times.

This interpretation is basically political and, although it draws heavily on
the insights of two anthropologists as well as my own earlier work in
southeastern Iran, has been inspired mainly by an appreciation of the
total geo-political context of Baluch history which I have acquired only
over the last few years. But first it is necessary to introduce briefly the
graphical and historical context of the Balouch

Balouch is defined by a semi-circle of historically important cities
and agricultural areas that stretches from Bandar Abbas (the earlier
Hormuz) on the Persian Gulf, through Kirman, the delta of the Helmand
River in Sistan, Qandahar, and Sind. Within this semi-circle, whatever
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western Afghanistan call themselves Baluch and are so called by their neighbours and fellow countrymen. (There is also a significant Baluch diaspora: a further uncertain number of Baluch are scattered in small groups through eastern and northeastern Iran, western and north- ern Afghanistan, Soviet Turkmenistan, and the former territories of the Ottoman Empire in Oman, the Persian Gulf and East Africa, and in the Muscadine Empire in Sudan.) Attempts have been made, especially by Frye, to explain how they arrived there by tentative reconstruction of a historical odyssey from northwest to southeast Iran over the early centuries of Islam on the basis of a combination of philological analysis and interpretation of sparse but tantalising textual and toponymic references. Today, despite variation within Baluchistan and similarity between the Baluch and many of their neighbours, such as the Pathans (Pakhtuns), there is never any empirical confusion about who is and who is not Baluch. A Baluch is one who calls himself Baluch, and no one who is not Baluch will so call himself.

In earlier publications I have simply left at that the question of Baluch ethno-identity, reserving for later investigation the question of how this identity as we know it ethnographically has evolved out of what can be identified as the way in which Baluch society and its component parts have associated with the territory they now call Baluchistan, and how it has remained itself in the present despite the lack of any unifying institutions or other centrifugal forces. These questions have continued to occupy me, and I hope to publish a detailed investigation of them in the near future. In the meantime, although I do not pretend to have definitive answers, it seems appropriate to offer here a preliminary review of the material and pursue some of its implications, in honour of Professor Elwell-Sutton, whose work has always evoked a special interest in the meaning of Iranian ideas for Iranians.

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Baluchistan is defined by a semi-circle of historically important cities and agricultural areas that stretches from Bandar Abbas (the earlier Hormuz) on the Persian Gulf, through Kirman, the delta of the Helmand River in Sistan, Qandahar, and Sind. Within this semi-circle, whatever was not controlled on any permanent basis from the cities, at least from the seventeenth century until the middle of this century, was effectively
Baluchistan. Though the hinterland of the cities fluctuated, and the whole area has been subject to (often overlapping) claims by Iran, Delhi, and later, Afghanistan, most of it has been effectively independent and locally autonomous from at least the Mongol period down to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is extremely arid, and is suited to some extent to agriculture, but in some parts of the twentieth century. It is extremely arid, and is suited to some extent to agriculture, but in some parts

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The Baluch are a Turko-Mongol people who live in a region that extends from the Indus Valley in Pakistan to the Persian Gulf in Iran. They are known for their nomadic lifestyle and are divided into several tribes. The main tribes include the Pathans, the Derawar, and the Balochi. The Baluch are also renowned for their unique language, which is a mix of Iranian and Arabic influences. The region has a rich history, dating back to the ancient Indus civilization.

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Before the Baluch became the dominant ethnic group in the later Middle Ages the area was divided into two separate named districts: the higher, colder, northern and northwestern areas were called Darhadd (the borderland), sc. of Sistan to the north) and the lower, warmer, southern areas were Makran. Within Makran the coast was always what distinct, populated by people known as Med, perhaps continuing the tradition of Arrian's Ichthyophagi, oriented towards the sea, and dependent on fishing and trading from small ports.

Throughout Baluchistan the nature of the topography makes communication difficult and the paucity and sparseness of natural resources limit the size of settlements -- which traditionally has made it difficult for potential leaders to build up large confederacies or otherwise extend their authority beyond their immediate constituency. Typical nomadic populations of the Middle East migrate over vast distances in spring and autumn in order to be able to rotate or exploit the seasonality of the best available pastures, but in most of Baluchistan there is no such incentive to make long migrations and nomadic tribes are typically small, especially in the mountains that constitute the greatest proportion of the area, ranging from thousands (the Marri, on the eastern edge are an exception, quoted at 60,000) to a few hundred. Their territorial boundaries often appear to be defined more by topographic limits to pastures than by social or political dynamics, or by any relationship to genealogically derived social boundaries.

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Throughout Baluchistan the geographical factor places strict limits on both agricultural and pastoral potential. Given the available technologies, agriculture on any significant economic scale is limited to certain well-defined pockets. The limits to pastoralism are in terms of overall productivity. The Baluch have obviously pushed against those limits, and since at least the beginning of the last century there has been continual movement in search of more ample resources.

It is not possible to introduce Baluchistan adequately without referring to interactions and movements between populations inside and outside the area. Ethnographic and historical studies tend often to be too localised to catch the significance of exogenous influences. Given the geopolitical situation of Baluchistan as economically marginal country between the Iranian plateau and the Indus plains, it will be necessary to look to the political poles of those larger areas for influences that would explain local events, and to reconstruct the history of the relationship between local Baluch politics and economics and the larger political economy.

We must be careful to avoid biases that might be built into the available historical material. What we know about Baluchistan derives from studies that are essentially one-sided: Baluchistan has always been approached either from India or from Iran, and its history is implicitly reconstructed in terms of either one or the other of those cultural or physical constructions of reality -- never both. From the mid-first millennium onwards the area was divided into named provinces of the Persian empire. It is possible that any historical research has yet been focused on the area, and the relevant syntheses so far available derive from the pursuit of answers to questions that arise from primary interests in the civilisations to the east and west. These questions relate for example to the fall of the Indus civilisation, the administration of the Persian empires, the progress of the Islamic conquest from the Iranian plateau into northern India and the movement of tribes that appear tantalisingly in Iranian historical materials here and there before the Mongol invasions as Kuch and Baluch. The spread of Seljuk power into Khorasan seems to have led to movements of population (including the Kuch and Baluch) that resulted in the lapse of the aratine route which until that time had passed through the area from the Iranian plateau into the sucession. After the Mongol invasion of the Iranian plateau in the early thirteenth century the area seems to have begun to take on the character of Baluchistan, firstly by becoming a refuge area -- for which it is well suited geographically. But political and economic forces in both Iran (including the areas to the north of eastern Baluchistan which later became Afghanistan) and India continually affected events there, and Baluch leaders have generally looked in both
directions for potential sources of external support in their internal conflicts.
Baluchistan seems to have come into being historically as a cultural
borderland – as an indirect result of population movements and political
upheaval in neighbouring areas during the mediaeval period. It appears
that, having absorbed a succession of immigrant groups, of which the Baluch
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2. Internal dynamics
Ethnographic sources on Baluchistan are not abundant. The first profes-
sional anthropologists to visit the area were the Peshrons (mainly in what
is now the Kohlu district of the province of Baluchistan in Pakistan in
1955). They were followed in the Pakistani province by Barth (in the
same part in 1960, briefly), the Swiders (in Kalâţ, Khudzdrâ and Kachch
from 1963 to 1965), and the Pastners (Panjmar in 1969 and a Baluch
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tion perhaps of Robert Peshron, whose particularly promising work was
cut short by his tragic death in the field, each writer was pursuing a limited
number of questions only, which in most cases were not derived from a
study of the special conditions of the area.
This work does, however, include two significant insights which deserve
attention. One of these relates the composition of camping groups among
traditional nomadic pastoralists to specific details of the technology of
nomadic pastoralism.2 The other explains linguistic and cultural change in terms of
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directions for potential sources of external support in their internal conflicts.
Baluchistan seems to have come into being historically as a cultural borderland – as an indirect result of population movements and political upheaval in neighbouring areas during the mediaeval period. It appears to have absorbed a succession of immigrant groups, of which the Baluch were neither the first nor the last; and problems in the analysis of its composite society became soluble only when approached in historical perspective as a function not only of its internal social and cultural dynamics but also of the history of the more powerful and stable centres around it – Arab as well as Iranian and Indian. Most commentators have made this task more difficult either by ignoring the historical dimension or by seeing the area as an appendage of only one of the surrounding civilisations – as a backwater rather than a borderland. In what follows I attempt to show how the understanding of the interaction of internal processes and external influences in the Qajar period can form a bridge between what we know of the Kuch and Baluch and what we see in Baluchistan today. The aim behind this reconstruction is to understand better what it means today to be Baluch, and what might be the significance of this meaning for the study of similar ethnic or other identities in the lands bordering the Sea of Oman and the Persian Gulf.

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derive in any way directly from their reasons for choosing to work in Baluchistan, but Baluchistan does in fact provide particularly suitable conditions for the study of the processes that attracted their attention. The combination of their insights illuminates the political dimension of Baluch society and facilitates understanding of the historical relationship between the Baluch and their neighbours.

Warren W. Swidler studied the everyday life of pastoralists in a Brahui community near Kalat. The Brahui are a group of tribes concentrated in the south-central highlands of Pakistani Baluchistan. They are distinguished from the rest of the population of the area only by their language, Brahui, which is Dravidian and serves as the basis for arguments that relate them to pre-Indo-Iranian populations. Whether or not they are, or should be considered to be Baluch, or a separate ethnic group, has been a subject of debate among themselves and their neighbours in recent decades, but there is no doubt that from the point of view of the political history of Baluchistan, which is the focus of the present argument, they are Baluch. Among them Swidler found that the basic camping groups was unstable as a social unit. The composition of camping groups was reshuffled frequently. Each group ran a flock which was composed by the combined holdings of the heads of household in the camp. The reshuffling correlated with changes in the size of the flock.

From these data Swidler developed a model which showed the size and structure of local camping groups of nomads as a function of their pastoral technology. In order to produce efficiently, sheep (the model works best with sheep, but with modification is also useful in the analysis of social processes among nomads who depend on other species) must be herded in flocks of a particular optimum size. This size depends on a number of factors which include the behavioural characteristics of the sheep and the logistics of shepherding and vary according to topography and pasture. Animals are owned individually and each man’s holding is likely to vary independently year by year. Therefore, in order to keep the flock size close to the optimum, and also have the right number of hands for the various tasks of pastoral production, the composition of the group needs to be changed not infrequently. In order to facilitate this continual reshuffling within an overall ordered community, the nomads think of their society in terms of a larger tribal unit, large enough to include sufficient individuals (all inter-related in various ways by marriage as well as common descent) for the movement of personnel between camp groups to proceed smoothly with the minimum of conflict and insecurity.

The tribal unit – not the spatially segregated camping unit – turns out to be the structurally important grouping in most nomadic populations. Its actual size varies from one nomadic area to another, but two hundred seems to be a typical figure. Structurally it corresponds with what has come to be known as the ‘tertiary section’ in the classic expositions of
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segmentary lineage theory in the literature of anthropology. It is worth noting that tribalism generally implies an obsession with social cohesion and political organisation of more complex societies.

The principles underlying the formation of everyday camping groups are shown to be a among nomadic pastoralists in Baluchistan, therefore, are shown to be a result of certain technological requirements in a certain geographical function of certain technological requirements. Because of their instability these day-to-day-living groups do not in themselves provide a basis for the development of larger political units or of well defined political roles – these evolve from the larger tribal structure which varies considerably from one situation to another accord-
ing to the numbers of people that must be incorporated and the organis-
ing concepts that are at hand, which in the Middle East include patriarchal

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Frequent wars and plundering forays inevitably tear numbers of people loose from their territorial and social contexts: splinter groups, fleeing survivors, and families and communities divested of their property, as well as nuclei of predators, are generated. From such processes of fragmentation and mobility, a vast pool of personal results – persons and groups seeking social identity and membership in viable communities. The growth rates of such communities will then not depend so much on their natural fertility rates as on the capacity of their formal organisation to assimilate and organise such potential personnel.

The structural difference between Pashtun and Baluch society that facilitates this one-way assimilation is the difference between egalitarianism and hierarchy. In both cultures the patrilineal principle determines political rights in the tribe and rights of access to resources; honour is defended obsessively against any person with whom equality is claimed; and honour involves obligation towards dependents – including clients and guests. However, Pashtun identity depends on membership in a council of equals – 'One might say that the model for the whole system is the group of brothers'; whereas Baluch tribal organisation, though derived from the same concepts, is not based on the particular mechanism of the egalitarian council.

Though defence of honour among equals is important, it thus does not become built into the political system as a major tactical con-

consideration. A model for the Baluch political system is the relation-

ship between a father and his sons.

Though extremely brief and perhaps somewhat oversimplified, Barth's concise comparison of two neighbouring social structures is among the nearest in the literature. But it begs historical questions: why had the Baluch not assimilated all the Pashtuns long before? Why is the present border between the two identities where it is? Presumably the answer to these questions should be found in the history of the area (if sufficient historical information is available), and should provide even more valuable insights into a type of basic social process that anthropologists have tended to neglect – the formation of group identities. As an explanation of cultural change Barth's interpretation is attractive – if it is not contra-
dicted by the available historical information.

In the same article Barth also helps us with the ideological aspect of our problem. Apart from reshuffling and seasonal movement in groups, nomads are always on the move as individuals. They need to travel widely to cultivate small plots of land, to find stray animals, to keep up visiting obligations, to purchase grain and other non-pastoral necessities, to make pilgrimages and to cultivate political connections. Besides structural flexibility, therefore, the nomadic round demands security for indi-

vidual travellers. The Baluch ideology is especially evident in a code of
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segmentary lineage theory in the literature of anthropology. It is worth noting that tribalism generally implies an obsession with social cohesion based on kinship and descent – actual or presumed ties of blood – in the absence of the economic factors which are more conscious in the social and political organisation of more complex societies.

The principles underlying the formation of everyday camping groups among nomadic pastoralists in Baluchistan, therefore, are shown to be the same as those underlying: in a certain geographical function of certain technological requirements in a certain geographical area, not to have the same group of men who must be incorporated and the organizing... 

The fact that the theory of complementary opposition that mediated this situational status to some extent is now in dispute, adds to the inherent interest of the Baluch situation. Barth’s work helps us to understand how this mediation is effected in the Baluch case. Taking a cue from Morgenstern’s concerning the relationship between linguistic and cultural change in the area, Barth adds evidence that the cultural border between Baluch and Pashtuns in north-east Baluchistan (Pakistan) has moved slowly and in a permissive context... 

Barth argues that despite several factors that suggest that the border would move in the opposite direction, as relative population growth rates and affluence and aggressiveness, this Baluchi assimilation of Pashtuns could have been predicted on the basis of a comparison of the ways their socio-cultural and political relations are organised. He suggests that the socio-political structure of the Baluch is better adapted to the problems of incorporating disorganised personal – refugees – than that of the Pashtuns.

There can be no doubt about the anarchy that prevailed in the area, writes Barth, about the century or so prior to the intrusion of the British. This anarchy generated a complex history of local conquest and succession in which certain structural features of the tribal organisation of the competing groups became overwhelmingly significant.

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Frequent wars and plundering forays inevitably tear numbers of people loose from their territorial and social contexts: splinter groups, fleeing survivors, and families and communities disinvested of their property, as well as nuclei of predators, are generated. From such processes of fragmentation and mobility, a vast pool of personal results – persons and groups seeking social identity and membership in viable communities. The growth rates of such communities will then not depend so much on their natural fertility rates as on the capacity of their formal organisation to assimilate and organise such potential personnel.

The structural difference between Pashtun and Baluch society that facilitates this one-way assimilation is the difference between egalitarianism and hierarchy. In both cultures the patrilineal principle determines political rights in the tribe and rights of access to resources; honour is defended obsessively against any person with whom equality is claimed; and honour involves obligation towards dependents – including clients and guests. However, Pashtun identity depends on membership in a council of equals – ‘One might say that the model for the whole system is the group of brothers’; whereas Baluch tribal organisation, though derived from the same concepts, is not based on the particular mechanism of the egalitarian council. Though defence of honour among equals is important, it thus does not become built into the political system as a major tactical consideration. A model for the Baluch political system is the relationship between a father and his sons.

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honour, the most striking features of which safeguard the interests of the traveller and the refugee; e.g., in statements about marriage preferences and relations between the sexes, and in appeals to a genealogical idiom of social organisation. The tribal ideal is the essential underpinning of the cultural idiom that allows movement and communication throughout the otherwise heterogeneous society in the manner of a lingua franca. Its general pervasiveness and similarity to the ideologies of Pashtuns, Bedouin and many Iranian tribal groups may be explained functionally in that it provides security for interaction between individuals and groups in constant movement between autonomous polities scattered over an inhospitable terrain.

The Baluch version of this ideology is intimately bound up with the use of the Baluchi language. Barth has drawn attention to the institution of hal - “exchanges of information given in a peculiar intonation and stereotyped phrases as formal greetings whenever tribesmen meet”. Baluch identity is also a linguistic identity. It appears that a social structure may be adaptive: in a particular situation it might spread as an idiom of interaction at the expense of a different structure. A linguistic idiom might similarly spread because it is the language in which a particular adaptive type of communication has developed. The spread of the linguistic idiom might facilitate the diffusion of the associated social forms.

The conditions of agriculture in Baluchistan are very different from pastoralism. The agricultural settlements seem to have had a long and continuous history - possibly, in some cases, since before the Persian empires. Populations vary between a few hundred and a few thousand, but conform mostly to a recognisable pattern: the cultivation is done largely by serfs or helotised smallholders; in the centre is a fort - often high and imposing; in the fort there lived traditionally a chief, known variously as sardar, khán, hákom (Persian/Arabic hikón), or náwáb, who by means of various forms of taxation or outright ownership effectively commanded the greater part of most of the agricultural production and operated from the settlement as a politico-economic base, building and rebuilding networks of alliances with similar chiefs in other agricultural settlements and with the nomads who covered the expanses of mountain and desert between the settlements. With few exceptions the alliances were ephemeral because no chief was economically capable of building a power base larger than those of his rivals.

The two types of social grouping (settled-agricultural and nomadic-pastoral) are closely interrelated and economically interdependent. They are in fact not thought of as two interdependent populations but rather as parts of a social whole which is stratified into four classes, hákómčá (which I have elsewhere translated as dynastic family - they are in fact the families of hákom or náwáb), balúch (mostly, but not all, nomads, whom the Baluch refer to as balúch par excellence, whose lives enshrine the

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values by which Baluch identify themselves; they may be descendants of the Kuch and Baluch), shahrí (cultivators, probably descendants of pre-Baluch landowners and peasants) and ghílám (former black slaves; non-black slaves were able to change their status or leave the area when slavery was formally abolished). Each individual is identified by membership in a tribal group, and each tribal group belongs to one or other of these four classes. The ranking of balúch in relation to shahrí varies in practice from one place to another according to the experience of particular communities. The settlements produce grain and dates, and the nomads, milk and its products. The combination forms the staple diet of the area. The nomads come into the settlements in the late summer and autumn to help with the date harvest. The cultivators visit the nomad camps in the mountains in the spring to drink milk. The chiefs vie with each other for the allegiance of the nomads. In their forts in the agricultural settlements they are able to store grain, which they can then use to finance a militia. Such militias were used to impose a tithe and other contributions on the agricultural or pastoral populations they could control. The nomads are egalitarian, but they are encapsulated in a hierarchical system.

All social groups in Baluchistan describe themselves in tribal terms, using the word zár both for single lineages and for groups of affiliated lineages (though there are signs that many of the farming groups have not always thought of themselves in these terms). Many, though now accepted as Baluch, are of known recent alien origin - from Iran, Afghanistan, Muscat, or Sind. Each is categorised as chiefly family, nomad, cultivator, or slave and each individual has a place in a chain of allegiance or fealty relationships which crosscut the class categories. But the tribal ideology, which is implicitly associated with the balúch, pervades all communication. All these elements of the cultural idiom - language, ideology, code of honour, social structure - constitute identity in a large cultural community which does not have well defined boundaries.

The tribal ideology extends throughout Baluchistan and beyond. In contrast the individual political units are exclusive and competitive. Each family is a member of a primary social grouping which can be seen to develop from the conditions of pastoralism or agriculture. These primary groupings are strung together in chains of hierarchical relations. One of the more common words in Baluch usage is kámásh (from the Brahui) which translates ‘senior’. In any social situation someone is kámásh - whether inter pares or not - and there is never any doubt about who it is (except in open conflict). The hierarchical chains of relations integrate the various types of grouping. Each is encapsulated in an asymmetric model of the larger society. But within the groups there is often little or no interest in lineage or in extension of genealogy to provide a framework
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for social relations. In general, in Baluchi no terminological distinction is made between matrilateral and patrilateral kin; in many (though not most) groups men and women inherit land equally. The model of patrilineal genealogy is used to model links between groups and to represent political affiliation and legitimacy, and as a means of relating historical events to the present.

Within Baluchistan itself, although there is sufficient homogeneity for the development of some sense of cultural identity, there appears to be no basis for the development of a unifying political authority. In particular, the basic conditions of nomadic pastoralism throughout the area generate social flexibility and individual mobility to the extent that the existence of a general cultural identity, which facilitates easy communication between strangers over a large area, is not surprising. There are other technological and environmental factors that facilitate the diffusion of certain values and concepts over a much larger area and make for a great deal of cultural affinity between the nomads of Baluchistan and, for instance, the Pashtuns in the northeast and the Bedouin to the west and southwest. It is the combination of these features that is called Baluch, and is appealed to as Baluch. Paradoxically, these features do not distinguish the Baluch from their neighbours. What distinguishes them is the hierarchy generated by the economy of the settlements. However, each form - nomadic and settled - is dependent on the other, and the particular combination and distribution of settlement and pastoral activity is probably unique to Baluchistan.

3. The larger temporal and spatial context
While Muhammad Shah Qajar was seeking to reintegrate the Baluch into Iran, Baluchistan entered international history in an instalment of the Great Game in Asia. The failure of a British diplomatic mission to Kabul and the arrival there of a Russian envoy led to the viceroy’s decision to invade Afghanistan. In order to ensure safe passage of the army to Qandahar, it was necessary to control Baluchistan. This need led in due course to a treaty with the State of Kalat in 1854 and the annexation and incorporation of the districts along the border with Afghanistan into the province of British Baluchistan in 1879. The boundaries of India and Afghanistan were demarcated through Baluchistan for the first time in the 1870s. There have been only minor revisions since. All of the Baluch territories that fell within India acceded to Pakistan and were finally integrated administratively into Pakistan in 1955. Baluchistan became a separate province within Pakistan in 1971. In Iran since the Qajar period most of the Baluch territories are incorporated into one province with Sistan to the north. In Afghanistan Baluch territory has not been accorded independent administrative status. Historical information on the area begins to pick up at the beginning of the nineteenth century as its increasing strategic interest to the British in India leads first to the dispatch of spies, and then of open political agents, some of whom later along with bona fide travellers published accounts of their experiences. The accounts vary in detail, reliability and perception, but include a few of high quality and readability. Later, for the eastern part of the area these travellers’ accounts were complemented by the decennial British Indian (from 1871) censuses, and consolidated in the District Gazetteers (1907). There is also a parallel increase in the amount of information published in India, but it is generally of less value for the present purpose.

The stage for the Qajar-period scenario in Baluchistan appears to have been set in the middle of the seventeenth century, when a significant political change occurred. The district southwest of Quetta, traditionally known as Sarawān, ‘highland’, although located close to the centre of Baluchistan, is in fact unlike most of the rest of the area in that it constitutes a spur of the Iranian plateau reaching down towards the sea. It is therefore both the gateway into the area from the plateau to the north, and especially from Qandahar, and (when the powers are differently balanced) a gateway onto the plateau from India. Because of its altitude and the resulting severity of the winters, there is a distinct advantage to the pastoralists of the area if they can ensure access to winter grazing on the Kacchi plain, which lies over a thousand metres below and just to the east of them. It appears that a combination of circumstances, including population movements on the west and the weakening of Mughal power to the east, allowed the leader of a group of Brahui-speaking nomads from Jhalawān tooust the Mughal governor from Kalat and establish control of Sarawān and the Kacchi plain, and so provide the basis for a new political development within the area. Control of the Kacchi plain must have been so desirable for Sarawān nomads that it is surprising they had not managed to control it at earlier periods. But in the light of the arguments advanced above such control was probably not feasible in the long term unless it was facilitated by some felicitous combination of exogenous circumstances. On this particular occasion, the control of the highlands over the lowlands was later confirmed and legitimised in such a way that its effects continued to the present day. Nādir Shah of Persia avenged the Afghan invasion (1722) of his country by capturing Qandahar in 1739. He appointed the Sarawān leader Nasīr Khan as beylerbegi of Baluchistan. When Nādir Shah was assassinated in northeastern Iran in 1747, Ahmad Shah Durrānī founded the Kingdom of Afghanistan based on Qandahar. Nasīr Khan at first acknowledged his suzerainty, but in 1758 he rebelled. Ahmad Shah defeated him in battle but could not take Kalat, and a treaty was negotiated. 14 For a short period the Khans of Kalat were able to exploit this situation and extend their hegemony over most of what is now Pakistani Baluchi.
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Historically, Baluchistan has been a no-man’s land of over half a million square kilometres between the political poles of Afghanistan, Iran and India. Although diverse in terms of land forms and temperature, it is uniformly arid and low in productivity. As a result of these natural conditions settlement throughout the area is sparse and highly localised, and the vast distances between settlements are exploited by small groups of pastoral nomads. The Baluch became the dominant linguistic group in the area in the late Middle Ages, and their leaders took over some of the major agricultural settlements. Although they lost some of them again to later immigrant groups, the Baluch identity had by then become fixed and the later immigrants were subsumed into it. But no settlement provided a sufficient economic base for the development of a larger political centre. Neither did the conditions of nomadic pastoralism. From the combination of these two, however, together with the linguistic idiom of Baluchi as a lingua franca, a unique political structure evolved, based on the exchange of agricultural and pastoral products and the ability of the chiefs to store and redistribute and provide relatively stable leadership. This structure was particularly suited to the incorporation of refugees, individuals and groups who had lost their economic and political place in another society, and for this reason on the northeast edge of Baluchistan many Pathans became Baluch as a result of the insecurity that was endemic in the area. This did not happen to such an extent on other sides of Baluchistan because of the influence of more powerful polities such as Sind, Qandahar and Iran. It could happen on the northeastern edge only between the development of the Baluch structure and the establishment of the Pax Britannica, a period that is not likely to have lasted longer than 300 years.

The Baluch structure reached its final form in the eighteenth century. The decline of the Mughals had left a power vacuum in the area. In 1666–7 as part of the local manoeuvring to fill it, a group of Brahu tribesmen were able to expel their representatives from Kalät and establish themselves. In the 1740s, Nâdîr Shah’s treatment of the Brahu reinforced the idea of the political identity of the area. (It is important to note that this identity was always represented as Baluch, not Brahu.) The intervention of Muhammad Shah from the west and the British from the east towards the middle of the nineteenth century set the seal on the hierarchical model of society that had developed as a function of the interaction of the nomads and the settled communities.

Although there had been periodic intrusion and interference in Baluchistan throughout the medieval period – the most recent (before Nâdîr Shah) had been from the Qizilbash under the Safavids in the early seventeenth century – there appears to have been no large-scale investment by foreign powers or establishment of long-term administration, or incorporation of the area into any larger political unit, from before the Seljuq period until the British began to interfere openly towards the middle of the nineteenth century. The intervention initiated by Nâdîr Shah in the 1740s may have been unique in the Islamic period: it galvanised the balance of power in the area, giving the newly risen Brahu Khans

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stan and even into parts of what now lies on the Iranian side of the border. But the chiefs of the small agricultural settlements scattered throughout the area, and the nomadic groups, continually rebelled against any imposition of taxes or other feudal requirements, and even marriage alliances were not reliable for long. One chief was played off against another and Qandahar and Kalät competed for allegiance. Qandahar’s record in this struggle provided the historical basis for Afghanistan’s recent proposal to include Baluchistan in a new state of Pakistan. On the Iranian side there was little interference until Muhammad Shah Qajar (1834–48) decided to reconquer the area and established a garrison at Bampur in the major agricultural area on the Persian side of the border, from which his officers made campaigns eastwards. This achieved little of any lasting significance, except insofar as they reasserted claims which affected the delineation of the border with the British in 1871, and familiarised the Baluch with Iranian administrative and military ways. This familiarity both increased their distrust of outsiders and reinforced their hierarchical tendencies. From then on, the Baluch called all Persians ‘qajar’ Qajar, but (once the Qajars had seen fit to award a title here and there in return for loyalty) usurped the Qajar term hâkin (‘governor’, pronounced hâkon) as a general title for the occupants of their forts.

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4. Historical and geographical significance

These structural and historical investigations into Baluch identity depend on an assessment of the territory of Baluchistan as a marginal area. That is, at a given level of technology Baluchistan supports fewer people per unit area in poorer circumstances than is the case in neighbouring areas where the Baluch identity has not spread. It is generally true of such marginal areas that their history is a function of the history of neighbouring areas which are more fertile and more densely settled; that political control of them is difficult except with the degree of force that only an external power can afford; but that unless the area is important for communications, mineral deposits or other strategic considerations, the investment required for an external power to achieve or maintain political control, or even provide significant support for a local leader, is not justified. Marginal areas are continually exposed to the indirect effects of exogenous factors which derive from processes of population movement, economic growth and decline, and cultural diffusion. These effects can lead to particularly interesting situations for study, because the social units are smaller and the cultural options are more obvious and easier to follow ethnographically (though perhaps not historically!) than in more fertile areas.

Historically, Baluchistan has been a no-man's land of over half a million square kilometres between the political poles of Afghanistan, Iran and India. Although diverse in terms of land forms and temperature,
of Kalât the ability to establish themselves. Later their position was stabilised and maintained by the British. The later status of the Khans of Kalât (which could not have evolved without outside non-Baluch intervention) was an important factor in the development of the idea that the Baluch were one people, despite the fact that they spoke Brahui and recruited their administration from among Persian-speaking ‘Dehward’ peasants. The idea of unity took on new significance as a result of the nationalist policies of the governments of Iran and Pakistan since the Second World War.

To arrive at this interpretation of Baluch identity it was necessary to begin by broadening the geographical and historical context of the problem. The historical boundaries of the study were extended back to the integration of the area into the early Persian empires, and the geographical boundaries are drawn to include Indian, Iranian, Afghan and Mvzooid influences. Depending on how the universe of the study is defined, the range of obviously comparable cases in the historical and ethnographic literature varies. Baluchistan has been introduced as a refuge area. This type of area has been referred to elsewhere – Morocco – as ‘lands of dissidence’ to denote the continual problems caused to more fertile areas by its instability. Ibn Khaldun was concerned to integrate such areas into the historiography of mediaeval Islam and emphasise the ‘group feeling’ or tribalism of their populations. Owen Latimore has done the same for Central Asia in relation to China. Turner’s treatment of the frontier in relation to modern American history belongs to the same pattern. But these conceptualisations address the problems of marginal lands only as they relate to the main currents of history – not in relation to the marginal areas themselves (though it is worth noting that Barth did squarely confront the problem from the point of view of the marginal lands themselves when he used the term ‘shatter zone’ to describe a similar situation among Kurds in the hills and mountains between the Iranian plateau and the Iraqi plains.17

In Baluchistan and neighbouring territories on all sides Islam and tribal custom – both from the west – have provided the conscious rationale for behaviour. The entire Gulf area was similar to Baluchistan in that it was dotted with small polities (based on various combinations of trade, piracy, pearl fishing and agriculture) run by chiefs (khans, shyaks, amirs), with mainly non-tribal populations of traders, helots, serfs or slaves, relating to a hinterland of nomadic pastoralists. The political structure was similar, though the identity was different and never became consciously unified. Baluchistan differed from the rest of the Persian Gulf/Sea of Oman area primarily in that it was oriented away from the water and developed a focus for a unified identity.

The name Baluch is of unknown etymology. As a tribal appellation it can be traced back into the pre-Islamic period, but the society to which it

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NOTES AND REFERENCES


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BRIAN SPOONER

now applies appears to have formed mainly in the eighteenth century as a function of a number of historical factors in at least two different and relatively unrelated political histories. Seen in this perspective it provides interesting comparative material for the study of social and historical processes of broader significance.

In the last twenty years of course Baluchistan has undergone another significant change – again as a result of exogenous factors, this time in Tehran, Kabul, Islamabad, and perhaps most especially the Persian Gulf. The changing economic and political context has made the individual potentiality independent of the tribal group and undermined the status of the chiefs. Though social change is not proceeding uniformly throughout the area, in many places people no longer know inherently where they stand socially and politically in relation to each other. As the economic opportunities and constraints have changed, so have the political relations. It is too soon to tell whether Baluch identity has built up enough momentum over the last two hundred years to survive this change or whether we are witnessing its disintegration. Perhaps the historical boundaries of the Baluch experience – as it has been described ethnographically – will appear in time to be comparable to its geographical boundaries: a function of geopolitical conditions that formed not long before the rise of the Qajars, were maintained and intensified by them, and faded away with other last traces of that pre-modern era in the second half of the twentieth century. This Baluch identity will then have been encapsulated historically in a two- or three-century period. If so, the answer to the question posed in the title of this article must be given in historical and geographical, rather than cultural terms. It will be interesting to look at some other tribal identities in the Iranian world in a similar light.
Who are the Baluch?

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