

[PASTORALISTS AND NOMADS]
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NOMADISM IN BALUCHISTAN

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Baluchistan as the Baluch define it includes most of West Pakistan west of the Indus, the southwest corner of Afghanistan, and the southeastern province of Persia, and Baluch minorities are also to be found scattered far to the north of this area as far as Soviet Turkmenistan. However, this vast area has never constituted any sort of unit, except in a vague cultural and linguistic sense.

It is not simple to define the Baluch. The Baluchi language, which is closely related to Pahlavi, provides a *lingua franca*, which most (but not all) Baluch speak as their mother tongue. Some Baluch are peasants, some are nomads, some depend almost equally on agriculture and pastoralism. Many groups appear to have entered the region and become Baluch as recently as 200–250 years ago, and some actually claim very feasible alien origins, though nobody would now dispute their “Baluchness”. There is no unequivocal evidence of Baluch in Baluchistan from earlier than the eighteenth century, though linguistic and historical evidence is generally thought to suggest their arrival in the area around 1100 A.D.¹ The origin and etymology of the word *Baluch* are unknown. There are many references to people called Baluch elsewhere in Iran before the eighteenth century. It is likely that some of these are the ancestors of some of the present Baluch, but evidence is lacking. In the usage of the word *Baluch* by the Baluch now two different (though no doubt historically closely related) meanings are distinguishable which for convenience may be separated and written “Baluch” and “baluch”. All who are born into the traditional society are Baluch, in distinction from people from other areas and cultures. All Baluch refer to the tent-dwelling nomadic pastoralists of the region as baluch, and used thus it has connotations of “par excellence”. It is the baluch who embody and maintain in their way of life the values of hospitality and standards of intimacy with the environment which are generally accepted as ideal in Baluch society. In the traditional situation it was the baluch who formed the fighting force of the chiefs. Many of them owned slaves, many of which originated

¹ Cf. e.g. R.N. Frye in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, article “Balucistan”.

from the East African slave trade and Oman, while others in the north were Persians captured in raids. Now a man is a Baluch if he calls himself a Baluch, for only the Baluch are proud of being Baluch and such identities are not so absolute as is often made to appear in the literature. Being a Baluch entails living up to a certain ideology, which includes a code of honor and certain patterns of ideal behavior. It also includes strong attachment to a territory within Baluchistan. The Baluch are proud of their poetry—austere rhyming verses, ranging in style and context from epic history and battle scenes to love ballads. A poem which, in one version or another, is universally known and well characterises their feelings toward their country, begins:

Koh ant baluchani kalat ambaresh berahen gar ant . . .

“The Baluch forts are their mountains—their storehouses are the pathless rock faces—the peaks are better than an army for them—the lofty heights are their friends—their refreshment is from flowing springs—the leaf of the dwarf palm their cup—the thorny brush their bed—the hard ground their pillow . . .”

For over a thousand km. Baluchistan spans the mountains which mark the southern edge of the Iranian Plateau, and includes stretches of the plateau on one side and the coastal plain of the Gulf of Oman on the other. But it is by no means physically homogeneous. The greater part of it is by any standards difficult country to subsist in, and ecological considerations must therefore play a major part in any analytical description of Baluch life.

However, although it is apparently so easy to be a Baluch, status within the society is assigned according to a comprehensive and intricate model. This model is in the idiom of tribal organization and genealogy. A man is born into the patronymic group of his father. All such groups bear names, which are treated as tribal names. In some cases these named groups are actual descent groups. In others they are demonstrably categories (e.g., the Med on the coast, who probably represent the ancient Ichthyophagi; and Gholam, or slave). These groups relate to each other hierarchically on the basis of two discrete criteria: *a*) allegiance relationships with high status leaders, known variously as *sardar* or *hakom*, and *b*) genealogy—which is important primarily in this function as an historical arbiter of the relationship between groups and the legitimacy of the leaders and their “dynastic” families rather than the pedigree of ordinary men. In the pre-modern situation the lowest common denominators of Baluch society were the minimal patronymic groups, which might constitute the population of a settlement or part of a settlement, or the nomadic population of a small territory or a group within it. Very seldom did these display any genealogical depth. The highest common factors of the society were the *hakom*-

type leaders with their followers.² The whole was articulated through an encapsulation process³ providing a non-symmetrical model of chains of unequal encapsulated groups. However, neither the genealogies, nor the allegiance relationships—nor for that matter the occupational criteria of nomad and peasant—were as absolute as they may appear. There was considerable mobility, especially over a span of generations—except for the negroid slaves who were restricted by their color.⁴

There is little published professional ethnographic information on the Baluch⁵ (though more is expected),⁶ and not sufficient to allow an ethnographic survey on the basis of the literature. I am, therefore, devoting the remainder of this chapter to a sketch of a particular group of Baluch nomads (with whom I am personally familiar)⁷ who in many aspects of their ecological adaptation are characteristic Baluch nomads. For, although nomadism is not an absolute category and an analytical description of one nomadic group is unlikely to hold for another even within the same cultural context, nevertheless, many of the features which appear below occur in various combinations throughout the mountainous tracts of Baluchistan both in Persia and West Pakistan and one group may without distortion be taken as typical of a type of nomadism which is widespread and may be unique to the area. I begin with a brief account of the environmental diversity of Baluchistan within Persia—into which patchwork the group is encapsulated, both geographically and politically. In such an account it is necessary also to pay some attention to agriculture, since all Baluch nomads either practise some cultivation or depend upon close economic relations with peasants.

² For more details of the working of this native model of Baluch society cf. Spooner, Brian, "Politics, Kinship and Ecology in Southeast Persia", in: *Ethnology* VIII/2, 1969, pp. 139-151.

³ Cf. Barth, F., "Ethnic Processes on the Pathan-Baluch Boundary", in: *Indo-Iranica* ed. G. Redard, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1964.

⁴ On status and condition of slaves, cf. Spooner, *op.cit.*

⁵ Apart from *opera citata*, only Pehrson, Robert N., *The Social Organisation of the Marri Baluch*, New York, 1966, and Barth, F., "Competition and Symbiosis in North East Baluchistan", in: *Folk* 6, 1, 1964, are significant.

⁶ Dissertations based on fieldwork in different parts of Baluchistan have recently been completed by Stephen Pastner, Carroll McC. Pastner (Brandeis Univ.), P. C. Salzman (Univ. of Chicago), Nina B. Swidler and Warren W. Swidler (Columbia Univ.).

⁷ Between 1963 and 1967 I spent some fourteen months in Persian Baluchistan and most of the remainder of the time in Tehran in touch with informants. I take this opportunity of expressing my gratitude to St. Antony's College, Oxford, the British Academy, and the British Institute of Persian Studies for the financial and other assistance which made this possible.

Baluchistan within the borders of Persia amounts to just under 175,000 square kilometres. No reliable figures are available, but rainfall probably nowhere within it approaches an annual average of ten inches. However, as is common in arid regions, more important than the scarcity of precipitation is its irregularity and unreliability. The region lies on the borders of the influence of the Mediterranean and the monsoon climatic regimes. It may therefore rain at any time of the year, it may rain several times in one year, or it may not rain for several years in succession. Temperatures range from below freezing during the short winter in the north to the 120's in the long summer further south, with diurnal ranges of up to 50 degrees. In addition to this general climatic situation, the topography causes sharp environmental segregation of communities. The northern part of the region—the Sarhadd (literally "border country") is a plateau averaging 5,000 feet above sea level and dominated by the twin peaks of a dormant volcano (Kuh-i Taftan) over 13,000 feet. Pasture can be lush in a good year, but surface water is scarce, and there are no permanent streams. Sheep and goat pastoralism is the dominant livelihood, though a certain amount of agriculture is now being developed with the aid of deep wells. South-east of the Sarhadd the plateau falls away to below 3,000 feet in the river valleys of Saravan, which support in almost equal measure agriculture, date palms and sheep and goats. West of Saravan lies the vast Jaz Murian depression, some 400 kilometres from east to west, which contains much rich grain country, a sand sea, wide expanses of tree pasture, and some salt desert. The greater part of it is roamed by camel nomads, who traditionally breed and train the fastest and best riding camels in Persia. For these animals, a hundred kilometres is a comfortable night's journey, and they are capable of 40 kilometres per hour for spurts of an hour or so. The water table is shallow throughout most of the depression, and the camels are watered from wells by hand-operated counter-poised water lifts, around some of which small plots may be sown with grain or vegetables.

South of Saravan and the Jaz Murian and stretching throughout the region from the west into Pakistan lies the Makran range of mountains, which has played the historical role of cutting off the coast from the interior. Jeeps can still cross it only along the courses of two (almost) perennial rivers, and the only efficient means of communication within it is by foot. Sharp jagged rocks tear the walker's clothes, and without a guide the traveler risks death from thirst and exposure, though with the guidance of a local Baluch, water, shelter and sustenance can always be found. Here the density of the population is probably less than the estimated average for the area of just over two per km², and it is divided

roughly equally between small agricultural settlements of up to a thousand inhabitants couched in the bend of one of the larger torrent beds or *wadis*, and goat nomads. South of the Makran range there is a narrow coastal plain. Apart from small communities of fishermen (Med) who live practically on the beach itself, and like most fishermen in the Middle East are a low class, the Baluch of the coastal plain have no interest in the sea and are closely linked socially and politically with their neighbours to the north. They mostly rely on pastoralism and agriculture to an almost equal degree. In places the soil is extremely rich and yields amazing crops when the rivers bring down floods from the mountains to irrigate it. However, throughout the coastal plain supplies of fresh water for drinking and irrigation are uncertain and inadequate because of irregular rainfall and the depth of the water table.

Baluchistan within West Pakistan is similarly sharply broken up into environmentally distinct regions, while Baluchistan within Afghanistan is divided between two extremes: vast desert and semi-desert plains and the ribbon cultivation along either side of the Helmand River which flows through them.

The segregating effect of the environment is reflected in variation in the basic means of subsistence. Besides the varying combinations of agriculture and pastoralism, the nomads' herds include varying numbers of camels, sheep, goats, cattle and even water buffalo, with the addition of donkeys for transport, and in some parts horses for prestige riding. The staple crops of the peasants vary between wheat, barley, millet, sorghum, rice, beans and dates. Direct rainfall is of negligible value, except for its immediate effect on the quality of pasturage. But one of the most important sources of water for irrigation is the run-off and wadi flooding which is the *immediate result* of rainfall. With little or no human assistance the rainfall of a whole catchment basin is gathered by the nature of the terrain itself and directed on to prepared fields, along with its invaluable sediment.

In Salah Koh in the Makran range—a typical area for the mountain nomads of the verses quoted above—in the summer of 1964, there were 72 tents in an area of some 400 square miles. They were distributed between twelve encampments of two to nine tents each. The camps move irregularly and their movements are determined by a combination of factors of rainfall and its effects on the environment (e.g., a flash flood often alters the configuration and depth of a torrent bed and therefore also the subsequent availability of surface water), and rights to agricultural land. The camp must be near enough to a source of surface water for the women to be able to keep it supplied with water by com-

muting with goatskins. Very often the camp will be situated on a terrace some 50 to 100 feet above a torrent bed which at that stretch of its course, and at that particular time, because of the shallowness of the gravel left over the bedrock by the last flood, happens to carry running water. In the summer, because of the heat the camp needs more water, which means more work for the women if the distance is the same. Similarly, the fewer women a camp can deploy, the nearer it must keep to water, and (potentially to its detriment) the more restricted it is in its movements. The requirements of the flocks also vary with the season. The maximum possible distance between pasturage and the camp is determined primarily by milking requirements. During the early spring when the milk is most plentiful, the pasturage must be close enough to allow the flocks to return to camp to be milked twice in twenty-four hours, while in the late summer when the pasture is at its driest and scantiest they may stay away from the camp for weeks at a time. This coincides with the date harvest, when many camps break up completely, and leaving the flocks in the care of a minimum number of shepherds, move off to the major date growing areas.

The watering requirements of the flocks of course also have to be met, and these vary with the temperature of the season and the lushness of the vegetation, and affect the milk yield. Seasonal variation consists of little more than the short transitional period between the long hot summer and the short crisp winter. May is often the hottest month (before the humid influence of the monsoon tempers the heat), December the coldest. When rain comes, whatever the season, the days are fresh and green for a while. When rainfall coincides with the end of the winter, it produces a lush spring of up to two months, rich with milk. When it coincides with the tailing off of summer the effect can be like a second spring. In a really good year the goats may reproduce twice.

Rain at any time is regarded as a gift of Divine Mercy, valuable for flocks and crops alike, except at the time of the date harvest, when prolonged rain or even heavy cloud can ruin the entire crop. The failure of the date crop is a disaster, and is a perennial risk because of the influence of the monsoon.

The other factor which influences the nomads' movement is their rights in small plots of agriculture scattered throughout their territory. Agriculture within the mountains is only possible where a flow of water from a spring or a torrent can be led onto a pocket of cultivable soil. In natural conditions it is very rare that this is possible. However, the Baluch have developed a method of damming narrow torrents and sections of wider river beds whereby a sufficient quantity of rich alluvium is accumulated

in a position where it can be irrigated. In this they appear to be heirs to earlier and more agriculturally oriented inhabitants of the region, who may have been satellites of the Indus valley civilization.⁸ However, ingenious and hard won though these plots are, very few are large enough to take as much as 100 kg. of seed grain, and the most common size accommodates a dozen date palms, a few pomegranate and peach or apricot trees, a bed of onions and peppers, and perhaps also room to sow 20 kg. of wheat. Throughout the mountains, wherever a reasonably reliable trickle of water is accessible, it is fully exploited. Many of these dams (which are called *band*) are of quite recent construction, or renovation. Every few days each one must be visited by one of the men who has an interest in it, so that its tiny crop may be tended and its meagre trickle of water redirected from one irrigation segment to another. Despite the small size of each plot in most cases at least ten persons will have active shares in it. Owing to the rules of inheritance, which give equal shares to sons and daughters (a local modification of the Shari'a), and the unstable nature of each individual camp, men from several camps have shares in each *band*. The land and water is never divided, and a man may not sell his share without the explicit permission of his co-owners.

A traditional traveler's right allows any passerby to sate his hunger on any growing crops, and the Baluch eat fruit and vegetables from the moment they are recognizable as such till they rot. On plots of this size often little remains to harvest. Further, it is tacitly understood that an absent shareholder forfeits his share of the harvest.

Any man, therefore, who wishes to maintain his interest in the produce of a *band* in which he has inherited a share must keep a balance between the distance of his camp from the *band* and the manpower of his camp, so that he will always be in the position to make frequent visits.

From the point of view of economics, these *bands* are obviously only a marginal factor in determining the viability of each nomadic family, or in fact of the community as a whole. The question therefore arises: what is the point of them? and why is so much time and energy expended on them? A possible answer to these questions lies in the changes which are now affecting all aspects of Baluch life. In these mountains bad years are not infrequent, and the nomad requires an alternative source of income if he is to avoid periods of starvation. There seems little doubt that his condition was relatively better before the rapid development of Iran during the last

⁸ Cf. R.L. Raikes, "The Ancient Gabar Bands of Baluchistan", in: *East and West*, ISMEO, New Series, XV, 1-2, pp. 26-35, Rome, 1965.

fifteen years. The people of Salah Koh are baluch. Formerly, when there was no food in the mountains they could look to the political organization outside the mountains to tide them over. They were the best fighters, the best riders, and the most enduring, and they were always in demand. Raiding was a supplementary subsistence activity. Now the situation is reversed. Not only can they not supplement their subsistence by raiding or service to a *hakom*, but the relief from the central government which reaches the peasants in the plains during bad times does not penetrate the mountains. The baluch are too isolated. Also, because modern development programs always favor agriculture rather than herding, the total system of values is changing, and the baluch are becoming insulated from their neighbors even within Baluchistan. It is in this context that their present interest in agriculture should be seen. Forced to rely solely on their environment, which is so marginal for subsistence, even a small agricultural crop is worth a large expenditure of energy, but could not be adequate for settlement.

The *bands* are also the only fixed points in the nomads' environment—or relatively fixed. For once constructed, only an unusually violent flood will damage them beyond repair. Besides the sources of surface water, and variations in pasturage, the remaining most significant points in the relationship between the nomad and his territory are the sites of individual exploitable plants, each of which are for the nomads equivalent to items of furniture, but these do move, more or less frequently and irregularly, according to natural factors beyond the nomads' control. Many of these wild plants which are hardy enough to withstand the natural conditions play an important ancillary role in the nomads' diet and provide raw materials for their material culture. Perhaps the most important of these is the dwarf palm, which grows in the torrent beds in profusion. The white heart (from which the tuft of fronds springs) provides nourishment when all else fails, and the leaves are the basic raw material from which are made rope, shoes, mats, tents, spoons, and even the water pipes in which they smoke their green tobacco.

The nomads' intimacy with their natural environment is equalled only by their intimacy with their animals. By far the most important animal for the nomads of Salah Koh is the goat, but they also keep a few donkeys, and occasionally camels especially bred for the mountains, for transport purposes, and cows. A common Baluchi saying epitomizes well the habits and requirements of these last three as well as giving good advice to the traveler: *har-ka guka dit apa dit, har-ka hara dit halka dit, har-ka oshtera dit gar abit*, which means "If you see a cow you have found water, if you see a donkey you have found a camp, if you see a camel you are lost". Only

goats (sometimes with small admixture of sheep) are herded. Other domestic animals are allowed to roam and find their own grazing. But cows will never stray far from water, and donkeys are afraid to stray far from the camp. On the other hand camels wander far and wide and may often be seen either singly or in small groups in the most isolated places. This herding policy is forced on the nomads by the environment and considerations of manpower. All available hands are occupied with the goats—the most important animal for their subsistence and the most vulnerable. Cows are a means of utilising resources which would anyway not be sufficient for the goats, and increasing overall production. They are never very numerous, and occasionally a small boy is left to watch over them. The donkeys by staying near the camp look after their own interests. Camels wandering alone occasionally do fall prey to leopards or wolves.

The degree of intimacy of the relationship between a man and his animals was first brought home to me when a man I was traveling with, on noticing two faint prints in the gravel of a torrent bed some four hours march from his own camp, proclaimed them to belong to one of his own cows. He immediately turned off in search of the stray while we continued our journey. Several hours later he arrived at our camp driving his animal. Nobody thought the incident worth remarking on. I was later to understand—as is generally the case with pastoralists—that not only could the average baluch learn everything he needed to know about the larger animals from a set of good prints, in the case of camels he could identify lineal descendants, and he could recognise any of his own sheep or goats by sight. He uses no brands or any other form of marking and he would never count his animals for fear, among other things, of the Evil Eye.

The Baluch are Muslims of the Hanafi rite, and many of the tribes, including the baluch of Salah Koh, claim in their epic poetry and genealogical pedigree to be descended from the paternal uncle of the Prophet. According to these poems, after playing a heroic part on the losing side at the battle of Kerbala they migrated across Syria, Iraq and Persia, and finally settled in what is now Baluchistan. Unfortunately, the historical details in the poems are meagre, and the great majority of all non-Arab nomadic pastoralists in the Islamic world also claim an Arab genealogy. For these and similar reasons scholars have disbelieved their claims. It is indeed hard to believe that such a migration could have occurred at that time without leaving behind it some more reliable historical evidence. And why should Arabs, famous for their pride in their own language, poetry and their very identity, allow themselves to be so completely assimilated to another obscure linguistic and cul-

tural tradition, particularly since they have still not lost their pride in their (supposed) origins?

However, legends of this nature are unlikely to be pure invention. On the basis of general ethnographic experience a very feasible explanation would be that at some time during the history of the region a small wandering element, for whom this claim was substantially true, was in fact assimilated. Because it was small (and it could have been as small as a single extended family of refugees) it was culturally and linguistically swamped, but the genealogical claim which it brought with it was so attractive to genealogically minded Muslims, that instead of becoming lost with many of the less significant cultural traits which the refugees brought with them, it was gradually merged in the general cultural tradition, and through intermarriage became a feasible (and not entirely untrue) claim for a majority of the Baluch.

There can be no doubt that the Baluch society of south-east Persia is highly composite in both a demographic and a cultural sense. Much of the dialect variation of the Baluchi language should also be seen in this context. In one tribe, Jadgeal, which claims to have immigrated from Sind about ten generations ago, a *patois* of Sindi is still used within the tribe, though they speak Baluchi with strangers. They are nevertheless generally considered throughout the society to be Baluch. Together with the ecological variation throughout the region which we have already noted goes a variation in the level of technology in irrigation which can only be explained on the basis of historical differences. High in the scale of Baluch cultural values is a code of honor which is particularly important to the pastoralists, and which is essentially identical to that of the Bedouin in Arabia and North Africa. This is particularly notable in the treatment of guests, travelers and refugees, i.e. of all "strangers to the camp". The provisions of this code allow both individuals and whole communities of immigrant strangers to be encapsulated within the standard social and political structure of the society within very few generations.

A brief look at the relationships between the ecologically heterogeneous groups and between the culture as a whole and the neighboring regions of the Iranian Plateau will complete this picture of the compositeness of Baluch society. There is an important economic base to the relationship between nomads and peasants: the peasants need clarified butter, and the nomads need dates. Consequently, the nomads of Salah Koh leave their mountains regularly every year for the date harvest (*hamen*), leaving behind only a few shepherds, and spend the season in one or another of the major date growing centers. The date harvest starts in July, reaches a peak in

August, and trails off in September. After grain for bread, and the milk from their flocks, the date is the most important staple of the Baluch diet. Its great advantage is that it may be stored almost indefinitely, and compared for instance with grain, it has a high proportion of food value to size and weight. Tales are told of Baluch under siege in the mountains for long periods subsisting on one date per man per day. However, the date is one of the things which was obviously cultivated in Baluchistan before the arrival of the Baluch. The main centers of its cultivation now are (who most likely represent the pre-Baluch inhabitants of the country, now assimilated) among peasants, and it is a food which is never served to guests. In a culture dominated by the values of nomadic pastoralists it is dietetically important but culturally despised. Though it will grow wild from seed almost anywhere in the region, to produce good fruit it must be cultivated from suckers and artificially fertilized, and precautions must be taken to prevent loss of fruit from the tree—both from the weather, and in good years from sheer weight—before *hamen*. For a cultivated crop, therefore, it requires relatively little attention, but is nevertheless more suited for cultivation by the peasants than the nomads. The peasants however easily produce a large surplus, and require extra labor to harvest the crop. So the date harvest becomes the major occasion for mass intercourse between peasants and nomads. In some cases both owe allegiance to the same *hakom*. In others individual families have reciprocal economic relationships, whereby the peasants will visit the nomads to enjoy fresh milk in the spring. Some nomads have shares in peasant date palms, others work as pickers for a share of the crop. The poorest are protected by the right to gather windfalls.

Most nomadic groups are related to peasants politically through allegiance to the same chief. Now that a Pax Iranica is enforced throughout the region by the central government, this relationship is expressed mainly through the mediation of disputes which are not serious enough to involve the Ministry of Justice. But perhaps the strongest homogenizing force in the region today is the use which both the peasants and the nomads make of a number of religious men (*maulawi*) and mystics (*darwish*). As the local representatives of Islam, some of these have repute throughout the region and are sought out for their *baraka* which can be applied in religious pronouncements, mystical intercession and the curing of sickness, and for settling disputes.

To their Persian-speaking neighbors in the cities and villages of the plateau to the north and west the word *Baluch* carries with it no connotation of prestige. The Persian peasant thinks of all the Baluch as wild

nomads inhabiting an impossible desert country, and remembers the days, not so very long ago, when he lived in fear of their raids. Such a situation is an aspect of the traditional ideological opposition between peasant and nomad on the Iranian Plateau. During the last century the peasant was oppressed by the landlords and the cities, and lived in fear of the nomads. Now, as a result of Land Reform and the process of modernization the situation is reversed. The Baluch and especially the baluch and other nomads in similar situations are not so much neglected in the modern race to westernize as upstaged. They have to make a much greater ideological transition, and they have to do it in marginal areas which are much slower to respond to modern programs of development. From the point of view of communications Baluchistan is a *cul de sac*. From the point of view of agriculture and development most of it (with a few signal exceptions) is desert. Demographically, it has for centuries been an area of political vacuum where wandering groups which had been defeated in battle, outlawed or dispossessed in the fertile country to the north, east and west, took refuge and eked a living licitly or illicitly. The name *Baluch* is just another element of the resulting composite society. We may take it as typical. Its origin is unknown. It is found in vernacular use by peasants in other parts of Iran, meaning simply: tent dwelling shepherd.