

## **Report From the Field**

### **Producing Tribal Balochistan: Sovereignty and Rule in a Colonial Frontier State**

By Hafeez Jamali. University of Texas, Austin

A key question in recent historiography of South Asia has been the production of people and production of space-time through the apparatuses of colonial rule and their persistence in the post-colonial period of nationalist rule (Chatterjee 2006; Goswami 2004). However, most of these studies have focused on ‘regulation’ or ‘settled’ districts of India where British control was relatively uniform and the administrative machinery sufficiently well-oiled to introduce projects of ‘improvement’. On the one hand, where the British did encounter adivasi or indigenous peoples of India as in Jharkhand, their presence or activities did not impinge on strategic imperial interests and the problem of their regulation was subsumed within the broader question of district management. On the other hand, in the frontier territories of Balochistan and the Tribal Areas of North West Frontier Province, colonial authorities had to operate in an environment over which they had less than full control. Moreover, in these territories, at the edge of the empire, the question of protecting imperial interests from the unhealthy influence of rival European powers such as Russia and France and the defense of British India haunted the imperial self much more. Thus, colonial authorities were faced with the problem of securing the attachment to their cause of reluctant tribesmen who had historically shown only nominal allegiance to any central authority and defied it openly whenever the opportunity was offered. My archival research in the British library suggests that in the case of colonial Balochistan (or Kalat Khanate), a frontier state, the exercise of rule was based on a mix of relations of force (sovereignty) and methods of rule (consent).

The method of indirect rule inaugurated by Robert Sandeman, Agent to the Governor General and first Chief Commissioner of Balochistan, is understood both by colonial writers as well as contemporary historians/ analysts/ opinion-makers of Balochistan (Nicolini, Redaelli, etc.) to have solved the problem of subduing the Baluch frontier<sup>1</sup>. It is popularly believed to have been an exercise in empire-light or a form of rule which involved a minimal expenditure of force and depended, for the most part, on the consent of the governed. However, a closer scrutiny of the archive – including comments by Sandeman’s contemporaries and successors on his administrative methods- suggests that it was far more intrusive and relied much more on the strategic use of military force than has been made out so far. More importantly, it brought together or fused disparate Baloch territories and tribes (and cut-out/separated others) to engender or produce a territory “Balochistan” and a particular subject of colonial rule, the ‘Baloch tribal’ with specific characteristics which required particular administrative methods of dealing i.e. through ‘tribal jirgas’ or councils of elders. Ostensibly, the ‘tribal jirgas’ were native institutions through which the colonial state gave Baloch people a certain degree of autonomy in

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<sup>1</sup> Some contemporary authors have tried to raise Sandeman from the dead in a bid to give strategic advice for pacifying the insurgents fighting the US military and Pakistani authorities in the tribal areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

resolving their differences and managing their internal affairs. However, in actual practice the Jirgas were supervised by British officers or their native assistants (like Rai Bahadur Hittu Ram, Sandeman's Assistant) and served to integrate the Baloch tribesmen, especially the tribal elite, into the structures of empire through which they learned to submit to colonial rule<sup>2</sup>. Over time, these arrangements led to the near total dismantling of the pre-colonial relations between the Khan of Kalat, his Sardars and ordinary Baloch tribesmen and by the end of colonial period the Khan had become a mere figure-head with no real power and the fulcrum of power in Balochistan shifted from the Khan's headquarters at Kalat to the British Agent's headquarters at Quetta.

The fault-lines of Sandeman's method of rule become particularly evident in the case of colonial governance in Mekran region of Balochistan. The anthropological knowledge that Sandeman and his contemporaries had acquired about Baloch people through their encounters with Marri and Bugti tribes on Sind-Punjab frontier and with Brahui tribes of central Balochistan became questionable in managing the affairs of Mekran. Unlike the rest of Kalat, which was a Khanate, Mekran was a Hakomate although it was formally under Kalat jurisdiction. It had a clearly delineated class/status structure with a fractious elite or Hakum class at the top, independent Baloch landowners and herdsmen in the middle, and agricultural tenants/cultivars, fishermen, servants and slaves at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Tribal affiliation did not carry the kind of force or weight in dealings of people in Mekran which it did elsewhere in Balochistan. As a result, the British Political Agents' attempts at resolving issues through tribal Jirgas and soliciting bonds of good behavior were repeatedly frustrated by non-compliance on behalf of the local actors. So the archival evidence pertaining to Mekran is particularly useful in studying colonial rule in Balochistan. Moreover, since the British perception of a Russian attack or advance from Persia/Iran was less alarming than was the case in Afghanistan, colonial rule in Mekran is marked by a certain lack of coherence and disunity of purpose and method. The affairs of Mekran were managed by multiple authorities based in Karachi (Sindh), Muscat (Persian Gulf) and Quetta (Balochistan)<sup>3</sup>.

Another important consideration here is the emergent grammars of citizenship, sovereignty and territoriality in Balochistan/Mekran at the moment of the colonial encounter. The pre-colonial relations were expressed in terms of matrimonial alliances between ruling families, payment of annual tribute, reception at the Durbar, conferring of Khillats/ titles, reading of the Friday sermon (Khutba) in the name of the ruler, etc. It was

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<sup>2</sup> I do not wish to imply here that British intervention was entirely an externally imposed grid of relations. Baloch Sardars (tribal chiefs) actively sought for colonial 'protection' or 'mediation' and participated enthusiastically in structures of colonial rule. The integration of Baloch tribesmen into colonial governance structures was facilitated by the relatively stable relations of mutual obligations and respect of authority between Baloch Sardars and ordinary tribesmen. This trait was repeatedly praised by colonial writers on Balochistan who characterized the Baloch as 'frank', 'generous' and 'hospitable' as opposed to the Pashtuns who were declared 'fanatic', 'priest-ridden' and 'bigoted'. Some of these characterizations are still quoted favorably by Baloch nationalists.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, during the period 1860-79, British authority in Mekran region was maintained by the Assistant Political Agent at Gwadar who was considered "Assistant to the Resident, Persian Gulf, for the country between Gwadar and Jask; as well as Assistant to the Political Agent, Maskat, for Gwadar affairs; and Assistant to the Agent to the Governor General, Baluchistan for the Mekran possessions of the Khan of Khelat". Reference J.A. Saladana (1905) *Précis of Mekran Affairs*.

a discontinuous body-politic animated by relations of in/fidelity, genealogical affinity, etc. as opposed to strictly delimited/mapped territory and uniform extension of sovereign authority. Matrimonial alliances and kinship relations did not necessarily span geographically contiguous areas/territories or correspond neatly to distinct/exclusive spheres of influence of various sovereigns to whom the local chiefs professed or owed allegiance<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, while Persia and Muscat had recorded documents, treaties, etc. to show for their claims over territory, Baloch claims over territory were argued in the form of genealogical and rhizomic maps that were recorded in popular memory and supported by limited documentation in the form of Sanads.

It appears that the colonial encounter transformed these relations in two important respects in Mekran region. On the Persian side of Mekran there was a more rapid assimilation of and a greater willingness to adopt the trappings of modernity and its territorial imagination due to Persia's long encounter with French and British empires and a relatively stable historical/cultural past or memory of statehood. From the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Qajar monarchs of Persia were steadily modernizing their army and re-asserting their claims on Afghan and Baloch territories eastward of the Persian heartland<sup>5</sup>. They sent regular military expeditions to discipline the recalcitrant Baloch Sardars of Mekran, exact tribute, and force them to declare allegiance to the Persian monarch<sup>6</sup>. Persian authorities' ultimate (although rather ambitious) object was to bring the entire intervening Baloch territories between British India and Persia under their control (Shahvar 2006; Hopkins 2007)<sup>7</sup>.

In the Baloch Khanate of Kalat, on the other hand, contradictory forces were at play. Initially (i.e. 1839-76) British policymakers sought to treat the Khan of Kalat as a sovereign ruler of all Baloch territories and to this end gave him a generous subsidy, encouraged him to keep a standing army comprised of mercenary soldiers, and discouraged Baloch Sardars (chiefs of individual tribes) from dealing directly with colonial authorities or soliciting British intervention against the Khan. This policy failed

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, the Nawab of Kharan- a powerful Sardar in western Balochistan- simultaneously professed allegiance to and received subsidies from the Amir of Afghanistan and the Shah of Persia while his territory was 'legally' part of Khanate of Kalat.

<sup>5</sup> During the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, Persian government repeatedly sought the help of Britain as well as France to send in their military officers to train its army in techniques of modern warfare. The Shah also requested the British to supply him with Naval warships and help train a nascent Persian Navy. Moreover, at the height of Anglo-Russian rivalry, the Persian Government gave an extraordinary lease/ concession to a British industrialist to set up a cotton processing factory in Bushire.

<sup>6</sup> See Najmabadi's *Story of the Daughters of Quchan*. Baloch, Turkoman and other nomad tribes of Persian borderlands were inscribed in mainstream Iranian cultural memory as savage and barbarian raiders who would loot caravans and abduct Persian girls to sell them into slavery or reduce them to domestic servitude. There was and still remains in Iran unstinting popular support for Tehran's oppressive measures against the Baloch. Among Mekran Baloch, however, there is a counter-memory of Tehran's atrocious military expeditions for the exaction of tribute. These punitive raids would lay the country to waste and reduce the ordinary people to starvation. In Balochi language, the word 'Qajar'- literally the Qajar rulers of Persia- is a metaphor for wanton cruelty and depredation.

<sup>7</sup> Soli Shahvar (2006) Communications, Qajar Irredentism and the Strategies of British India: The Mekran Coast Telegraph and the British Policy of Containing Persia in the East. *Iranian Studies*: 39:3.

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spectacularly as the Sardars felt that the British government was curbing their independence by making them bear the Khan of Kalat's heavy yoke. Subsequently (1876-1948), however, British policymakers took a U-turn in the face of growing Russian threat in Central Asia (so-called Great Game). They intervened directly and decisively in the affairs of Balochistan by declaring the Khanate as a confederate structure where the Khan of Kalat was merely 'first among equals' viz a viz his Sardars.

In sum, the British sought to uphold the stability or maintain the status-quo of the indigenous political arrangements (system of rule) in Balochistan (rather than attempt to modernize it) based on their own anthropological understandings of Baloch society<sup>8</sup>. These understanding tended to vary over time based on the influence of ambitious frontier officers like John Jacob and Robert Sandeman and the changing perception of threat from Russia in London. Through these categories, colonial authorities sought to 'locate' and 'fix' the fluid dynamics of inter-tribal relations and the complex skein of alliances and multiple allegiances in Balochistan in imperial space-time. The acceptance of the British offer of 'mediation' by Baloch Sardars and the Khan of Kalat in 1876 appended them formally and irreversibly into the orbit of British rule in India (Redaelli 1997)<sup>9</sup>. This process enabled British administrators like Sandeman to inscribe an imperial margin or frontier in the 'savage' space of Balochistan where careers could be made and honors won<sup>10</sup> (Dutta 2003).

*Hafeez Jamali is a graduate student in anthropology at the University of Texas, Austin (hafeezjamali@gmail.com)*

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<sup>8</sup> Reference Mahmood Mamdani's argument in "Beyond the Native and Settler as Political Identities: Overcoming the Political Legacy of Colonialism" in the context of Africa. Mamdani argues that for colonial authorities in Africa, the 'improvement' of natives did not only mean modernizing them according to European standards, but in certain cases, helping them stay true to their 'authentic'/native' traditions which implied propping up of indigenous governance structures by colonial authorities.

<sup>9</sup> Redaelli, Ricardo (1997) *The Father's Bow: the Khanate of Kalat and British India*. Manent.

<sup>10</sup> Disraeli's famous declaration that the East was a career (quoted in Said 1973) was exemplified by Sandeman's career in Balochistan. As British Prime Minister in 1876, Disraeli gave wide-ranging powers to the Viceroy, Lord Lytton, who was to give his full backing to Sandeman's proposals for intervention in Balochistan under the rubric of the "Forward Policy". The supposed object was to prevent a Russian attack on India from the direction of Afghanistan by establishing forward military posts on the mountain passes at the gates of Afghanistan at the Khyber, Gomal, Tochi (NWFP) and Bolan (Balochistan) backed by military cantonments/garrisons in Peshawar and Quetta. These proposals were considered ill-advised and dangerous by some of Sandeman's colleagues such as Major Loch and his immediate supervisor Sir William Mereweather, the Commissioner in Sind. From an obscure frontier officer reporting to the Commissioner in the 1870s, Sandeman became the first Agent to the Governor General (AGG) in Balochistan who reported directly to the Viceroy in Delhi. See also Simanti Dutta (2003) *Imperial Mappings in Savage Spaces: Balochistan and British India*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corp.

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