

Sabir Badalkhan

TWO ESSAYS ON BALOCH HISTORY AND FOLKLORE



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UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI NAPOLI “L’ORIENTALE”
Dipartimento Asia, Africa e Mediterraneo

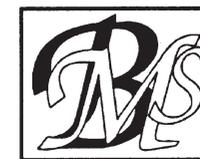
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Baluchistan Monograph Series

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PREFACE

During the early 19th century the British came in direct contact with the Baloch, first with those living in the Punjab and Sind, and later with those in Balochistan proper. Soon after their arrival in the region, they began studying the Baloch as an ethno-national group, their language, literature, folklore, tribal structure, physical features, and so on, forming theories and suggesting hypotheses regarding their origins and relations with other nations and peoples. While some maintained that the Baloch originated from north-western Iran, others believed they came from Central Asia, from Arabia, or from elsewhere.¹ Among the early British writers, some also opined that while some tribes might have a foreign origin, bulk of the Baloch were the autochthonous population of the country. With the passage of time, however, other theories were abandoned and a northwest Iranian origin came to be the widely accepted one. This thesis was established on three basic grounds: first, from the Balochi oral tradition which claims that the Baloch came from a place called Alab/Alap, identified as Aleppo in Syria by Western writers and later followed by some local writers too; secondly, their mention in the Shahnameh of Ferdowsi where they are sometimes shown along with the people of Gilan and Dilam, regions situated on the Caspian Sea regions; and thirdly, on the basis of their language, which is classified as belonging to the northwestern group of Iranian languages having close affinities with Kurdish and other languages of that branch.

Here, in the following, we are going to discuss in some details the first two of these arguments while leaving the language aspect to scholars more competent than us, or at least for the time being. As can be seen in the discussion that follows, we argue that both the Balochi oral tradition and the mention of the Baloch in the Shahnameh of Ferdowsi have largely been misunderstood and misinterpreted. It is true

¹ For a detailed overview on different theories regarding the Baloch origins see I. Baloch, *The Problem of "Greater Baluchistan": A Study of Baluch Nationalism*, Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GMBH, Stuttgart, 1987, pp. 34-43.

that the Balochi oral tradition, especially the oral epic tradition, projects a general belief of the Baloch that they, as an ethno-national group on the whole, are Arabs of the Quraish descent, who lived in a hypothetical place called Alab, Alap, or Alif, to be found somewhere in Saudi Arabia. It also advocates strongly that the Baloch were physically present at the battle of Karbala in 680 A.D. in the number of thousands and fought along with the forces of Imam Hussain against the army of Yazid, the second Umayyad Caliph. It was only on the aftermath of the murder of Imam Hussain and all of his adult male family members and followers, it claims, that the Baloch decided to migrate from Alab and come to settle down first in western Makran and then spread to the rest of Balochistan. However, this tradition is filled with contradictions and while the oral tradition from the trans-Indus Baloch tribes claims that such a mass migration, in which an alleged force of 40,000 strong men from 44 Baloch tribes and their camp followers participated, was led by Mir Jalal Han, a 12th century chief of the Baloch in western Makran, the Makran variants of migration epics place two tribal chiefs of the 15th century at the head of this supposed mass migration. In the following pages, we are going to argue that the Balochi oral tradition on issues related to Baloch origins and early migrations is weak, full of inconsistencies, inaccuracies, and contradictions, and cannot be taken as a historical clue to the issue of the early history of the Baloch as an ethno-national group.

As to the second argument of this presentation, we are going to argue that although Ferdowsi presents the Baloch as a strong ethnic group enrolled in the army of different Iranian monarchs, he fails to identify their country of residence at the time of his stories. However, from a close study of the occasions when the Baloch are mentioned in the Shahnameh, we have suggested that Ferdowsi probably had the Baloch in mind inhabiting their present homeland, particularly in southeast of Kerman and western Makran, living in the neighbourhood of Kuch and the tribes living on the plains of Saruch in southeastern Iran.

These two essays partially resume studies published in the past, and are part of a larger research project that I have been carrying on for more than last two decades now and which I intend to continue in

the future too. I am presently elaborating the material I have collected during these long years and during many research trips to different parts of Balochistan, both in Pakistan and Iran, and hope to publish the results in the near future.

During all these years of my stay in Naples and working on Balochi oral traditions and folklore, I have been fortunate in having the support of Prof. Adriano V. Rossi, University of Naples, "l'Oreitnale". He has been a guide, a teacher, and a source of encouragement and support to me in all these years. Like in the case of my previous publications, he has also gone through these two essays with great attention and made valuable suggestions and feedbacks on various issues. My deepest thanks are due to him, and to all those friends and family members who have encouraged me with their support and appreciation for my research work. Needless to say, that I am the only responsible for any shortcomings in this work and for the opinions expressed here.

This little work is dedicated to the memory of my late parents whom I left back home and travelled abroad in pursuit of my studies at a time when they needed my help and physical presence at their old age. I will always carry beautiful memories of their immense love and the appreciation for my studies.

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