Aspects of Religion in Southern Baluchistan

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RÉSUMÉ

Dans le monde musulman, des croyances et des pratiques religieuses locales cœxistent avec l'orthodoxie islamique. Cet article analyse certains aspects de l'interaction entre une "grande" et une "petite" tradition de cette sorte en la région de Makran du Baluchistan du sud, ou Pakistan de l'ouest. On y décrit la secte (prophétique) *mahdiste* du Zikrism, des mystiques religieuses variées et un exemple de culte d'un saint. Les caractéristiques de la religion Makrani sont vues comme le résultat de certains événements historiques particuliers, comme des adaptations fonctionnelles, au style de vie pastoral et nomade d'une grande partie de la population, et, plus généralement, comme une illustration de l'hétérodoxie religieuse rencontrée à l'intérieur de l'Islam.

INTRODUCTION

It is generally recognized that the codes and prescriptions of the world's orthodox or "great" religious traditions may coexist and interact with diverse local beliefs and practices or "little" traditions. Ideally, neither dimension can be fully understood without a consideration of the other. Westermarck (1914) and more recently Von Grunebaum (1955), among others, have emphasized this heterodoxy in Middle Eastern Islam. To further illustrate this feature of the Muslim world, the present paper describes aspects of religion among a little known people enclaved in a setting of Islamic orthodoxy — the Baluchi speakers of

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Makran District, southern Baluchistan, Pakistan. An attempt is made to relate selected features of Makrani religious life to local cultural and historical contexts as well as to more generally Islamic phenomena.

GENERAL

Makran is an arid tract of deserts and mountains, 23,000 square miles in size with a population of approximately 150,000. Bounded on the south by the Arabian Sea, on the east by the rugged peaks of the Jhalawan region, on the north by the desert of Kharan and on the west by Iranian Baluchistan, Makran is one of the largest, least populated areas in all of Pakistan. Baluchi, an Iranian tongue, is the primary language and *lingua franca,* while smaller numbers of people also speak Brahui — a Dravidian language — or Jadgali — a Sindi derivative. Intensive irrigation agriculture, based on the utilization of sub-surface water, supports substantial sedentary populations in the valleys of the Rakshan and Ketch rivers — northern and central Makran respectively. In these areas emphasis is on date palm cultivation, while the dry and barren hinterland supports a scattered population on combinations of pastoralism and rainfall-based cereal cultivation.

Makran frequently has encountered external powers, from Alexander's Macedonians, through the medieval Arabs and the eighteenth and nineteenth century Brahui Khans of Kalat, to the British and Pakistanis. However, until the early twentieth century the rigorous environment prevented effective rule by outsiders, and local authority was vested in indigenous elites known as *hakim,* the most notable of whom are the Gitchkis, a powerful lineage claiming descent from an immigrant Sikh or Rajput. From the ranks of the Gitchkis came the *sardar* or paramount chiefs of Makran who were based in the populous irrigated tracts of Panjgur in the Rakshan river valley and Ketch in central Makran. The *hakim* stood at the apex of a stratified social order whose middle range was made up of various named tribes of *Baluch* agriculturalists and nomads, while a lower stratum was composed of negroid slaves and menials known as *hizmatkar.*

The British policy of indirect rule in Baluchistan — the so-called "Forward Policy" pioneered by Sir Robert Sandeman in the late 1800's — coupled with a stark and forbidding terrain, served to keep Makran relatively more isolated from outside influences than were most other areas of south Asia. While recent Pakistani administrations have attempted to play an increasingly pervasive role in the area, many aspects of traditional political organization survive. In the context of the present paper, the same holds true for traditional beliefs, customs and attendant social organizational forms. In the religious sphere, while the majority of Makranis are Sunni Muslim (*nemazi*) and under the jurisdiction of orthodox clergy (*mullah and qazi*), extra-establishment or non-establishment forms of worship and religious leaders continue to be significant.

ZIKRISM

During the seventeenth century, the non-orthodox sect of Zikrism became important to the political and religious history of Makran. The Zikris were followers of a sect founded in the fifteenth century by Said Mahmoud of Jaunpur, a *Mahdi* — or Islamic messiah — who travelled extensively and drew many converts in the northwestern sector of the subcontinent. Tradition states that he came to Ketch, near the present town of Turbat in central Makran, preaching for ten years and converting the entire populace before his death in the early 1500's. However, it is more likely that the faith was brought to Makran by a number of the disciples of the *Mahdi* and not by the *Madhi* himself (Field 1959:60).

Although the Zikris call themselves Muslims, orthodox Sunnis regard them as idolotrous, superstitious, and cut off from the mainstream of orthodoxy. Indeed, many Sunnis characterize the Zikris in their midst as *Kafir* or infidels. Zikris believe that the authority of the Prophet has been superseded by the *Mahdi* and normal orthodox prayer forms have been substituted by *zikr*, their own version of daily prayer ritual. Ramadan, the month of daily fasting which constitutes one of the pillars of universal Islam, is

not observed by the Zikris. On these and other grounds, the doctrines of Islam and Zikrism are opposed.

Near Turbat in central Makran, the mount of *Koh i murad,* the supposed home of the original *Mahdi,* remains as a place of pilgrimage or *hajj* for the Zikris. The annual pilgrimage to *Koh i murad* takes place at the end of the Muslim *ramadan* when Zikris from as far as Karachi (where many Makranis migrate for work) gather on a plain about five miles southeast of Turbat at the base of the holy mountain. There is a small village nearby which is inhabited throughout the year by a few Zikri families who are in charge of maintaining the place of worship. The primary holy area (*kaaba*) for worshippers consists of a large plateau, about one half mile on a side, and a steep hillock overlooking a small dry basin which fills with water only during the sporadic and meagre rainfalls typical of Makran. This entire area is surrounded by a low wall of loose stones. Orthodox Muslims are not permitted beyond this wall and Zikris must remove their footwear once they enter its environs.

While the annual *hajj* is the focus of Zikri public ritual, and the occasion for the massing of thousands of followers encamped near the spot of pilgrimage, there is a resident community of spiritual leaders in Turbat responsible for the collection of dues, largely in the form of sheep and goats since most Zikris are pastoral nomads.

The historical connection between the rise of Zikrism and political events in Makran is clear. The establishment of the sect is linked to the rise in power of an indigenous Makrani tribe, the Buledis. By the mid-eighteenth century, the Buledi ruler of Ketch district had quit the Zikri faith, but was supplanted in political dominance by the spiritual leaders of the Zikris, Mullah Murad and his son Malik Dinar Gitchki who incited a revolt and wrested the main fort of Ketch from the Buledis. Subsequently, they became established as supreme authority in two other major centers of Makran, Panjur and Tump (Ross 1868:41).

While they maintained a political base of some strength, including the ability to call men to arms and collect revenue, independent rule by the Gitchkis was shortlived. In the last half of

the eighteenth century they were subjected to the force of the Brahui Ahmedzai Khans of Kalat from eastern Baluchistan. From that point until the emergence of the nation of Pakistan following the partition of the subcontinent, the political history of Makran was dominated by the Khans of Kalat and the indigenous Gitchkis, with the vacillations of power between the two set off by the intervention of the British who signed a number of treaties with Kalat beginning in the mid-nineteenth century.

Important changes in the religious affiliation of the Makrani populace took place at the time of Brahui interference. Under Nasir Khan of Kalat who first threatened Gitchki hegemony, the son of Malik Dinar Gitchki was reconverted from Zikrism, until then the dominant faith in the area, to Sunni Islam. This change in religious allegiance was spread to large sectors of the population until Zikrism found itself in its present low estate.

This situation can be contrasted with events elsewhere in Baluchistan. Salzman (1972), describing the history of Iranian government contact with the warlike Baluch tribes of the Sarhad plateau of Persian Baluchistan, notes that with the early twentieth century establishment of government control over the tribes the Baluch intensified their devotion to Sunni Islam as a means of retaining their cultural identity *vis-a-vis* the newly dominant Shia Persians. In the case of Makran, the conversion of the populace to Sunni Islam and the decline of Zikrism occurred for different reasons. Whereas in Iran religion became a means whereby the Baluch could continue to set themselves off from their Shia rulers, the indigenous Gitchki elites of Makran, in contrast, wished to curry favor with the ascendent Khan of Kalat, Nasir Khan, who, as a fanatical Muslim, viewed his campaign against the then Zikri Makranis as nothing less than a *jihad,* or holy war, against infidels. By converting to Sunni Islam and forcing their followers to do likewise, the Gitchkis of Makran managed to remain enough in the good graces of the Khan and his successors to retain a high degree of local autonomy. That is, religion was a means of assimilation *into* the dominant power structure, not differentiation from it as in Iran. And so Zikrism — a uniquely Baluch religion — never achieved an ethnically unifying stature.

In spite of its political vicissitudes, the Zikri faith today still retains a practicing body of followers, principally among the nomads in the desolate mountains of southeastern Makran.

The cultural as well as religious status of Zikrism is often considered "backward" from the viewpoint of sedentarizing and modernizing forces; for if the Zikris are looked down upon by villagers who consider themselves in the mainstream of orthodoxy, then their often nomadic existence is equally denigrated by those adhering to a sedentary way of life. *Pahwal,* the villagers' terms for all nomads, Sunni or Zikri, is a contemptuous one, with connotations similar to "hillbilly".

The survival of Zikrism among the nomads of Makran is consistent with data elsewhere in the Islamic world where the nomads' mobile way of life is particularly conducive to religious heterodoxy or laxity, due to their relative removal from the sedentary population centers which otherwise would subject them to pressures to conform to more orthodox forms of worship (through social opprobrium and the presence of orthodox clergy).

Along these lines, Thesiger (1959:230) notes that the *Ikhwan* brotherhood of the puritanical Wahhabi sect in nineteenth century Arabia was eager to sedentarize the nomadic Bedouin clans since their migratory way of life was viewed as incompatible with the spiritual supervision required by the austere and strict Wahhabi doctrines. Similarly, in describing the Basseri nomads of southern Iran, Barth (1961) notes a pronounced *de facto* lack of formal religious or ritual observance despite nominal allegiance to the Shia great tradition. Further, Evans-Pritchard, discussing the rise of the Sanusi religious brotherhood in Cyrenaica (1949:69-70) notes that among oasis dwellers the religious role of the Sanusi *marabtin* or saints was far more pronounced than it was among the hinterland Bedouin tribes. The latter, although providing the bulk of the membership of the Sanusi order, perceived the movement and its head in a primarily secular light — as a leadership nexus uniting otherwise fractionalized nomad clans against common enemy invaders, such as the Turks, and later the Italians.

Correspondingly, in the case of Makran it appears that Sunni Muslim nomads are far less concerned about the ritual aspects of

contact with Zikris than are Sunni villagers. Whereas most of the latter say that they will not accept food from a Zikri, eat from the same bowl, or eat an animal killed by a Zikri, nomads appear less concerned about these matters. An expressed ideal of casualness and mutual good will which unites the "countrymen" (*mulki mardom*), or inhabitants of a nomadic territory, extends to the Zikris within the territory. One of the present authors has seen, for example, a young Zikri nomad come to visit the camp of his good friend, a Muslim; finding him absent, as well as the other male camp members, he stayed to visit and eat with the women of the camp. This is strongly suggestive of the lack of tension which ideally ought to exist among "countrymen", since, like all Muslims, the nomads of Makran are deeply concerned about shielding their women from social "outsiders" (c.f. the notion of *purdah*). The relative ease with which Zikris and Muslim nomads from a common territory intermingle, even between the sexes, indicates that shared territoriality is more important to the status of social "insider" than common religious belief (Pastner 1971).

In sum, although not all nomads in Makran are Zikris, nor are all Zikris nomads, the perpetuation of the faith is clearly dependent upon the survival of a nomadic population which, in spite of not being totally independent of sedentary institutions either economically or politically, is logistically capable of maintaining an otherwise dissident religious sect.

FAKIRS

Fakirs (Baluchi *Pakir*), the holy mendicants typical of Islam, are present in Makran. Frequently bizarre in their physical aspect and dressed in gaudy but tattered rags, they may be seen wandering through the oasis bazaars with prayer staff and begging bowl.

The Makranis distinguish between three varieties of holy beggar. The *wali Allah* is believed to be touched by God and is often an obviously mentally and physically aberrant individual. *Kotubi* are more normal in their behavior and conform strictly to orthodox religious practices such as regular prayer. Among the notable Makrani *kotubi* are the Hajji of Zahui and the Fakir of

Kalag. Thirdly, the *abdal* is a holy fool, often a once normal individual who received a dramatic mystical experience which thereafter altered his behavior.

One well known *abdal* is Hajji Nur of Mand. He is said to have lived as a nomad for fourteen years trying to receive some divine power. No sign was given, allegedly because he refused to study under an *abdal,* instead claiming that his spiritual mentor was a *dohluk* bush. But one day this bush blew away and when Hajji followed it into a ravine, he spied four Caliphs eating sherbert. They adopted him as a disciple and since that time he is reputed to have manifested divine power.

Another famous *abdal* is Dad Rahmin of Panjgur who at one time was a government clerk and shopkeeper. It is claimed that he once bested the *kotub* of Kalag in an argument by turning into a giant snake. In the Panjgur bazaar, one of the present authors saw him eat a mixture of ink, snuff, cigarettes and cotton balls, ostensibly to flagellate his spirit. At the same time he delivered a trance-like speech in which he told his listeners not to fear martial law (which had just been declared in Pakistan in March 1969) because he was their protector and master. Onlookers came to him in order to be touched and blessed.

An elderly Panjguri describes his personal experience with Dad Rahim:

> Once when my child was sick I called Dad Rahim. He said to take some bean pods and rub them all over the body. Where could I get the pods without being a thief? Dad Rahim was angry and said I was a liar and abused me a lot. Then he left my house and wouldn't sit there. Later on I was walking on the road near the graveyard and saw a lot of people sitting. They were wearing white robes and sitting as if in prayer. Dad Rahim was speaking to them and rubbing two bones together. Over his head was a lantern. When I looked again he was gone and I knew he was a saint.
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> Another time he came to my house and told me to bring tea. Many others were there too. I said I had no sugar. He said: "What do I care for sugar; bring tea anyway". So I did and it was as sweet as if it had sugar. Also there were some six animals, like dogs, but with long fur and big heads — not really dogs. And they came to Dad Rahim and ate from his hand. When I told my friend to come and see, he couldn't see anything.

Fakirs are placed in a supernatural hierarchy. Below the Prophet and his Caliphs there are said to be four Sultans, one in each corner of the world. Next in order are four *Kotubs* and below them are the *abdals,* four of which are in Syria. Twenty of the *abdals* are adult and twenty are innocent children, and each week these twenty die and others take their place.

THE SHRINE OF PIR OMAR

Pirs are the saints of Makran. Often the heroes of folklore, their burial places are shrines (*ziarat*) where pilgrims come to invoke the saint's aid in curing illness or solving other assorted difficulties.

In the desert six miles south of the oasis of Panjgur stands the shrine of the Pir Omar. This tiny oasis comprises a verdant grove of date palms and several garden plots nourished by a fresh water spring. About twenty kin-related *jalyrop,* or hereditary custodians of the shrine, live there. In addition to tending their crops, the custodians receive alms from the pilgrims who drink the water and eat the earth around the shrine, both of which are said to have curative powers.

On the edge of the cultivations stands the actual burial place of the *pir.* A mud wall surrounds a bier which is bedecked with embroidered garments and the horns of ibex. A weathered stone slab proclaims the names of the Gitchki chiefs of Panjgur who, in return for a share of the alms, have protected the shrine since the eighteenth century.

The legend of the saintly Omar, as related by the leading *jalyrop,* dates back to the time of the warrior Tumor (the Baluchi name for the fourteenth century Tatar conqueror Tamerlane). The Tatar war bands, having penetrated the geographical bastions of Makran, caused much of the populace to flee to the site of the present oasis shrine where the headman, Omar, had a reputation for sanctity and spiritual power. When the Tatar commander demanded that the refugees be surrendered, Omar invited him to a parlay (*majlis*). As today, the discussion took place on a woven

palm mat. When the Tatar leader was seated, Omar called upon Allah who caused the mat to enfold the warrior, preventing him from moving. In recognition of Omar's power, the Tatars withdrew, and, after his death, Omar was considered a saint and his village a shrine.

DISCUSSION

The development of Zikrism in Makran and the continuing significance of "folk" religious personnel are consistent with the general history of Islam throughout the Middle East. While orthodox faith has stressed the achievement of knowledge of God through legal interpretation and reliance on obedience, devotion and worship, non-orthodox and local forms of Islam have attempted to affect personal communication with God. In Makran, for example, while the *mullahs* and *qazis* of the settled areas represent formal authority (governmental as well as religious since they also act as judges and teachers), the fakirs operate within the realm of personal mysticism and supernatural power.

Sufism, developed in Persia during the eleventh century, is the best known example in the Muslim world of the attempt to gain knowledge of God in ways not always acceptable to orthodoxy, although reconciliation between formalism and emotionalism has at times been achieved. The *marabouts* of North Africa and the *dervishes* of Persia are other localized instances where ascetics and mystics on the Sufi pattern have emerged. In some areas, these personalized religious practitioners ultimately have rigidified their devotional practices and organized into formal brotherhoods, as among the Sanusi of Cyrenaica (Evans-Pritchard 1949). The recognition of saints, such as the Makrani *pirs,* in the Islamic religious hierarchy is also similar to traditions such as Sufism; a mystic being recognized as a saint when he can perform miracles which document his intimacy with God.

Zikrism can be regarded as an example of the missionary functions of mahdist cults in Islam as well as a particularized regional variation which not only deviates from religious orthodoxy but has political ramifications as well. Just as the appearance of Zikrism in Makran was linked with the rise of Buledi rule, its

demise accompanied the insurgence of the Sunni Khanate of Kalat into Makrani politics.

Increasing modernization and secularization in Islamic areas are nominally accompanied by the decline of saint cults, superstitious belief and local "folk" leaders along with greater reliance on orthodox practices and clergy. The perpetuation of Zikrism among the nomads of Makran, the least modernized sector of the population, attests to this correlation. Even among the settled villagers of Makran, a continuing usage of non-orthodox, "little" tradition institutions, such as saint worship, signifies the marginality of Makran and the persistance of the "little" within the more Islamically orthodox traditions of the Pakistani nation.

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