

The Tupak of the Jemadar: Notes on The Baluch Presence Along the Swahili Coast During the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

Between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was the blood-red flag of the Omanis that formed a tie, and not merely in the figurative sense, between the ports of Makran-Baluchistan, the principal ports of Oman itself, and the ports along the Swahili coast from Mogadishu to Kilwa. This short note aims to re-read Baluch presence during nineteenth century's Swahili coast during the 'apogee' with the 'Arabs' from Oman, as well as its potential influence on local society.

The Tupak was the muzzle-loading musket used by the Baluch soldiers of the Omani Sultans, and the Jemadar (Jamadar, Jam'dar) was the chieftain representative as well as the Baluch commander in the Sultans' Omani army. The Baluch in Africa were brought between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the Omani Arabs as soldiers; once settled, their culture has undergone quite a metamorphosis from the end of the eighteenth century on. Traditional Baluch lifestyle gradually melted with the Swahili one. Baluch ancestors interacted with local people and assimilated to become part of the cultural and social life of the region. It must be noted however, that they did not lose their identity. Language and culture apart, the Baluch in Africa did maintain an identity from the rest of the people.

The famous British explorer, Richard Francis Burton (1872:16-17), once said, "Of the gladdest moments in human life, is the departure upon a distant journey into unknown lands. Burton so expressed his feelings while sailing to Zanzibar during the second half of the nineteenth century. The feelings of the Baluch soldiers sailing during much earlier times and in much different conditions from the coast of Makran to the Swahili coast¹ were certainly less enthusiastic and romantic, although their sailings could have been pushed by similar emotions.

From the nineteenth century on, it was the blood-red flag of the Omanis that formed a tie, and not merely in the figurative sense, between the Omani enclave of the port of Gwadar in Makran-Baluchistan, the principal ports of Oman itself such as Muscat, Matrah, and Sur, and the Swahili coast from Mogadishu to Kilwa. This short note wishes to re-read Baluch presence during nineteenth century's Swahili

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coast during the 'apogee' with the 'Arabs' from Oman, as well as its potential influence on local society. The *Tupak* was the muzzle-loading musket used by the Baluch soldiers, and the *Jemadar* was the chieftain representative as well as the Baluch commander in the Sultans' Omani army. The Baluch in Africa were brought by the Omani Arabs as soldiers; once settled, their culture has undergone quite a metamorphosis from the end of the eighteenth century on. Traditional Baluch lifestyle gradually melted with the Swahili one. Baluch ancestors interacted with local people and assimilated to become part of the cultural and social life of the region. It must be noted however, that they did not lose their identity. Language and culture apart, the Baluch in East Africa did maintain an identity from the rest of the people.

In this regard, while many trace the African elements in Asian cultures and societies in general, and in Baluch culture and society in particular (During, 1997:39-56), we would like to re-examine the role of the Baluch elements into African culture and society. Thanks to research carried on in the Baluchistan Archives combined with research in the British Archives, and field work conducted in Pakistani Baluchistan, in the Sultanate of Oman, in the United Arab Emirates, and in the United Republic of Tanzania, Baluch presence in the Gulf and throughout the western Indian Ocean was apparently closely connected with piracy, and measures taken by the British authorities against slave trade during the nineteenth century (Nicolini and Redaelli, 1994:401-414). Illicit traffic of arms and ammunitions was flourishing on the shores of the Gulf and of the Indian Ocean, and the prohibition orders were simply ignored and weapons were obtainable in large quantities.

Starting from the nineteenth century, the level of influence on trade routes 'controlled' by Muslim merchants in the Gulf and in the Indian Ocean was high (Sweet, 1964:262-280; Shariff, 2001:301-318; Riso, 1995). The growing strategic importance of the Indian Ocean as a watering highway was soon to become the focal point of world politics, making the region the pivot of world affairs. The promotion of arms trade and its influence has been not only a source of complex relationships between different people and different cultures and religions, but also played an important role in searching for peace among all the littorals of the Swahili coast.

The coastal region of Baluchistan, Makran, since ancient times, did hold a historical strategic position as the most direct route between the Middle East and the riches of the Indian subcontinent. Covering an area of 62,000 squared kilometres, Makran forms the southern most strip of Baluchistan province. As there is hardly any rain, the few villages and settlements depend on spring water and wells (*qanat/kariz*) (Piacentini and Redaelli, 2003). The coast has several small fishing villages while

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main ports like Gwadar, Ormara, Jiwani and Pasni have fishing harbours where the fishermen can be seen coming in with their catch every morning and evening; and where Makrani Baluch used to trade with all the maritime world of the past in the western Indian Ocean.

The port of Gwadar lies on the coastal area of Makran (Nicolini, 2002:281-286). Its dry climate combined with the natural geographical features make one of the most daunting environments for successful human habitation. Therefore, it is sparsely populated. Makran was, and still represents today, a place of refuge for innumerable dissidents, rebels and fugitives. Among the first were, as stated above, the Omanis, who gradually imposed their power on the main coastal centres. The case of Gwadar was of particular interest as the town, its port and the surrounding territory were granted as a *jagir* (a temporary grant of land exempted from taxation) from the *khans* of Kalat to the Al Bu Sa'id of Oman. From a *jagir* Gwadar soon assumed the *status* of an enclave of the Sultanate of Oman.²

As close connections always existed between the two countries, the Omani presence in the Makran region eased the control of the local trade and of the regional and tribal mechanisms of power. The strategic role played by the port of Gwadar in the illegal traffic of arms and ammunitions coming from Europe to the Gulf and directed to East Africa had been essential. So essential that during the second half of the nineteenth century, Sir Olaf Caroe did write, "The strategic value of Baluchistan, the desolation of the region is a resource". It offers what Tucker called 'space power' (Brobst, 2005:82-83). It is interesting to note that, once in Africa, and having consolidated their military power on behalf of the Omani Sultans along the Swahili coast, some elements among these groups did not remain soldiers and started trading activities. Baluch settled and started different activities linked to the slave and ivory trade - the main merchandises of the time (Lobo, 2000:25; Kusimba, 1999). Therefore, Baluch role along the Swahili coast throughout 1800 was destined to considerable impact on local societies, and to significant modifications in its main motivations and objects. The result was an important contribution to Swahili culture and society, and to relevant changes within Swahili 'traditional' customs (Spear, 2000:339-373).³ Obviously, it must be noted that Baluch activities did not make them so wealthy according to the legendary prosperities described by most of the available literature. The wealth of the Sultans of Zanzibar, as well as the luxury of their court was different in reality. Consequently, Baluch role has been studied as closely, and often exclusively, related to the military and defensive role within the groups of Oman. It is believed that Baluch groups were found only along the Swahili coast littorals and in the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba; but they developed trading relationships into the hinterland of East Africa. Only few Arabs went to the interior of Africa, e.g. traders like for example Tippu Tip and his father who claimed to be Arabs. Swahili

settlements were also viewed as Arab mainly due to the Islamic nature of their behaviour. The close connections between the Omani Sultan and the Baluch soldiers and body guards represented the crucial issue: the loyalty was the prerequisite for the recognition by the Arabs of Oman as their allies and from the nineteenth century onwards, descendants of Baluch soldiers were assimilated into new categories and played new roles within Swahili society and culture (Middleton, 1992:97).

Starting from the end of the eighteenth century and for all the reasons already stated, it was precisely the warriors of these South-Central Asian people who protected, hid, supported and faithfully defended the Sultan of Oman. Thanks also to the tribal structure and clan-family relationships of these people, which, traditionally nomadic, could count on both 'Wahani' and 'Mawani', today's Iranian and Pakistani coasts, as well as 'jennani' and 'jennani' solidarity. From the accounts of travellers, explorers and historians of that time, we see emerging among other groups of Baluch along the Swahili coast: Hot, the Rind and the Nousherwani (Miles, 1982:54). These three groups were identified in archival available sources, although we assume that other Baluch groups were present on the field and in battles both in East African coast.

The Baluch from the coastal Asian region of Makran were pushed towards extreme misery of their country towards Persia and towards the coast of India. Here, they offered themselves to the Omani Sultan as soldiers, soldiers and bodyguards for pay that, though even modest, could represent the difference between life and death for them and for their families. During the nineteenth century the condition of life of these people in Makran was so harsh that the explorer Sykes vividly described it as terrible and miserable.

At that time, the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba were administered by governors representing Sa'id bin Sultan Al Bu Sa'id (r. 1806-1856) and commercial powers on his behalf. The military support furnished by these representatives with complete authority over the islands and their affairs, consisted of several contingents of Baluch troops, whose trustworthiness, that is to say, Baluch corps 'closely tied' to the Sultan, was the fundamental economic agreements. The loyalty these Baluch soldiers showed to the Omani ruling family at a time when there was much internal struggle for power of Oman, earned them lasting trust with the Sultan who assigned them to guard all his palaces and interests in the region.

The first settlers on the East African coast were, as usual, soldiers and Baluch soldiers, who until the establishment of the Sultanate in the 1850s, maintained army posts in the major centres of Mombasa, Zanzibar and Pemba. They were inter-married with the local Waswahili and were quickly assimilated into the

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culture and society. They were later followed by whole families who left Baluchistan in the hope of finding better life along the Swahili coast, which arose at the time as an important manufacturing centre and only later became the hub of international maritime trade with Asia (Kusimba, 2008:22). Most of the Baluch came from Kasarkand, although their brothers later followed them in from Sarbaz, Lur and Muscat. Although the life and times of Baluch on the Swahili coast during 1800 is quite obscure, it seems however that Mombasa was the major Baluch settlement at the time. According to Lane (Lane, 1993:133-141), it is believed that the first non-African to go into Maasailand was a Baluch, so too was the first non-African to be welcomed into the royal court of the Kabaka of Buganda. As they moved inland, the Baluch founded cluster communities in Djugu and Bunia in the Congo; Soroti, Arua and Kampala in Uganda; and Iringa, Tabora, Mbeya and Rujewa in Tanzania; probably there was a Baluch family in almost every main Swahili town.

The Baluch settled in Mombasa and developed a more cosmopolitan lifestyle, preferring to engage in small real estate ventures and trade, or keeping employment with the Omanis and later, the British. Those who lived in the fertile hills of Uganda and Tanzania flourished in the farming and trading industries. The mercantile skills and business acumen of the Baluch earned them high regard amongst the various communities in which they settled. This can also be said of the small but vibrant Nairobi community.

Since the first half of the nineteenth century, the *Bulushi* (pl. *Mabulushi*) Swahili communities - mainly from Persian origins - settled in Saa-teeni, outside Zanzibar town, in Fort Jesus in Mombasa, and later on in the Unyanyembe. The introduction of military terms such as *jemadari* (commander), *singe* (bayonet), *bunduki* (rifle), *habedari* (attention), have been identified into Kiswahili from Persian Baluch (Lodhi, 2000:62).

In regard to the political leadership along the Swahili coast, during the nineteenth century the local Omani-Arabs governors on main African trading ports often enjoyed the support of the local, autochthonous Swahili aristocracy, mainly merchants. They were tied to the Omani elite by mutual interests in the exploitation of the rich resources, offered by the eastern shores of Africa (Glassman, 1991:277-312; Lodhi, 2000).

Without a shadow of a doubt, European rivalry in the Gulf and in the western waters of the Indian Ocean from the start of the nineteenth century on, combined with related upheavals in power and strategy, had a decisive impact also on the deviation of the maritime routes followed by slave trade. Clearly, however, the 'ability' of the Omani Sultan in exploiting such political contingencies was also to

carry a certain weight. These, therefore, were some of the causes on which Sa'id bin Sultan Al Bu Sa'id and the Asian mercantile communities, both Muslim and Hindu, built their commercial emporium in the face of inevitable conflict with the English in the Gulf over the question of piracy (Davies, 1997; Risso, 1995; Nicolini, 2006).

A complex exchange network soon developed between the interior and the Swahili coast, leading to the introduction of rice cultivation in the interior in those areas under 'Arab dominion' such as Tabora, Nungwe, in modern-day northern Congo, and in nearby Kasongo. On the coasts of the continent, on the contrary, local societies experienced significant changes due to the massive influx of slaves from the interior and of Arabs and Asians from abroad. Tabora, a key site on the commercial route towards the heart of the continent practically became an 'Arab town', with considerable Baluch presence (Reid, 1998:73-89). Thus, considerable differences developed between the cultural identities of the coast and the islands, on the one hand; and the interior of the continent on the other, where, from the third decade of the nineteenth century onwards, the opening up of caravan routes wrought a 'revolution' in economic, social and cultural terms.

Maritime ports of the Swahili coast had always been sustained by intimate interaction with the non-Muslims of their rural hinterlands, and this contributed also to the consolidation of the coastal identity (Glassman, 1994:33). Nevertheless, Rockel reminds us that Unyamwezi, the heart of the ivory trade and the home of most male caravan porters, was not a major source of slaves; rather, it was a region that imported slaves. Caravans arrived at the coast usually in September and porters announced their approach by blowing horns and beating drums (Rockel, 2000:173-195; Rockel, 2006).

Another important item destined to alter the power balances was represented, as stated above, by firearms, the *Tupak* of the skilled Baluch *Jemadar*, soldiers. During the first half of the nineteenth century matchlocks began to appear in the hands of Omani mercenary troops - composed also of Baluch - who imported them from the Ottoman Empire and from Europe. As is well known, Omani interests did not converge only on the island of Zanzibar and on the seaboard of the mainland in front of it; the Al Bu Sa'id, and their Baluch troops, moved down to Mozambique (Hawley, 1982:29-39; Pouwels, 2002:385-425). In this regard, a clear sign of the consistency of the Omani military aspirations along the coasts of East Africa during the first half of the nineteenth century were the political and diplomatic initiatives between the Portuguese and Oman. In 1830 the representatives of the Lisboa Crown in Lourenço Marquez (the present Maputo) sent to the Sultan of Oman what follows:

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27 de Março de 1830,

Relação dos artigos enviados para o imamo de Mascate, com indicação do respectivo valor: 1 espingarda de 2 canos e um par de pistolas também de 2 canos (150 pesos), uma bengala de abada con castão de ouro (70 pesos), uma moldura com vidro para o retrato do rei (10 pesos); para embaixador do imamo havia sido dispensado o valor de outra bengala (20 pesos) e de um par de pistolas de um cano (12 pesos).⁴

Tabora, near the heart of Unyamwezi, as we have seen above, became an 'Arab' town together with Ujiji. Here Baluch soldiers settled, intermarried, and soon became powerful figures. There were obviously considerable modifications in the traditional elites' patterns of power relationships, where client-patronage perspectives never were to be the same, and where new actors were destined to emerging on the new western Indian Ocean scenario in its connections with the East African hinterland. Everybody could share this ambition but at the same time new tensions were introduced between Swahili rich families, struggling to preserve their precarious domination, and the demand of the 'parvenus' on whose support they relied (Glassman, 1991:277-312).

Throughout the nineteenth century the shame and humiliation of slavery in East Africa had been imposed and exploited by numerous social groups for many lucrative purposes mainly originating from southern Arabia and western India. Baluch were part of this framework. To this regard, the British explorer Stanley wrote:

... this personage with a long trailing turban, was Jemadar Esau, commander of the Zanzibar force of soldiers, police, or Baluch gendarmes stationed at Bagamoyo. He had accompanied Speke and Grant a good distance into the interior, and they had rewarded him liberally. He took upon himself the responsibility of assisting in the debarkation of the expedition, and unworthy as was his appearance, disgraceful as he was in his filth, I here commend him for his influence over the rabble to all future East African travellers ... (Stanley, 1872).

And from another British testimony by Lieutenant General R.S.S. Baden-Powell:

... The first visitor from the outer world to come into the Uganda was a Baluch soldier, named Isau bin Hussein, of Zanzibar, who, in 1849 or in 1850, flying from his creditors, finally reached the court of Suna, King of Uganda. On account of his beard they named him 'Muzagaya' ('The Hairy One'), and he became a power in the land. Through him the people there first heard of the Arabs and of white men, of whose existence only vague reports, treated as fairy tales, had hitherto reached them. The rumour arose among them that they too were originally descended from a white race ... (Kirkland, 1998).

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the growing effectiveness of British measures aimed at abolition caused a reduction in the availability of East African slaves. This lack was, however, partly compensated for by Asiatic slaves,

as shown by the commerce in Asian people from the coast of Baluchistan destined to be sold in the squares of Arabia. And this was one of the alternative slave routes in the western Indian Ocean.

We confirm the theory which maintains that in the Indian Ocean, people of African origin may have moved to India and to the Gulf as free people as well as slaves - more than 70% (about 1,500) of soldiers in Oman were African from East Africa - and Asians were moved to Africa and Southeast Asia as slaves or moved as traders or indentured labourers (Mujitaba, 2000; Jayasuriya and Angenot, 2008). Here the Baluch moved as *Jemadari*, as soldiers, and as body guards to the Omani Sultans, and represented with their firearms their military and defensive strength in Africa. Later on, they settled and started different economic activities; the Baluch did acquire social status and considered themselves 'better than the Africans', while on the South-Central Asian coasts they were enslaved themselves by other ethnic groups in a much more powerful positions (Nicolini, 2007:384-396).⁵ To conclude, the role of the Baluch on the Swahili coast was deeply interconnected with the role played by the Omani Sultans; therefore, they were mercenaries within the slave trade along the Swahili coast during the nineteenth century which was generally 'controlled' by Omani-Arabs and was represented by many diversified groups. It was an endless process of power relationships within slave societies in the Indian Ocean. The conservation of Baluch cultural identity in Africa is a peculiarity of some descendants of the nineteenth century courageous Asian warriors although restricted to few small enclaves.

Our sincere hope is that the history of the Baluch, for a too long time considered the "black fellows" of the Gulf (Peterson, 2004: 32-51) will acquire the dignity it deserves also within Indian Ocean history, and will not remain a history still mere footnotes at best.

Notes

1. With the broad term Swahili coast, we would like to identify a cultural space which stretches from Cape Guardafui to Cabo Delgado. See for example Middleton, J. (1992). *The World of the Swahili. An African Mercantile Civilization*. New Haven: Yale University Press, pp.184-200.
2. Report of the British Commissioner for the joint Anglo-Persian Boundary Commission: F. Goldsmid, *Eastern Persia: An Account of the Journey of the Persian Boundary Commission, 1870-1890*. London. 1876. Goldsmid, F.J. 1863. Report by Col. Goldsmid on the Claims of Persia, Kelat and Muscat to Sovereign Rights on the Mekran Coast, Political Department. Bombay. 19 December.

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3. The intense debate on the role of the Swahili culture and civilization is not the main focus of this note. Amongst the many, see for example T. Spear. 2000. Swahili History and Society to 1900: A Classified Bibliography. *History in Africa*. Vol. 27: 339-373; D. Nurse & T.J. Hinnenbush. 1993. *Swahili and Sabaki: A Linguistic History*. University of California Publications in Linguistics. 121. Berkeley and Los Angeles. University of California Press; M. Horton. 1996. *Shanga. The Archaeology of a Muslim Trading Community on the Coast of East Africa*. Memoirs of the British Institute of East Africa. 14. London. The British Institute in Eastern Africa; T. Spear. 2000. Early Swahili History Reconsidered. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*. Vol. 33, No. 2: 257-290; R.L. Pouwels. 2001. A Reply to Spear on Early Swahili History. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*. Vol. 34. No. 3: 639-646; C.M. Eastman, 1971. Who Are the Waswahili? *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*. Vol. 41. No: 228-236; P. Caplan & F. Topan (Eds.) 2004. *Swahili Modernities. Culture, Politics and Identity on the East Coast of Africa*. Trenton N.J. Africa World Press; F. Shami & G. Pwiti (Eds.) 2000. *Southern Africa and the Swahili world Studies in the African Past*. Dar-es-Salaam University Press; J. Middleton. 1992. *The World of the Swahili. An African Mercantile Civilization*. New Haven. Yale University Press; E. Gilbert, 2002. Coastal East Africa and the Western Indian Ocean: Long-Distance Trade, Empire, Migration, and Regional Unity, 1750-1970. *The History Teacher*. 36. 1: 67 pars; C.M. Kusimba. 1999. *The Rise and Fall of Swahili States*. Walnut Creek. Altamira Press.
4. Santana, F. (1967). *Documentação Avulsa Moçambicana do Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino*, II, Centro de Estudos Históricos Ultramarinos, Lisboa 63, p. 683.
5. Quetta Archives H.S.A. - A.G.G. Office - Essential Records. Baluchistan Archives. Complaint about existence of Slavery in Baluchistan, from Capt. P. Cox, Consul and Political Agent, Maskat to Lieut. Col. C. A. Kembal, Agg. Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, 17th September, 1901. Political 5-2/57.

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