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# Nomads in a Wider Society

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# Nomads in a Wider Society

## **Abstract**

Nomadism is found mostly in marginal areas which support only relatively sparse populations, particularly in the arid and semi-arid regions of Africa and Asia. It is a traditional form of society that allows the mobility and flexibility necessary for relatively even use of vegetation over large areas of low quality rangeland. It also facilitates more social interaction than would be possible among people living in small scattered settlements. Since nomads cope successfully with both social and ecological problems in areas where other people don't want to live, their way of life deserves careful attention. Nomadism involves ways of thinking about space and people which may be important for successful economic development in marginal areas.

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# Nomads in a Wider Society

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Nomadism is found mostly in marginal areas which support only relatively sparse populations, particularly in the arid and semi-arid regions of Africa and Asia. It is a traditional form of society that allows the mobility and flexibility necessary for relatively even use of vegetation over large areas of low quality rangeland. It also facilitates more social interaction than would be possible among people living in small scattered settlements. Since nomads cope successfully with both social and ecological problems in areas where other people don't want to live, their way of life deserves careful attention. Nomadism involves ways of thinking about space and people which may be important for successful economic development in marginal areas.

## The Baluchistan Case

Baluchistan is a sparsely populated area comprising some 350,000 km<sup>2</sup> of western Pakistan and a further 400,000 km<sup>2</sup> in southeastern Iran and southwestern Afghanistan. It is probably the poorest and least developed area of each of the three countries. In Pakistan it comprises 44% of the country, but its population is less than 5 % of the national total. These figures - combined with the fact that it is largely barren mountain and desert, has no large rivers or other economically significant renewable natural resources, suffers from severe climatic extremes, and is populated by tribes which are culturally and

linguistically distinct from the rest of Pakistan - are largely responsible for its past failure to attract development.

This situation has changed since the Russian move into Afghanistan. Pakistani Baluchistan has become a focus of attention for a number of bilateral and international agencies, as well as the Government of Pakistan. Unfortunately, project design is still in most respects conventional and unimaginative. Now the nomads of Baluchistan are likely to suffer more from development than they did from neglect, since the new effort is mostly focused (as it would be in more densely populated areas) on irrigation - albeit small-scale - in the scattered settled communities. This strategy will further disrupt the economic, social, and political balance between the pastoral and agricultural, the nomadic and settled sectors of the society - which has already been disturbed by the combined effects of national policies and outside economic forces. While development also originates from the outside, its effects can be more controlled and constructive. Unfortunately, the idea of supporting nomadic activity offends the professional conscience of the applied ecologists, agricultural economists, and national politicians who dominate development thinking. In the case of Baluchistan this professional position may lead to unfortunate results.

The role of nomads in Baluchistan is similar to that of nomads in other parts of the Middle East. Only 1.2 million ha. of Baluchistan are cultivated annually. Investment in irrigation will probably be more effective in improving the quality of this cultivation than in increasing the proportion of cultivated to noncultivated land in the province as a whole. Uncultivated land is considered rangeland, but it is mostly of very poor quality. It is used by an uncounted number of nomads, probably less than half a million, or less than ten percent of the population of the Pakistan province excluding the provincial capital, Quetta.

Despite its economic marginality, this large territory between Afghanistan and the Gulf has been continuously inhabited since prehistoric times. The great majority of the population are Baluch. They speak various dialects of an Iranian language, Baluchi, and they have been the dominant ethnic-tribal group in the

area for several centuries. However, little was known about them outside the area until the British began to direct attention to their colonial North West Frontier in the 1830s. At that time Baluch society was already conspicuously heterogeneous. Different tribal groups claimed different - many of them non-Baluch - origins, and were politically and occupationally stratified. Most of the area contained small pockets suitable for cultivation, separated by vast expanses of mountain and desert with only very scanty vegetation. The agricultural land was cultivated by smallholders, helots and serfs (most of whom were of pre-Baluch or otherwise non-Baluch origins). Chiefs (mostly of known non-Baluch origin) intermarried with their own kind from other settlements and wove alliances with the intervening nomads (whose ancestors probably all entered the area as Baluch), whom they needed as henchmen and militia. All these groups went under the name of Baluch and identified themselves as Baluch to outsiders, but among themselves they used baluch exclusively for the nomadic pastoralists. The fact that the settled of all classes, both earlier and later arrivals, assimilated to the nomadic identity and language and became Baluch (though never baluch) is particularly significant for an understanding of the meaning of life in Baluchistan both then and now.

The contribution of the nomads to Baluch society cannot be quantified as it is not so much economic as cultural. The nomads generate the Baluch view of the world, which is the cultural basis of the whole society, nomadic and settled. Without the nomads, Baluch society as a whole will lose the cultural glue that holds it together.

### The Cultural Contribution of Nomads

In Makran especially (the southwestern Division of the Province, approximately 38,000 km<sup>2</sup>, continuing westward across the border into Iran), but to some extent throughout Baluchistan and even beyond, these baluch nomads are considered a people apart. It was they who somewhere between 500 and 1,000 years ago brought into the area the language, the identity and - most importantly - the values which have come to constitute the culture of Baluchistan.

Since at least as early as 1800 many baluch have migrated as mercenaries and adventurers, both northward into the Turkmen area either side of the modern border between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union, where they developed the Baluchi rugs that are now collectors' items in the West, and south to the ports of the Persian Gulf and East Africa as far as Zanzibar.

In the 1972 census of Pakistan, the population of Makran was listed as 304,000. Of these, 74,000 are settled in the two major agricultural centers of Turbat and Panjgur, and the port settlement of Gwadar. There are no reliable figures to indicate how many of the remaining 230,000 were baluch or nomadic, nor how many still spend most of their year in tents or other temporary dwellings with their families and flocks rather than opting for jobs in the booming Gulf Emirates. We may estimate, conservatively, well over 50,000. But as in the larger society their significance for the future development of Makran far outweighs their numbers or their own economic contribution.

The baluch are important for the economy of the area. They provide valuable milk products and are an indispensable source of labor for the date harvest which coincides with the slack season in the pastoral cycle. They are also agricultural producers themselves: much of the agricultural production of the area depends on unpredictable river flow and runoff, which only the baluch understand. Small pockets of soil scattered throughout the area produce crops when a downpour happens to bring water, but only if a nomad is there to apply it.

In addition to their economic role, the nomads are even more important for the morale of the total population. Their way of life embodies the values to which the rest of the population subscribes. Baluch values derive from the conditions of the nomadic life. Their moral code encompasses the major rules of honor, hospitality, asylum and compensation for homicide, governing relations with strangers, refugees and criminals, and between men and women. Their poetry and songs celebrate exploits and conditions that are either nomadic and pastoral or are difficult to reconcile with a settled agricultural life. The most celebrated of their poems, which they use as a national anthem, begins:

The Baluch forts are their mountains

Their storehouses are in pathless rock faces

Their peaks are better than an army

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...

Even when confronted with poor, undernourished, uneducated nomads in the new centers of local government, the Baluch still hold to the values of the good nomadic life.

### Prospects for a Nomadic Future

The Baluch are the only people who use or are likely to use some 90% of the territory of Makran. Without them the greater part of the population would be marooned in isolated oases, which do not have the resources to be economically independent. With increasing dependence on outside subsidies, many would gradually migrate to take advantage of the more attractive economic and cultural opportunities outside the province. The presence of Baluch weaves them into an interdependent social, economic, political, geographic, and cultural whole.

The decline of the Baluch, which now threatens Baluch society, is due to a syndrome familiar in other pastoral areas of the world. Changes in the larger political economy as well as changes in dominant values in the larger consumer-oriented society have altered the day-to-day economic and political balance between farmers and nomads.

Despite the economic importance of the baluch in the traditional economy of Makran, development programs here as elsewhere favor industry and agriculture. The reason is simple: estimated return on investment. Development experts who observe the meager natural resources of Baluchistan, the non-existent infrastructure, and the unpromising quality of the labor pool, conclude that there is no economic justification for investment.

Odds are heavily stacked against the nomads. Many influential members of the larger society would rather move to national cities than endorse the traditional lifestyle. The baluch are losing the will to argue their own case. Moreover, powerful arguments have evolved against any policy encouraging nomadism. Apart from governments' distrust of nomads, who are difficult both to tax and to provide with facilities, another, often strident, argument maintains that nomads are responsible for over-grazing, which has reduced the vegetation cover to levels where it is economically useless and often beyond recovery. To support nomads, it is argued, would be to work against ecology. This argument should be carefully examined. Ecologist's assessments are based on the assumption that what they see in the vegetation now is a long-term trend and the direct consequence of nomadic activity. There is in fact no convincing evidence for this. We simply do not know whether baluch herding strategies are responsible for environmental degradation or whether economic incentives at national and international levels have temporarily caused them to overgraze. Furthermore, there is no proof that disturbing the nomadic basis of baluch society would alleviate this problem.

If nomadic pastoralism as a way of life has survived so long, it would seem to have proved itself viable both ecologically and culturally. If the Baluch were left now to their own devices, their future, and especially the future of the baluch, would be uncertain. It would largely depend, as much of their history has, on what foreign interests various entrepreneurs among them managed to attract. Historically, when there was no foreign interest and no great economic attraction outside, there seems to have been a balance within the area between agriculture and pastoralism, between settled and nomadic populations, and



between natural population growth and emigration. Since Baluch society appears to have worked best under these conditions it makes sense to design development in such a way as to edge the society back toward that balance. The way to do this is not to invest exclusively in roads, power, irrigation works, and agricultural extension, but to set about systematically restoring the balance between the pastoral and the agricultural sectors of the internal economy, and between the nomadic and the settled constituencies of the local polity; to distribute the investment more evenly between the settlements and areas of nomadic activity; to rebuild the morale of the Baluch in order to rebuild the morale of the Baluch.

Nomadism, as a way of life, is rarely explicable simply as ecological adaptation. In modern conditions, seasonal movement could in many cases be accomplished by commuting shepherds as well as by migrating families. But the intimacy and commitment nomadism forges between the family and the range in marginal conditions is probably unattainable by any other means and more promising ecologically in the long run than any other feasible use strategy. Moreover, the nomads' knowledge and understanding of the total territory is an important support for other sectors of the economy and for the society's general conception of nature, the relationship between the total society and its environment.

The natural conditions and the historical experience of Makran are sufficiently similar to vast areas elsewhere in Southwest Asia and North Africa to suggest the possibility that these considerations may apply beyond Baluchistan. Despite their apparent ecological and political drawbacks, nomads' ideological contributions may be indispensable for the future use and development of vast areas of desert and steppe throughout the Middle East and beyond.

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