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MARITIME INDIAN OCEAN ROUTES: THE ROLE OF GWADAR/GWĀTAR

Abstract

Fra le principali rotte dell'Oceano Indiano – sia marittime sia terrestri – Gwadar, divisa nella seconda metà del XIX secolo dalla Commissione Britannica per le Frontiere fra la baia orientale persiana di Gwātar e quella occidentale di Gwadar, rappresentò una delle principali vie di comunicazione tra il Medio Oriente ed il Sub-continente Indiano, giocando un ruolo strategico nel commercio di schiavi, avorio, datteri e spezie dall'Africa orientale e dalla Penisola araba verso l'Asia centrale e viceversa. Tanto Gwātar quando Gwadar, sulla regione costiera del Makrān, sono state definite scientificamente terra incognita.

History

Along the shores of the Western Indian Ocean, trade relations between the people of the Asian, Arabian and East African coasts were innumerable and deeply intelinked. Such links and relationships of trade and power were to be sought in those elements that constituted the close equilibrium of the Indian Ocean, that is, in the monsoons, in the presence of commercial thalassocracies (the well known 'merchant-states'), in the predominance of mercantile laws, and in the trade routes of spices, ivory and slaves. Starting from the sixteenth century onwards, the European desires for conquest of commercial monopolies in the slave

trade, and in all those factors essential to the creation of multiple ties, contributed to the consolidation of a 'red thread' which would link three continents: Europe, Asia and Africa. Oman international trade activities during four centuries - 1500 to 1800 - saw irresistible waves of political leaders, brave seafarers, valorous merchants and adventurers in an escalating competition between leaders and merchants from every part of Asia and Africa as well as of Europe and the newly United States. During the period that saw the rise of European powers in the Indian Ocean, according to available historiography, a 'revolution' occurred from which new protagonists emerged along the Asian, Arabian and African regions. Against this backdrop, the gradual emergence of new Omani dynasties resulted from the polarization that followed the struggle against the Portuguese presence in the Persian/Arab Gulf and in the Indian Ocean. This gave rise to gradual and discontinuous processes of unification among the Omani groups, traditionally divided and in conflict with each other, which came to the fore in the progressive affirmation of what we could define as the international power of the Omani Arabs in the Gulf and in the Indian Ocean. The history of Oman international trade relations has been closely connected mainly to the maritime routes across the Western Indian Ocean: sailing the Gulf and the Western Indian Ocean had always been dependent on the fact that the winds occur in an annual sequence with great regularity. The balance created by the monsoons was achieved over the space of a year with the following rhythm: from December to March the monsoon blows from Arabia and the western coasts of India in the north-east, pushing as far as Mogadishu. The winds are light and constant, the climate hot and dry. In April the monsoon starts to blow from the south-west, from Eastern Africa towards the coasts of the Gulf, the climate cooler but much more humid. The rains are mainly in April and May, while the driest months are November and December. Until the nineteenth century, sailing from Arabia in November in a south-south-westerly direction took thirty to forty days in ideal weather conditions while, in December, thanks to the stabilization of the monsoon, the voyage took only twenty to twenty-five days. Consequently, thanks to the monsoons the international trade relations of Oman had been historically through the sea; although we must remember that Oman trades were intense through land as well. Maritime coastal trades, as

well as long distance trades, constituted the expressions of an economy that was already highly sophisticated, developed and organized; therefore, the necessity of control of these sea trade routes represented a crucial element: a political element. Starting from the eighteenth century onwards, groups from the interior gradually began to settle on the coastal new centres.



Makrān

Suddenly the traveler comes upon a desert plain before the sea, where there are many boiling mud pools. Everything in the Makrān coastal region blends together in a kind of colourless mass; the sand, the houses, the people - the poverty. What is striking though, is the brightness of the veils and of the Baluch dresses of the Makrani women who walk around the old Arab-Indian-African market. This fascinating place is the ancient Ismaili (*Khojas*) community centre; the Ismailis played a crucial role in the history of the port town and still

retain a determined power in the local society.

The role played by Gwadar within the framework of the slave, ivory and spice trade coming from East Africa had been crucial. And the African element is still very evident in this ex-Omani *enclave*; music has many African overtones and is played with African instruments. The dances, performed only by men dressed as women, start with some rupees placed on the top of your head, and the dancer moves around slowly picking the money up.

In front of Gwadar port there is Ashtola Island, explored by McGregor in 1877-78. It is a wild and beautiful island, with a high mountain that ends in a plateau. Here people tell the legend of the white horse of the Prophet, as remembered by the presence of a shrine. Guater (also Gwadar, Pers. Govāter) is a little known locality at the southeastern corner of Iran on the border with Pakistan. Gwātar (Gwuttur) (25° 10' N. 61° 33' E.) must not be confused with Gwadar (25° 6' N. 62° 19' E.). Since the British Commission definition of the borders in 1871-2 Gwātar bay, on the eastern shore, remained within the Persian borders; while Gwadar, on the western shore, about fifty miles west of Gwātar (De Cardi, p. 164; Potter, p. 139), is today part of Pakistan.

Gwadar is a small port on the neck of a hammer-headed promontory on the Makrān coast, about 250 miles east of Muscat (Hay, pp. 433-443); it included the Persian town of Gwātar, the Persian port, and the whole sandy peninsula of that name, covering an area of about 307 square miles (Hughes-Buller, p. 280); it has been one of the main routes of communication between the Middle East and the Indian Subcontinent, together with a strategic role within slave, ivory, dates, and spice trade from East Africa and from the Arabian Peninsula, directed to Central Asia and vice versa (Saldanha, p. 19). One of the earliest detailed source that specifically names Gwātar/Gwadar within Gedrosia region is *Anabasis Alexandri* by Arrianus of 325 B.C. (Roberts, p. 187). Together with Pasni, a fishing village on the Makrān coast - today in Pakistan - , Gwadar was attacked and burnt by the Portuguese in 1581 (Stiffe, pp. 610-12; Badalkhan, pp. 153-169). In 1739, Taki Khan, Nāder Shah's general (1736-1747), captured it (Hughes-Buller, p. 48; Miles, p. 252). In 1784 Mir Naşir Khan I (1749-95), the *khan* of Kalāt, granted as a "jagir" (lease), a temporary grant of land exempted from taxation the port of Gwadar to Sa'id

Soltān b. Aḥmad Āl bu-Saʿid of Oman (r. 1792-1804) who ruled on Muscat, on a trust basis (Ross, p.113; Piacentini and Redaelli, pp. 33-49). In 1784 half of the revenues on Gwadar belonged to the Gički family of Makrān (Broome, pp. 221-45); while Gwātar was nominally under the Persian influence through Jadghāl Baluch tribe chiefs (Pottinger, p. 30; Macgregor, p. 24; Rubin, pp. 59-72).

On the occasion of the construction of the Indo-European Telegraph Line, investigations made by the Makrān, Sistān and Persia Boundary Commission, directed by Sir Frederick Goldsmid (1818-1908) (Goldsmid, pp. 269-297), juridical-territorial claims were advanced (Soli, pp. 329-351).

On 24 January 1862 Mir Faqir Moḥammad Bizenjō, chief of the Bizenjō tribe of Makrān and ally of the Khan of Kalāt, who was representative of Kēč, signed a treaty with Goldsmid for the safety of the passage of the telegraph line through Makrān; the representative also granted to Goldsmid the safety of the lands belonging to Mir Bayan Gički, chief of the Gički family. At the beginning of 1863 Ebrāhim Khan, the Persian military governor of Bampūr, wrote letters to Saʿid Tawayni Āl bu-Saʿid of Oman (r. 1856-66), grandson of Saʿid Soltān b. Aḥmad Āl bu-Saʿid of Oman, and to the Omani Arab deputy (*wālī*), named *Mahomed* (Leech, p. 702), of Gwadar suggesting not to give their approval to the prosecution of the telegraph line to the British before a Persian consent. Numerous raids followed, and the British were obliged to send forces to protect their political agents in Gwadar (Harris, pp. 169-190). Only in 1868 the Persian Government accepted to give up its “rights of sovereignty” on the oasis of Kēč and on Gwadar as part of the Kermān province: it was better for British India to border with Persia than with a tribal territories such as of Kalāt (Khazeni, pp. 1399-1411).

In 1863 Reverend George Percy Badger was put in charge of the Boundary Commission to investigate on the intricate question of the borders in this area (Badger, pp. 1-8); he considered politically advisable that Gwadar remained within Omani hands, with a well armed fleet strong enough to defend it, rejecting the hypothesis of restoration to the Khanate of Kalāt, who was unable to protect this important strategic port against Persian claims. During the second half of the nineteenth century Gwadar was at the same time: an enclave of

the Sultans of Oman, a place of interest for the Gički family from Kēč Makrān, a strategic observatory for the British Government along the coast of Makrān in Persian direction, and a station of the Indo-European Telegraph Line. On 24 September 1872, joined by the Persian Commissioner Mirzā Ma‘šūm Khan, (Piacentini, p. 200) the British Boundary Commission fixed the demarcation of the frontier, starting from the bay of Gwātar to the west of Gwadar, between Persia, Makrān and Sistān (Brobst, pp. 197-215; Nicolini, pp. 4-23).

Only on 8 September 1958, and for three million pounds, the request of the Khans of Kalāt to restore the “*jagir*” (lease) on Gwadar granted from Mir Naṣir Khan I of Kalāt to the Āl Bu-Sa‘id of Oman, was finally satisfied. The price for a town, the price for an important harbour and a strategic base that has belonged to the Omani Sultans since 1784. Since that period, close relationships subsisted between the Āl bu-Sa‘id of Oman and the Baluch tribes of the coastal area of Makran.

Slave Trade

During the second half of the nineteenth century, more precisely in 1874, a group belonging to the tribe of the Rind from eastern Baluchistan bought domestic slaves at Gwadar;¹ they came from the coasts of East Africa. This gave rise to a conflict of interests between the Rind and the representant (Na‘ib) of the Khan of Kalat in Kej (today’s Turbat, capital of Makrān); a conflict which ended in bloodshed and saw the death of four members of the “blue-blooded tribe” of Baluchistan. Sir Robert G. Sandeman (1835-1892), the Deputy-Commissioner of Dera Ghazi Khan, affirmed that the death of four members of the Rind tribe had nothing to do with the slave trade at Gwadar. Sandeman, as described by biographers of the time was very charismatic and ambitious, understood the psychology of intertribal relations much better than his Political Agents, his representants, as, in his opinion, they were not able to identify the real causes of tribe conflicts between the members of the Baluchistan groups. In this regard he reminded: “*domestic slavery is a time-*

¹ H.S.A. - B.A. A.G.G. OFFICE Records, File 292/1874 Misc., *Slavery in Baluchistan. The Gazetteer of Baluchistan (Makran)*, Quetta, 1906 (repr. 1986), pp. 98-101.

honoured institution in Baluchistan as in other eastern countries, and much of the land is cultivated by slave labour ... at the same time it must be remembered that many of the ideas attaching to the word "slavery", which are so repellent to civilized minds, are absent from the manners of the Baluch tribes".² This affirmation by Sandeman could be interpreted in different ways: for example as eurocentrist and full of contempt for local populations. Nevertheless, the following elements suggested different interpretations of the "justification" of slavery in Asia within a wider scenario: the strategic importance of Baluchistan within Anglo-Russian rivalry; the second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-80); the recent construction of the telegraph line which connected Calcutta to London (Indo-European Telegraph Line) after the political consequences of the Great Mutiny in India of 1857; the growing importance of the North West Frontier of British India; the need for definition of the borders between Persia and the Khanate of Kalat which began with the Commission directed by Sir Frederic Goldsmid in 1870 and ended with the sign of an Agreement in Teheran on 24 September in 1872.

In 1877 Sandeman became the Agent to the Governor General and Chief Commissioner of Baluchistan. During the first years of the twentieth century, the British measures adopted against the slave trade contributed to diminishing the number of slaves from East Africa; to this reduction corresponded a new slave trade of Baluch origin, as testified by the trade in Asians coming from the coast of Baluchistan directed to Arabia to be sold in Arab markets during the first decades of the twentieth century.³ As clear proof, on 20 May 1903 the responsible Agent of Jask area sent a telegram to the Director of the Persian Gulf section in Karachi saying that: "*a great number of them are brought to these places from the Kej district ... not*

² H.S.A. - A.G.G. Office - Essential Records, *From the A.G.G. to the Secretary to the Government of India*, Foreign Department, Quetta, 25 March, 1884, Report n. 942; Selections from the Records of the Government of India. Foreign Department, No. CCXI, First Administration Report of the Baluchistan Agency, Calcutta, 1886, p. 290.

³ H.S.A. - A.G.G. Office - Essential Records, *Complaint about existence of Slavery in Baluchistan, from Capt. P. Cox, Consul and Political Agent, Maskat to Lieut. Col. C. A. Kemball, Agg. Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, 17th September, 1901*, Political 5-2/57.

only Africans but low caste Baluchis are now being sold by petty headmen".⁴ The poorest among the Baluch were sold as slaves, and the cause was the following: "*the reason there is such a demand for slaves from these parts, is that the trade from the African Coast has been effectually stopped, and Baluchistan is the only place now open to them*".⁵ The Baluch were collected within the district of Kej and sent as slaves also in Persian territory.⁶ Baluch slave women had their heads totally razed, than covered with quicklime, so that their hair could any more grow, rendering them perfectly recognizable to their own tribes, and forbidding them to coming back to their places of origin. The role of Baluch mercenary groups within the slave trade in sub-Saharan East Africa was represented by a specific ethnic group who was enslaved in South-Central Asia by other groups in a much more powerful position; and this was a continuous process of shame and humiliation of weak and desperate people in this maritime part of the world, and a process of different perceptions held by various powers between the land and the seaboard areas.

Gwadar/ Gwātar

Gwadar today belongs to the jurisdiction of the Government of Baluchistan - Home and Tribal Affairs Department, within the Makran Division. As a consequence, the definition of Makran as a Tribal Area forbids tourists, especially westerners, to travel throughout this region without a N.O.C. (no objection certificate).

Gwātar remained a fishing village within the Persian borders where today aquaculture and shrimps are farmed; in Pakistan instead, since 1964, the Gwadar Deep Sea Port Project was a dream of Pakistani government; after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the

⁴ H.S.A. - A.G.G. Office Confidential, 1903-1905, File 23, n. 1510, *Traffic in Slaves from Kej to Persia, from the Ass. Superintendent Jask Sub-Division to the Director, Persian Gulf Section, Karachi, Telegram dated 20th May, 1903.*

⁵ H.S.A. - A.G.G. Office Confidential, 1903-1905, File 23, n. 1510, *Traffic in Slaves from Kej to Persia, from the Ass. Superintendent Jask Sub-Division to the Director, Persian Gulf Section, Karachi, Extract of a Letter n. 11 dated 28th March, 1904.*

⁶ H.S.A. - A.G.G. Office Confidential, 1903-1905, *Traffic in Slaves from Kej to Persia, from Russell, Under Secr. to the Gov. of India to the A.G.G. Quetta, 1903, File 23, n. 1510.*

newly formed Central Asian republics – together with the rich trans-Afghan pipelines - China finally largely financed (\$200 millions) and built the Gwadar Port Project first phase in January 2006 (Axmann, pp. 268-274). Although the Pakistani Gwadar should become a twenty-first century reality equipped with a highway and oil and natural gas pipelines (Kaplan, pp. 64-94), connecting both “horizontal” (Iran, Pakistan, China) and “vertical” (Afghanistan, Central Asia) strategic and economic interests, the traditions of the Makrāni and Baluch groups, still remain politically but not culturally divided.

Abbreviations

A.G.G.: Agent to the Governor-General

B.A.: Baluchistan Archives, Quetta, Pakistan

C.O.Q.D.A.: Commissioner of Quetta Archives, Pakistan

H.S.A.: Home Secretariat Archives, Quetta, Pakistan

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