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## Literature Review:

# The role of nation states in managing memories of disputed territories

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**Part 3 of 8: Borders, Ethnic Groups, 'Tribes', and Memory**

**- Vahe Boyajian**

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## Borders, Ethnic Groups, 'Tribes', and Memory - Vahe Boyajian

Vahe Boyajian, Research Fellow at the Institute of Archeology and Ethnography (National Academy of Sciences, Yerevan) draws on the wide-ranging literature to outline some connections between the phenomena of borders, 'tribes' and memory. Vahe demonstrates these debates by narrowing the scope to a specific geographical area incorporating Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

The unabridged scholarly contributions on borders and borderlands, 'tribes' and ethnic groups, nationalism, state politics and related issues provide a massive literature for various approaches and discourses, intellectual debates and theories. The terms 'borders' and 'borderlands' are used by a wide range of intellectuals and academics, by representatives of various fields of social life of humankind, which indicates that the interest towards this phenomenon and its significance is immensely high, yet this also means that the topic is not just one and unified, rather there are many topics.

Malcolm Anderson, for example, defining characteristics of borders stresses that borders are both institutions and processes. As institutions, they mark and draw lines between states thus featuring the sovereign status of them, as well as that of the citizenship. As processes, borders have more than one function; they become instruments in the hand of the state to conduct policy and maintain control over the people. Borders, thus, play a crucial role in creating the nation and the state (Anderson 1996: 1-3). That is the reason why borders have also become a term in discourses and narratives of phenomena like nationalism and identity.

In defining the borders and borderlands Oscar Martinez (1998: 5-25) concentrates on several crucial processes: *transnational interaction*, where the borders act as a place of interchange of foreign customs, ideas, institutions, etc.; *conflicts*, both international and ethnic; *accommodation* of those conflicts; *separateness*, when the inhabitants of the border zones distinguish themselves both from people on the other side of the border, as well as from those in the interior areas.

The socio-cultural and territorial elements of the borders and boundaries are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Here one can face a danger of categorization, if identifying these patterns as separate phenomena. In fact, in anthropological research all these patterns have been studied by an emphasis on differences, a long lasting process that has resulted in groundbreaking literature on each aspect.

According to Fredrik Barth, the ethnic groups are socially constructed, whose members have a specific strategy to use and manipulate their cultural identity, in other words to stress and undermine certain aspects depending on the context. For Barth, the boundaries between ethnic groups are maintained by cultural features, which, of course, does not suppose that those features are the natural continuation of the previous 'culture' (Barth 1998: 38).

Sandra Wallman, brings the idea of 'opposition' into the realm of the investigation of the boundaries between the groups. She argues that social boundaries do not just have two sides, but are characterized by an interface line between inside and outside. Any social boundary must be viewed as a consequence of the various possible relationships between identity and interface. Boundary marks the edge of a social system, the interface between that system and one of those contiguous upon it and it has a significance for the members of these systems (Wallman 1978: 207).

Similarly, Anthony Cohen argues, 'a community exists only by virtue of its opposition to another community'. Cohen also argues that traditional spatial ties, kinship and class were transformed in the new age, so the structural boundaries are diminishing or eroding; instead, the aspects of differences are being transported into the minds of the people (Cohen 1986: 2).

Of course, there has been also criticism on such approaches, one point being that it emphasizes the internal identification rather than external constraint and the shaping influence of wider structures (social, economic, political), such as those of class and the state. If ethnicity depends on ascription from both sides of the group boundary, then one

should accept the fact that by that members of one group might be able to impose their categorisations on the members of another group (Jenkins 1997: 23).

Another important dimension of borders and borderlands is their featuring as state, geopolitical and territorial boundaries. The state borders are usually referred as real borders, in distinguishing them from the symbolic ones. These dimensions of borderlands have been mainly the focus of political and economic studies. In many anthropological works, state borders figured as if not the key objects of the focus, at least they are touched in terms of explaining the territorial and geopolitical aspects of the given locality (see Cohen 1965; Cole & Wolf 1974; Lavie 1990; Leach 1954; van Bruinessen 1992).

Nowadays there is a growing importance of border perspectives in political anthropology, where the relations between border areas and their nations and states have more importance than the local culture. Currently, the interdisciplinary nature of border studies prevails, although it also leads to uncertainties, becoming more a fashion, rather than an approach (Wilson & Donnan 2012: 16-17). In this regard, Mark Salter states '... The border is a primary institution of the contemporary state, the construction of a geopolitical world of multiple states, and the primary ethico-political division between the possibility of politics inside the state and the necessity of anarchy outside the state' (Salter 2011: 66-67).

Borders bearing both inclusive and exclusive characteristics, thus, are places where the similarities and distinctiveness of certain groups expose themselves more vividly. This, of course, applies to ethnic groups as well. Hence, the ideas of ethnic identity, otherness, uniqueness, and related phenomena more explicitly are found at borderlands. Ethnicity and its correlate, national identity, is a fundamental force found at all borders, and it remains the bedrock of many political, economic and social activities which continue to befuddle the institutions and agents of the state, in the borderlands and in metropolitan centres of power and influence (Donnan & Wilson 1999: 5-6).

Taking the borders and borderlands as loci for conflicts (Martinez: *ibid*), the question of actors of the process emerges. They can be diverse groups of people (united and/or separated on ethnic, social, political, economic backgrounds) and institutions. Those groups might be characterized as ranked or unranked, yet neither of them is static. Rapid changes affect the preliminary adopted categories, and as Donald Horowitz suggests: ‘Among the engines of change is ethnic conflict itself’ (Horowitz 1985: 32).

In his attempt to define the concept of ‘ethnic group’, Horowitz, along with other attributes, talks about ‘genealogical doubts’ (when group members try to pass) and ‘permanent distinctiveness’ of certain groups, by that stressing the elastic nature of ethnicity; ‘...Ethnicity easily embraces groups differentiated by color, language, and religion; it covers ‘tribes’, ‘races’, ‘nationalities’, and castes’ (*ibid*: 51-53).

The word ‘tribe’, in its turn, is one of the most used and misused terms in describing many different kinds of social structures, formations and groups. Tapper suggests that:

*Tribe* may be used loosely of a localized group in which kinship is the dominant idiom of organization, and whose members consider themselves culturally distinct (in terms of customs, dialect or language, and origins); tribes are usually politically unified, though not necessarily under a central leader, both features being commonly attributable to interaction with states. Such tribes also form parts of larger, usually regional, political structures of tribes of similar kinds; they do not usually relate directly with the state, but only through these intermediate structures. The more explicit term confederacy or confederation should be used for local group of tribes that is heterogeneous in terms of culture, presumed origins and perhaps class composition, yet is politically unified usually under a central authority. (Tapper 1983: 6-9).

It is worth noting the importance of the role of the tribes in the state formation in the geographical areas decided upon at the beginning of this piece. As noted above, borders, or

in other words, demarcated territory, are the primary institution of the contemporary state, though, alongside with other attributes of state, like state power, legitimacy, judicial sovereignty are regarded as aspirations. The aim of the states is to obtain these features, but in reality, not all of the states are successful in this (Khoury & Kostiner 1990: 6-7).

Diverse groups within the state possess the capacity to limit the power of the state in various aspects, but notably in the sphere of territorial dominance. The accommodation or, encapsulation of the tribes into the social, political and economic life of the state varies depending on the capacity of the state. In their turn, tribes also change in course of time: the traditional social structures decline thus pushing the tribes towards inevitable transformations.

Joel Migdal notes that tribes and state form a dialectical symbiosis by mingling and sustaining, sometimes trying even to destroy each other he writes:

Maximal state-ness means a centralized, bureaucratized administration that permits little autonomy for tribal groups; it means that the society acknowledges the state's legitimacy over a clearly demarcated territory with established frontiers and that it is fully assimilated into a single nation, with the state being the embodiment of the society's collective will. Minimal state-ness, by contrast, means a highly decentralized state authority that permits vast autonomy for tribal groups who do not accept state authority over the territory within the specific borders claimed by the state and who do not subscribe to the same ideological precepts that the state wishes to impose on the society. In the Middle East, because the degree of state-ness varies widely between maximalist and minimalist, interactions between states and tribal groups also vary widely (Migdal 1985).

Ernest Gellner in his description of the phenomenon of tribalism in the Middles East emphasizes several constituents – segmentary lineage organization; weak, quasi-elective, or even fully elective leadership; symbiosis of pastoral and agricultural populations;

complementarity with holy lineages; external trade and pilgrimage routes; external ideological input; the wider political game; the mercenary option (Gellner 1983: 109-114). The combination of some of these elements, sometimes all of them, is applicable to almost all the tribal groups in Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The habitat of most of the tribal groups is mainly peripheral, thus placing them in border zones of the mentioned states.

Among a wide range of reasons for the continuing prominence of tribalism, ethnicity, and conflict in this region at least three can be attributed to these countries. First, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan all are multi-ethnic countries (despite the fact that in Iran, for instance, no ethnic minority is recognized at the level of constitution). Second, many ethnic groups (ironically with traditional tribal structures) are transborder peoples (Baloch – inhabiting bordering areas of Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan; Turkomans – Iran, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan; Pashtuns – alongside the Durand line, in former North-West Frontier Province, now FATA – Federally Administered Tribal Areas, etc.). Third, the relative weakness and the limited capacity of at least two of these states (Banuazizi & Weiner 1986: 3-7).

Subsequently, rising and shaping of ethnic and even national movements cannot be limited merely by the boundaries of an industrialised society, as Gellner suggests (Gellner 2006: 46). Farhan Siddiqi, for instance, talking about the politics of ethnicity in Pakistan reasonably explicates the socio-economic settings of the Baloch movement as one of a tribal society; the Sindhi ethnonational endeavors—as an example in rural environment; and the Muhajir’s movement—as a case in an urban setting (Siddiqi 2012: 3). Siddiqi deals also with the germination of the ethnic conflicts in Pakistan, which he considers the responsibility of both the government and the state. Ascribing infrastructural power to the government and the despotic power to the state, Siddiqi writes:

... despotic powers have been most readily applied in order to resolve ethnic conflicts than have political strategies of accommodation and compromise. Even when accommodation and compromise have been applied, they have been largely



symptomatic of the state's contrivance in co-opting radical elites and their respective ethnic organisations without attending to the larger political, social and economic problems that non-dominant ethnic groups face (ibid: 114).

Another argument the author uses for elucidating the current politics of ethnicity in Pakistan concerns the intra-ethnic conflict, which is labelled as 'an essential reality' (ibid: 112). In all three cases, the internal problems hinder the resistance of the ethnic groups against the state. Siddiqi emphasises the fact that 'cultural homogeneity in a group does not necessarily translate into common political goals and objectives' (p. 117). Especially among the Baloch, the inter-tribal conflicts and the detachment of many *sardars* (tribal leaders) from the rest of the population, their co-operation with the state at certain levels play into the hands of the central authorities. Given the fractured nature of the struggle against the state and the lack of a nationwide agenda for the Baloch, Sindhis, and the Muhajirs, calling those movements national seems debatable.

A volume edited by Magnus Marsden (Marsden 2010) comprising more than a dozen contributions on the identity issues on multiple levels (ethnic, religious, sectarian, gender, etc.) also gives a comprehensive picture of nowadays Pakistan. The range of the topics is quite impressive – from state policies towards ethnic and religious minorities to individual and collective identity.

Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern emphasise the importance of two key elements regarding the collective identity of a given group – the notions of memory and notions of landscape;

Memory and place, via landscape (including seascape), can be seen as crucial transducers whereby the local, national and global are brought into mutual alignment; or as providing sites where conflicts between these influences are played out. Such a theoretical scheme can also be seen as providing an alternative way of studying identity to the concentration on nationalism and national senses of identity as phenomena *per se*. It can help to re-establish a sphere of studies for social

anthropology that would integrate aspects of earlier community-based approaches with approaches that emphasise political change, citizenship, national identity, historical influences, and similar broad factors (Stewart & Strathern 2003: 2).

Coming to the phenomenon of *memory*, it is noteworthy that different types of memories (individual, collective, historical, etc.) (Bull & Hansen 2016; Bosch 2016; Tamm 2013) are used by people, both at individual and group levels, as well as by institutions (state, etc.) differently depending on the socio-cultural context or/and political expediency. There can also be examples of individual stories and collective histories deeply rooted in the memory of the representatives of a given group that ‘migrate’ beyond the boundaries of a certain cultural and social milieu, thus applying a trans-border nature to memory (Weinreich 2010).

The notion of historical memory can be associated with cultural heritage of a group of people, which, in its turn is tightly interwoven with phenomena like national, ethnic identity, and nationalism. In this regard, Benedict Anderson argues that ‘nationalism has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which – as well as against which – it came into being’ (Anderson 2006: 12).

Somewhat similar stance advocates Ugo Fabietti (2011): while exploring the roots of the Baloch nationalism in Pakistan, he brings up the connection between the notions of memory and nationalism. Fabietti stresses the importance of distinction between the local identity memories and the imported ideas. Different values, models, behavioral codes, in other words cultural elements that precede nationalism ‘are not always simultaneously active. Indeed, many of them are, so to speak, ‘dormant’ – or to use an expression by Aleida Assmann (Assman, A. (1999). *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*. München: Beck), ‘stored’ in what she herself calls the ‘memory-archive’... the discourse of Balochi nationalism is founded on a form of memory-function, which takes elements of the memory-archive and organises them according to a purpose, ‘Within the memory-function, these ideas, values, symbols and behaviours ‘retrieved’ from the memory

archive interact with other elements which Balochi nationalism had absorbed during and after colonial era (Fabietti: 112-113).

However, it should be noted that in case of the Baloch, historical memory does not necessarily always manifest itself in a coherent and solid way. Depending on variety of situations and circumstances, many tribes in both Iranian and Pakistani Balochistan in a way select specific constituents (remembrances of their heroic past, biographies of legendary leaders, 'crafted' genealogies, etc.) of their memory archive to function as legitimate advantages in the relations with both inter-tribal and state level. A vivid example, which floats in the air of Iranian Balochistan, can be the battle at Nalak gorge in Sarhadd – historically attested but somewhat of little importance in terms of strategical outcome between the tribes and the British military expedition during the colonial period. The struggle of the local Baloch tribes against the British more than a century ago in modern times is put into the wider context of the Iran-West confrontation. The interactions between the Baloch tribes and the British in Sarhadd is illustrated by General R. Dyer in his book 'The Raiders of Sarhadd' (Dyer 1921), which has been translated into Persian and cited by the Baloch tribes as a kind of 'document' attesting their importance. By referring to these events the Baloch position themselves as key actors and manifest their loyalty to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Meantime, the state also manipulates with separate components of the Balochi memory-archive in case there is a need to secure their support and allegiance to the central government. If the memory of once fierce warriors and tribal 'romanticism', their involvement in the armies of the Sassanian kings of pre-Islamic Iran attested in 'Shahname' and other ballads serves as a proof of their legitimate role in maintaining Iran's integrity and security and acts as an identity marker for the Baloch, the same elements of the memory are manipulated by the state for controlling the volatile borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan by hiring the Baloch as a paramilitary forces. If the genealogies of some Baloch tribes present them as descendants of, for instance, Abd al-Qadir Gilani (a prominent figure of the Qadiriyya Sufi brotherhood) stressing their advantage over other Baloch tribes, the latter engage in a competition to 'craft' their own genealogies with no less enthusiasm 'pulling' their lineage back to times immemorial.

All these elements of memory-archive are indispensable tools both in the hands of the tribes and the state to regulate and maintain their relations, to establish control, to figure as legitimate authorities and protect the inherited statuses. In this regard, memory-archives should be viewed as phenomena that play key role in *loci* characterized by mosaic of borders, ethnic groups, and tribes.

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