

Commission on Nomadic Peoples

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The Other Nomads Of South Persia: The

Baraftowi Koochaki of Jahrom¹

by Rostam Pourzal

During the past two decades or so, anthropologists have paid increasing attention to the nomadic forms of adaptation in the Middle East. In particular, a certain amount of ethnographic work has appeared on Iranian pastoral nomads in the southern Zagros range, including the tribes of the powerful Khamseh and Qashqai confederacies.

The precursor of these studies, Barth's account of the Basseri, while inspiring other research, has dominated anthropological thinking on pastoralism in the Iranian area. The Basseri tribe of the Khamseh confederacy has come to be regarded to some extent as the prototype of Iranian and even other southwest Asian mountain nomads. Partly due to the lack of comparably detailed knowledge of other groups, the Basseri form of political organization in particular has emerged in the literature as a theme of which others' are variants. Consequently, tribes defined by allegiance to a hierarchy of chiefs and subchiefs who dare challenge the state have been vaguely thought to characterize at least all nomads of Fars, the home province of the Basseri. This notion is incorrect, for while the Khamseh and Qashqai tribes are certainly dominant among Fars' half-million pastoral nomads, there are other nomads in the area without chiefs.

A few hundred households of such nomads live along the southern reaches of the Basseri migration routes between the towns of Jahrom and Lar west of the Mansurabad Plain.² They are the Persian-speaking Koochaki who in four territorial divisions inhabit about 1,000 contiguous square kilometers on the southern (Baraftow) flank of Mount Alborz year round.³ Far from being an aggressive tribe, Baraftowi Koochakis are unable to defend themselves effectively. Until as recently as the 1940s, they were often raided by the Khamseh and other tribesmen for livestock and other property. This incapacity they relate to their simple sociopolitical organization, which is devoid of groupings other than the household and the territorial unit, or beyleh. Although each of the four beyleh have similarities to subtribal groups among the Khamseh and Qashqai, rather than being united in a superstructure centered around a chief, they are clients of the state-organized sedentary society, in the manner that settled peasants in Fars are. (A half dozen other Koochaki beyleh on the northern slopes of Mount Alborz have more organizational features in common with the confederacy tribes than Baraftowis do.)

Although their domestic organization does not differ significantly from that of confederacy nomads, local subsistence groups such as herding units and camps do not exist among Baraftowis. Above the level of the household, the territorial beyleh is their only organizational similarity to the tribes. As a partilineal descent group, each beyleh embodies the rights of its members to the use of pasture and water, as the oulad and tireh do among the Khamseh and Qashqai, respectively. Averaging about 100 households (1974 estimate), each beyleh has a stable membership which takes practically no corporate

action and a headman (kadkhoda) allegiance to whom defines the commoners (ra'yat) of the beyleh--all of which characteristics have parallels in the oulad and tireh.⁴

The kadkhoda and their close agnates own the greater part of the arable land and most of the large herds in Baraftow. They form a local elite comparable to, though less prestigious than, the kadkhoda and camp leaders (rishsefid) among the tribes. Like the latter, though to a lesser extent, members of the Baraftowi elite tend to be polygamous, relatively sophisticated, and related to one another by marriage.

Inheriting office by partilineal descent from the alleged founder of their group, as do their tribal counterparts, Baraftowi kadkhoda have limited authority. Their jurisdiction covers only such areas as arbitrating small disputes, representing their respective beyleh's interests vis-a-vis other groups, and collecting taxes on behalf of a higher authority which can dismiss them (see below). Otherwise a first-among-equals who tends his herd as others do theirs, a Baraftowi kadkhoda needs the good will of his landed relatives for his position. The latter's ability to provide or withdraw favors plays an important role in persuading others to conform to the kadkhoda's will, although the threat of being seized by agents of Jahrom's administration on one's next trip to the market town discourages dissent, too. The gifts of grain and a few goats which the kadkhoda's landed relatives give him from time to time enable him to have a special guest tent and to entertain persons from other nomad groups as well as Janromi officials (representatives of the state) who come to receive taxes, enlist fighting men, or enforce order.

This points to the major difference in political organization between a Baraftowi beyleh and an oulad or a tireh among Fars' tribes. Rather than being a part of a tribe, Baraftowis are subject to the full authority of the sedentary state. Accordingly, while oulad and tireh kadkhoda are legitimated in part by appointment from their respective tribal chiefs, Baraftow's four headmen depend on and represent the authority of the administrators in Jahrom, and they can be dismissed by the latter.

This is not to say that certain elements of collectivity do not exist among Baraftowi beyleh. In fact, the latter, who consist of the Zoghali, the Pazanui, the Chapowi, and the Pahvandeh, have a sense of common fate, culture, and history and very friendly relations. Members of these groups sympathetically abstain from wedding during one another's periods of bereavement and regularly exchange elaborate greetings and market information on trails to Jahrom and when they visit shrines in each other's territories. As I pointed out earlier, there is also a high incidence of their kadkhoda and rishsefid marrying women of one another's families. In a population where groups are defined and set apart by patriliney and where matrimony joins many more than two individuals socially, affinal ties of this kind strengthen fellowship. Matrilateral relations that result from them form enduring social and political bonds.

Furthermore, members of all four beyleh defer to one another's kadkhoda. The Chapowi kadkhoda is held in especially high regard by all of the Baraftowi and is occasionally called upon to arbitrate in local disputes or to represent Baraftowis' interests vis-a-vis other groups in unusually complicated cases. He is indeed suitable for this

role, for he alone is sufficiently prestigious to have personal relations with Khamseh and Qashqai chiefs,⁵ but he lacks coercive or adjudicative authority.

Thus Baraftowi beyleh are individually organized much like tribal subsections among the Khamseh and Qashqai and are structurally equipped to accept the authority of a single person from a noble family. Yet there is no evidence that they have ever acted as a single political/military body under a chief. Instead they behave as components of the sedentary power structure, which is responsible for protecting them against raiders and invaders of other sorts.

Footnotes

¹This essay is excerpted from my M.A. thesis, Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, 1980.

²The following is based on data collected in four summer field visits from 1970 to 1974, totalling 10 weeks. Many thanks to Professors Brian Spooner and Sandra Barnes for their critique and support.

³See the map opposite page 1 in Fredrik Barth, Nomads of South Persia, (Boston, Little, Brown and Co., 1961).

⁴See Barth, ibid, Chapter IV and David Marsden, "The Qashqai nomadic pastoralists of Fars Province," in The Qashqai of Iran, World of Islam Festival (Manchester, University of Manchester, 1976), pp. 9-18.

⁵When the Qashqai made their last major bid under the Pahlavis for self-rule in 1946, the central government suspected the Chapowi kadkhoda of cooperation with the rebellious chiefs and exiled him temporarily.

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