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Makranis, the Negroes of West Pakistan

THROUGHOUT most of the history of India many racial and ethnic groups invaded the subcontinent and subsequently integrated with the local population. This amalgamation has resulted in a panorama of mixed population. Dravidians, Aryans, Mongoloids, Arabs, Anglo-Saxons and Negroids were among those who came into India at different times, amalgamated with the local groups, and changed their physiognomy in due course of time. Among other groups, the Negroes and Baluch mulattoes of Baluchistan, which now forms part of West Pakistan, are of great interest to students of race and ethnic relations.

Negroes in West Pakistan are called Makranis. Apparently the early slave trade involving Negroes centered in and around Makran from where they were distributed to different parts of the country, such as Las Bela, Kharan, Kalat and Karachi. Makran is a province in Southern Baluchistan which lies east of Iran and West of Sindh. About eighty thousand Makranis belonging to the Negroid race or to mixed races were reported in West Pakistan in the 1951 Census.¹ Early in the present century, they apparently constituted about one-fourth of the total population of Makran.²

Various historians and anthropologists hold different theories regarding the origin of the Negro population in what is now West Pakistan. First, the slaves from whom these Makranis are generally assumed to have descended are alleged to have been imported from Africa through Maskat. Also, it has been suggested by some observers that "this element of the population may be one of the oldest in the country for their features are in many cases distinctly Negrito in type."³

Professor S. K. Chatterji, the Indian linguist, discussing the basic unity underlying the diversity of culture in India, also supports this view. According to him, "the first people to arrive in India were a Negrito or Negroid race from Africa, coming at a very early period by way of Arabia and the coastline of Iran. They spread over western and southern India, and even passed on to the northeastern part of the country . . . Their contribution to Indian culture as it developed later on was nil. A few of

* The investigation was carried out during the academic year 1956-57 when the primary author was serving as head of the Department of Sociology, Panjab University, Lahore, West Pakistan, and when the other authors were enrolled as graduate students.

¹ *Census of Pakistan, 1951*, I (Census Publications, Government of Pakistan).

² *District Gazeteer, "Makran"* (Bombay: Times Press, 1907), p. 69.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

their words may have been borrowed by later arrivals and may survive in the present-day languages of India.”⁴ But it would be hazardous on our part to say definitely that the Makranis originally belonged to those groups which Chatterji has mentioned.

A Pakistani historian describes among racial groups in Sindh and Baluchistan the following which he assumes are descended from peoples who came from Africa: the Gadras, Golas, Shedi, Habashi, thought to be natives of Abyssinia, and the Roha, whose ancestors were brought from Africa and sold into slavery in Sindh.⁵ Besides these local Negroes, whose exact origin has become lost through the passage of time, some Negroes migrated to Karachi, the capital of Pakistan, after the partition of India in 1947. Among them were some Muslims from Cutch and Kathiawar and some Sunni Boras, who show occasional traces of wooly hair and inverted lips.

Majumdar, an Indian anthropologist, writing on the races and cultures of India, also discusses the Negro element in different parts of that country. In his opinion the Negroid physical traits in the Muslims of Cutch and Kathiawar and in the Sunni Boras are due to absorption and not to any substratum of a Negrito race. This absorption became possible because of the formation of a Negroid population in Gujarat, which probably occurred between the eighth and tenth centuries A.D. In Ratanpur, Rajpipla State, India, there is today a colony of Negroids. Their reputation as sorcerers and healers and their shrine built upon the ruins of a desecrated Hindu temple attract people from different parts of Gujarat.⁶

The Negroes inhabiting the Las Bela territory of West Pakistan are quite numerous. They possess most of the features of African Negroes and are reported to be an indolent group of people living from hand to mouth.⁷ In the course of time this group, which is locally known as Meds, appears to have absorbed a large mixture of alien blood but their “heads are broad and noses prominent in spite of this mixture with Indian races.”⁸

The Gadras of Makran, mentioned above, are distinctly Negroid in type. Some of those now living are said to have been slaves. They are reported locally to indulge in a kind of fetish worship which is thought to have been brought by their ancestors from Africa.⁹ Professor M. Shedi, quoting Dr. Glaser, a German anthropologist, states that Gadras may be descendants of people from ancient Phoenicia and Yemen who were sold as slaves there.¹⁰

But Professor Vincent A. Smith, in a history of early India, held that Gadras are of Rajput descent.¹¹ This supposition by Smith does not seem

⁴ S. W. Chatterji, *Interrelation of Cultures* (UNESCO Publications, 1953), pp. 165-66.

⁵ Sadiq Ali Sher Ali Ansari, *The Musalman Races Found in Sindh, Baluchistan and Afghanistan* (Karachi, 1954), pp. 74-75.

⁶ D. N. Majumdar, *Races and Cultures of India* (Lucknow, 1944), p. 40.

⁷ *District Gazetteer, "Las Bela"* (Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1907), p. 40.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁹ *Imperial Gazetteer, "Las Bela"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), pp. 146 ff.

¹⁰ Mollie Shedi, *Naeem Zindgi* (a Sindhi magazine), November, 1956.

¹¹ Vincent A. Smith, *The Early History of India* (Oxford, 1904), p. 100.

to be realistic, however, because he has ignored their racial type. It seems more likely that the Gadras were subjugated and made slaves by the Rajputs in Sindh or in the Panjab. It was common for Negro slaves to carry their master's surname or tribal name. The former slaves of Baluchis called themselves Baluch; of Bohras, Bohra; of Menons, Menon. Similarly, the slaves of the Rajputs may have followed the same practice.

Thus it seems more plausible, as suggested by Dr. Glaser, that the Gadras are of Negro origin and that their ancestors came from Africa directly or by way of Southern Arabia and occupied coastal areas of Baluchistan up to Sindh. Later on they were vanquished by the superior forces of Baluchis and Rajputs and were made slaves. When the slave trade flourished, more and more Negroes were brought in from the East African coastal areas. They in turn intermixed with the existing groups. This interesting group found in Las Bela and Makran is to some extent culturally different from other Negro groups found in West Pakistan. Some of them are quite well educated, and they have lost entirely the language of the country of their origin.

The district of Kharan in Baluchistan also possesses a considerable number of Negroes. They are called Sarozais and Langahis. Sayed Habib writes in the *District Gazetteer* of Kharan that "The present Negroes are the descendants of those captured slaves who were taken in the battles with Iran and Afghanistan. Purdil Khan, during the second quarter of the eighteenth century, is said to have brought 4,000 captives from Minab in Southern Persia. The fame of Kharan slaves was so great in former days that Khudadad Khan, the Khan of Kalat, in 1859 sent an army of some 6,000 men but had to retire without gaining any material advantage except the capture of a few slaves."¹² Thus, according to these official records of Kharan, the Negroes came there as captured slaves during the eighteenth century.

Something more definite can be written about the origin of the Negroes now residing in Karachi. Official records showing immigration to that part of the country are available. In a statement dated March 10, 1842, Lieutenant Colonel Robertson, the officiating resident in the Persian Gulf, reported the importation of sixty-six slaves into Karachi from Maskat and Kishan. Further, the record mentions that a boat belonging to some people of Karachi imported eighteen slaves in the same year. In 1842 another boat proceeded to Karachi with an inhabitant of Hyderabad and thirteen slaves. Nine of them were Abyssinians and four were Negroes from other areas in Africa. Again in 1842 another boat is mentioned as having arrived at Karachi with three Sindhis and thirty-five Abyssinian slaves.¹³

Apart from the forced migration of Negroes, many of them migrated

¹² *District Gazetteer*, "Kharan" (Bombay: Times Press, 1907), p. 34.

¹³ D. R. Banaji, *Slavery in British India* (Bombay: Taraporewala and Sons, 1933).

to Karachi from time to time for the sake of employment. Some came from Dizzak, Sarbaz and other localities in Persian Baluchistan.¹⁴ "The majority of the so-called Makranis who are now found to be working at Karachi in large numbers came from Persian Baluchistan. A good many are employed in the mines which are worked by the Northwestern Railway at Khost in Sivi district."¹⁵

On the basis of such historical evidence, we are justified in saying that most of the so-called Makranis in West Pakistan are the descendants of Negroes who were either captured and/or imported as slaves during the early development of Islam, particularly in the ninth century when the Arabs of Oman had a very flourishing trade with the colonies in East Africa. They were exchanged for articles such as indigo, madder,¹⁶ hides, cotton, etc. by the people of Makran and Las Bela.¹⁷ Also they were captured by the rulers of Kharan in battles with Iran and Afghanistan especially during the eighteenth century, and still others were brought to Karachi by persons coming back from their pilgrimages to Mecca. This practice probably began during the eighteenth century and continued into the first half of the nineteenth century.

Slavery was abolished in British India in 1843 and was made a criminal offense in 1863.¹⁸ But there are instances which show that the slave trade was regularly practiced in Sindh and Karachi until the end of the nineteenth century and perhaps even later. However, at the end of the nineteenth century, the slave owners could not maintain effectively their hold on their slaves. The slaves fought for their freedom and many started to work independently. As most of them were illiterate and unskilled, they did not rise above the lowest strata of society. Inasmuch as the Baluchistan states were not under the direct control of the British Crown, they were not affected by the British bill regarding the abolition of slavery. The District and Imperial Gazetteers and other documents on Baluchistan show that a slave system continued there even later than it did in the Sindh and Karachi areas. So Negro slaves from slave areas took refuge in the areas of British Baluchistan, Sindh and Karachi. They migrated in such large numbers that they established their own colonies in the new areas.

At present in Sindh and Karachi most of the Makranis are unskilled laborers, cart drivers, peons or coolies, fishermen or tenants. There are a few Makranis who own small restaurants or are school teachers, motor drivers, or skilled laborers. The slight vertical mobility shown in the occupational field by the Makranis in Karachi is, however, very recent. It is due primarily to the partition of the country which led to an immense out-migration of Hindu and Sikh populations and an in-migration of

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 361.

¹⁵ *District Gazetteer*, "Makran," p. 69.

¹⁶ A plant, the root of which is used as a source of dye.

¹⁷ A. C. Hughes, *The Country of Baluchistan* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1877).

¹⁸ William L. Mathieson, *British Slavery and Its Abolition* (London, 1926), p. 31.

Muslim refugees, which gave many new opportunities to Makranis. Also, Karachi, upon becoming the capital of a new country, offered many new openings for development in the fields of education, industry, commerce and politics. An encouraging decline in the rate of crime, use of narcotics, and illiteracy among Makranis has been reported as resulting from this social change.

Their social status is still not equal to that of other classes, however. Inter-marriage between Makranis and other groups is not very common. Marriage between a Makrani girl and a Baluchi boy is not considered as undesirable as is the reverse of that situation. This may be due to the practice of hypergamy which to some extent is characteristic of the caste system throughout Pakistan. There are a few cases, though, where rich Makrani men are married to Baluchi women. Formerly the rulers of the Baluchistan States kept many Makrani girls in their harems without marriage.

Today, Makranis observe essentially the same customs as are observed by other Muslims in Pakistan. For example, marriages are arranged by the parents. They give the bride a small *jehaz* (dowry), the size determined by their economic status, and the husband gives her *mehr* (dower). Dower money is also usually small, ranging from about Rs. 40 to Rs. 200 in Karachi.

Divorce is uncommon among Makranis, as it is among other groups in Pakistan. Usually marital quarrels are solved by the elders of the joint family or by leaders of local community associations. It is reported that in Baluchistan a man may shoot his wife for adultery. In Karachi, adulterous behavior would result in divorce. During this research only one case of divorce was reported among the Makranis of Karachi.

At the time of the birth of a child, the family arranges a ceremony, "*Sana-o-Sifat*," when all the neighbors and relatives are invited to a feast. Makrani circumcision and burial rituals are celebrated as by other Muslims in Karachi. Circumcision is performed by a barber who assumes the role of a surgeon. It is commonly believed among most lower class Pakistanis that a barber is actually better qualified, because of experience, to perform circumcision than is a trained medical doctor. The circumcision ritual involves the invitation of friends and relatives to a feast which often imposes too great an expense on the family and results in indebtedness.

Makrani men and women have adopted Baluchi and Sindhi dress styles. The common dress of both men and women consists of a *kumiz* (long shirt) and *salwar* (full slacks). Women also wear a *dupata* or head cover. The clothes are usually made of a dark-colored cotton material. The educated and economically better situated males wear Western dress.

While the literacy rate for the people of Pakistan as a whole is low (about 18 percent), the Makranis as a group rank lower on the literacy

scale than the average Pakistani. However, those who have been in Karachi for some time are educationally better off than those who arrived there later from Baluchistan or those still in Baluchistan. There is no racial segregation in educational institutions in Pakistan.

Most of the Makranis are very fond of music and dancing. They have their *Lewa* dances on weekends, holidays, and on festival days. The drum beater, with his drum, sits in the center, and other participants dance around him. This dance is claimed to be of African origin and during the singing which accompanies the performance they use a combination of Arabic, African and Pakistani languages. Despite a great lapse of time they have apparently retained some of their native African art and music. The history of this area shows that there were Negro musicians in the courts of the princely states of Kharan and Kalat. G. B. Tate, reporting on a tour of Baluchistan, Iran and Afghanistan, testifies to this fact: "On my way to Kalat I was joined by one of the slave musicians who had deserted from Kharan."¹⁹

During the course of this investigation it was found that "passing" is quite common although most Makranis observed in Karachi can be readily identified as being of Negroid descent. Some persons among our respondents, however, denied that passing occurred, and there are many among the refugees from Junagadh, Cutch and Bombay who are very proud of their Negroid ancestry. Such persons are usually among the economically better placed. Most of these recent arrivals are day laborers, butchers, cooks or riksha drivers, but some of them are engaged in other types of commercial activity as well.

Politically, there is no discrimination against these various Negroid groups in Pakistan. They have the right to vote and theoretically, at least, could run for political office. At the time of this investigation in 1957, there was a Makrani who held the office of councilor in the Karachi Municipal Corporation.

The Makranis living in Pakistan and Persian Baluchistan speak the Baluchi language, with slight colloquial differences between the various groups. The Makranis of Karachi speak different dialects, most of which are a combination of Sindhi and Arabic. There is, however, one group of Mombasis among these Makranis who are said to be recent immigrants to Karachi who speak their native language of Kenya, although they do speak the Sindhi language also.

Though most of these Negro groups are Sunnite Muslims, some of them belong to the Shia Zikri and to other sects. We cannot here discuss all of these religious sects, but among them the Zikri sect, which is generally not known, is especially interesting because of its affinity with and, at the same time, divergence from Islam. "They are the followers of a Mahdi, who is stated to have come from Jaunpur in India, and they be-

¹⁹ G. B. Tate, *The Frontier of Baluchistan* (London: Witherby & Co., 1909), p. 22.

lieve that the dispensation of the prophet Mohammed is at an end. While denying many of the doctrines of Islam, they have initiated others. They have constituted their own *Kaba*²⁰ at Koh-i-Murad near Turbat (Makran) and thither all good Zikris go on pilgrimage in the month of Zil Haj. They are very priestly-ridden and believe their *Mullas*²¹ to be endowed with miraculous powers."²² Basically, they differ from other Muslims. They believe that there are forty chapters in the Holy Koran instead of thirty. They do not say *Namaz* (prayers), and they do not believe in observing fasts in the month of Ramzan. They have their own mosque in Karachi.

Makranis are now becoming increasingly conscious of their low educational standards and of their undesirable living conditions. Inadequate and substandard housing constitutes a national problem of major proportions in Pakistan, especially in the urban areas. Karachi has grown from a city of 359,000 at the time of partition to a city of approximately 1,500,000 in 1957.²³ Makranis, like most of the many refugees who contributed to this phenomenal increase in population, suffer from the resultant housing shortage. Many live in little more than hovels. Some of the more fortunate share overcrowded buildings in the older section of the city. Few have adequate housing.

They have become increasingly active in recent years and have formed various organizations in Karachi to protect their rights and to fight for their demands. During the investigation upon which this paper is based, about sixteen different organizations were found to be working among the population of about ten thousand Makranis in Karachi. Their principal objectives are better wages and working conditions, better and more sanitary housing conditions, and better streets. They have recently been successful in having medical dispensaries, schools and libraries opened in the communities in which they live. They present an interesting group for further research.

²⁰ The small and nearly cubical stone building in the court of the great Mosque at Mecca which contains the famous black stone of Mecca, fabled to have been given by Gabriel to Abraham. Since the time of Mohammed the Kaba has been the chief object of pilgrimage of the Islamic world. It represents the direction (kibla) to which Moslems turn while praying.

²¹ A religious leader.

²² *Imperial Gazeteer* (Baluchistan: Clarendon Press, 1908), VI, 291.

²³ *Ten Years of Pakistan: 1947-1957* (Karachi: Pakistan Publications, 1957), p. 328.

