

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ON "THE NATIONAL INTEGRATION OF BOIR AHMAD"

I read Professor Löffler's "The National Integration of Boir Ahmad"¹ with great interest. As an anthropologist who has also done fieldwork among the Boyr Ahmad,² I regard the article as a welcome addition to the Iranian ethnology. However, I feel compelled to offer a few brief remarks on certain aspects of my colleague's analysis.

Let me begin with a note on two general historical points raised in the opening paragraphs. First, presumably in an attempt to provide a proper perspective for the "national integration" of the Boyr Ahmad, the author states that the "anarchic" conditions in existence prior to the Qajar ascendancy were somehow ameliorated by the rulers of this dynasty "by appointing the local Khans as tax collectors and through interfering in their power struggles."³ Second, such "interferences" are viewed as having played a role in the emergence of dominant political figures among the Boyr Ahmad. These external factors led, ineluctably, to territorial expansion at the expense of their tribal neighbors.

While the policy of holding a certain Khan responsible for collecting the annual tax met with some intermittent success in other tribes, the Bakhtiyari for instance, there is little solid evidence of a comparable, enduring arrangement with the Boyr Ahmad. It should be emphasized, however, that in the case of the Bakhtiyari, this took the form of an asymmetrical transaction, whereby the Ilkhan received lavish gifts, tax exemptions and huge land grants in Khuzistan, and the government got in return a nominal

portion of the revenue and a certain number of cavalrymen to serve in its traditional army.⁴ Normally, the tax collecting Khan appropriated a lion's share of the proceeds.

All these structured arrangements were conspicuously absent or at best underdeveloped in the relation between the central government and the Boyr Ahmad during the Qajar dynasty.⁵ Likewise, the granting of honorific titles and other symbols of office to notable leaders was relatively infrequent and on the whole ineffectual in producing a stable, centralized leadership loyal to the Crown. Moreover, it must be remembered that the central government was often neither militarily nor economically in any position to test its tenuous provincial hegemony by challenging the intensely independent Boyr Ahmad. In fact it appears that the regional administrator's exercise of political control was pretty much limited to the town of Behbahan and to some extent the Basht-e-Babui and Mamassani⁶--both agricultural tribes forming, along with Behbahan, the southern boundary of the Boyr Ahmad country. They seldom ventured beyond this relatively secure foothill belt. The mountains held strategic vantage points which were used by the Boyr Ahmad for the defense of their territory, sometimes with disastrous results for the intruders.

Furthermore, rarely did Khans ask or receive military assistance from the provincial governors in their intra- or inter-tribal conflicts. There were, however, numerous instances in which the governors solicited military aid from the Boyr Ahmad, usually to quell local rebellions.⁷ All this should by no means be interpreted as implying that interactions in other spheres between sedentary communities and the Boyr Ahmad did not exist. For the purposes of the present argument the point is that for both strategic and military reasons political integration into the larger society did not begin to take any discernible form until the middle of the 1960s following the land reform crises and the subsequent implementation of some development measures.

In my view, then, despite the few visible structural

changes, the whole process has had too short a period and has so far been too limited in scope to allow us to speak of "integration," unless, of course, we choose to ascribe an entirely different meaning to this term.

The most objectionable part of Professor Löffler's article, from my point of view, is not so much the speculative historical reconstructions, but, rather, the author's astonishingly moralistic overtones and normative pronouncements in describing the salient features of tribal life. To put it bluntly, I am struck by the extent to which Professor Löffler's portrayal of the Boyr Ahmad leadership betrays the personal biases and distortions of his informants who were no doubt motivated by political considerations and ultimately self-interest. It is quite expected that an informant's conceptualization of his society reflect his own cognitive assumptions, aspirations, frustrations, and ideals. What is not expected, however, is the uncritical acceptance of a particular "native's model" as an article of faith and its incorporation into one's ethnographic account. Had the anthropologist exercised some initial skepticism and proceeded to expand the circle of his informants, he would surely have discovered that, on the whole, the image of the leaders as "oppressive" ogres was hardly a dominant view. Even Mahmud Bavar--one of the two historical sources mentioned--who can scarcely be called an impartial observer, in reference to the Boyr Ahmads' attitude towards their leaders, concedes that "the Khan and Kadkhudas of every tribe are the object of profound respect and veneration by their People."⁸

An additional and directly related point with which I find myself in fundamental disagreement is Professor Löffler's characterization of the Boyr Ahmad political and social organization as a "feudalist" system comprised of three hierarchically distinct classes, namely, the Khans, Kadkhudas ("who as landlords were in direct control of manpower and economic resources"), and, finally, "the peasants at the bottom."⁹ For one thing, the system of stratification was a good deal more complex, for another, the usage of the term "feudalistic" is highly misleading and

inappropriate to depict the political and economic position of the Khan in his tribe. A. K. S. Lambton has cogently argued against the applicability of the designation "feudalistic" even to the nineteenth-century Iranian system of land assignment and the subsequent development of large land ownership.¹⁰

In this connection it would hardly seem necessary to emphasize that a Boyr Ahmad Khan, as indeed the Khavanin in other tribes, seldom abused his potential autocratic power,¹¹ knowing full well that his very longevity in office depended, to a great extent, on his ability to establish and maintain a broad base of political support. Arbitrary exercise of power and oppressive measures were not conducive to the mobilization of the requisite political support. The same axiomatic principle of leadership applied to the hereditary office of Kadkhuda as well.

To say that the Boyr Ahmad society or for that matter any other society is differentiated along economic and political lines does not automatically mean that the leaders exercise a monopoly on "manpower and economic resources." While some leaders possessed considerable wealth in land and animals, others, though certainly not paupers, could hardly qualify as wealthy "landlords." It is worth remembering that a substantial portion of the Kadkhuda's income came from the customary dah-yak (one-tenth) of annual levies on grains and animals collected in his sub-tribe by the agents of the Khan.

The point I am trying to establish here is that while a number of Kadkhudas could no doubt be considered wealthy by native standards (possession of large herds of 300-500 sheep and goats, and access to predictable sources of water for irrigating rice fields and orchards), on the whole, a great discrepancy based on wealth and political power did not exist between the Kadkhudas and the commoners. A similar statement can be made with respect to the paramount chiefs. What makes the analysis particularly one-sided is the lack of any mention of the complex system by which wealth was redistributed and ultimately translated into political power.

It is important to bear in mind that in tribal societies wealth in itself does not confer prestige upon a person.¹² The economic hiatus separating a few favored Kad-khudas and their fellow tribesmen is far greater today than ever before. The windfall increase in wealth has not brought an increment in prestige.

The second issue relates to the choice of the term "peasant," in this article and elsewhere,¹³ in reference to Boyr Ahmad tribesmen. In order to make this purely arbitrary appellation consistent with the generally accepted definition of peasantry by anthropologists, Professor Löffler has deemed it necessary to "integrate" the Boyr Ahmad into the larger social whole. Once "integration" was presented as fact, "exploitation" by the erstwhile leaders ("landlords") became an inescapable corollary. Löffler assumes that the Boyr Ahmad are socially, politically, and economically different from other tribes, for example, the Qashqā'i and Basseri, among others, that are seldom confused with peasant populations of southern Iran. Iranian tribesmen themselves rarely if ever obfuscate the two categories. Thus, a further ambiguity is introduced by the unfortunate choice of the term "exploitation." As Dalton has recently observed, this word is prejudicial and is "used by some social scientists (perhaps unintentionally) to condemn only those systems of social stratification they dislike and disapprove of, so that exploitation is said to be in peasant societies, but no such statements are made about tribal societies...."¹⁴

It is of course quite legitimate and empirically defensible to speak of systems of inequalities in terms of economic and political resources in the hierarchically organized tribal kingdoms and chiefdoms (including the Boyr Ahmad) without necessarily transforming the lot into peasants and their chiefs into feudal lords, despite the current strong appeal to be ideologically fashionable.

While I basically agree with the outlined difficulties confronting the Boyr Ahmad in the wake of the recent fundamental changes, I have not observed the much lamented

disorganization and widespread hopelessness. Professor Löffler seems to adhere to a static, equilibrium model in which any structural change would tend to threaten the functioning of the entire social system. In fact many of the traditional institutions have not been seriously affected by the recent changes.

Disputes, which according to Professor Löffler "are no longer settled locally," would serve as a good example here. Of over one hundred cases of disputes--ranging from domestic household quarrels to homicides involving two unrelated groups--which I recorded in the field between 1968-70, less than 10 percent was referred to the local gendarmerie, the sole law enforcement agency, and of that less than half reached the town courts for litigation. By far the largest proportion of conflicts are resolved by the time-honored method of menjigari (Persian--mīānjigari), or mediation. Recourse to an outside body to seek redress is generally regarded as the measure of a fool or a desperate man and is normally met with opprobrium. The threat of court action, however, is sometimes cleverly manipulated by a disputant in the hope of wresting a more favorable settlement from the other side.

To add a final note, considerable hardship and frustration, frequent indignities at the hands of gendarms, and often unsympathetic regional bureaucrats notwithstanding, the tribesmen are increasingly adapting to the demands of the new conditions with remarkable vigor and resiliency. Nevertheless, in meting out blame for the present social ills it would be less than candid not to mention, perhaps next to the parasitic urban trade partners, those Boyr Ahmad individuals with a newly acquired prominence and influence--the so-called political brokers and entrepreneurs--who often willingly sacrifice their cultural values and the interests of their fellow tribesmen for their own ever-growing cupidity.

NOTES

1. Reinhold Löffler, "The National Integration of Boir Ahmad," Iranian Studies, Vol. VI, Nos. 2-3 (Spring-Summer, 1973), pp. 127-135.
2. Field study among the Boir Ahmad was carried out for a period of nineteen months between 1968-70, supported by a National Institute of Mental Health research grant and fellowship.
3. R. Löffler, op. cit., p. 127.
4. Gene R. Garthwaite, "The Bakhtiyāri Khans, the Government of Iran, and the British, 1846-1915," Int. J. Middle East Studies, Vol. 3, No. 1 (n.d.), pp. 24-44.
5. G. Reza Fazel, "The Encapsulation of Nomadic Societies in Iran," in Cynthia Nelson, ed., The Desert and the Sown: Nomads in the Wider Society, Research series, No. 21 (Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1973), pp. 129-143.
6. Mahmud Bavar, Kuhgiluyeh and its Tribes (Gachsaran, 1944; in Persian), p. 31.
7. M. Bavar, op. cit., pp. 95, 98-99.
8. M. Bavar, op. cit., p. 42.
9. R. Löffler, op. cit., p. 128.
10. Ann K. S. Lambton, The Persian Land Reform 1962-1966 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 20-23.
11. Cf. G. Garthwaite, op. cit., p. 26; and Fredrik Barth, Nomads of South Persia: The Basseri Tribe of the Khamseh Confederacy (Oslo University Press, 1961), Ch. V.
12. Cf. Brian Spooner, "Politics, Kinship, and Ecology in Southeast Persia," Ethnology, Vol. VIII, No 2 (1969), pp. 139-152.

13. R. Löffler, "The Representative Mediator and the New Peasant," American Anthropologist, Vol. 73, No. 5 (October, 1971), pp. 1077-1091.
14. George Dalton, "How Exactly Are Peasants Exploited?," American Anthropologist, Vol. 76, No. 3 (September, 1974), pp. 553-561.

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THE AUTHOR REPLIES:

Professor Fazel seems to accuse me of the following: speculative history; misuse of the terms oppression, feudalistic, and peasant; and misjudging current attitudes and patterns of dispute settlement. I shall try to clarify things in this order.

1. My short statement regarding Qājār rulers and Boir Aḥmad khāns is abundantly documented in the sources I have quoted and in the oral histories I have collected. In fact, Professor Fazel doesn't at all refute this statement as it stands. Rather, he devises a number of allegations (territorial expansion at the expense of tribal neighbors, enduring and structured arrangements between Qājār government and Boir Aḥmad khāns, granting of honorific titles, military assistance from provincial governors, etc.)--statements I have never made--and tries to prove me wrong on those. How little this strawman argumentation adds materially to the issue is evident from the fact that his "point," when it is finally made, turns out to be a reiteration, in different phrasing, of my own note at the end of the intro-