

## THE COLONIAL ENCOUNTER ON THE NORTH-WEST FRONTIER PROVINCE:

### MYTH AND MYSTIFICATION

The story of colonization is not a pretty one. To the Pathans living in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan it meant the destruction of villages, of water-tanks and of grain-stores; it meant electric-fences, block houses and an endless series of 'butcher and bolt' raids. The situation was worst in the Tribal Areas: in 1947, when the British left, there were no hospitals, schools, colleges, railways or electricity supplies except, of course, those established within British cantonments and for the exclusive use of the British. The institutions the British left behind were instruments of repression and subversion: the Frontier Scouts and Constabulary, block-houses and barbed wire, political allowances and titles. Today the only remnants of the British cultural legacy are the adjuncts of war: the bagpipes played by the Frontier Constabulary and the shorts still worn as its uniform.

The colonial encounter on the Frontier was brutal, but the way in which it took place prevented it from involving the total uprooting and destruction of the colonized civilization, a process found in other parts of the world (Wolf 1971:231), including other parts of the Indian sub-continent itself. In Bengal for example, whole groups inter-acted with the British and adapted entirely to their ideas, manners and language. The intellectual eclecticism and syntheses created a new class, the bhadralok, literally 'cultivated class', often in the forefront of intellectual life on the subcontinent (Addy and Azad 1973). The hundred years of British rule on the Frontier, however, failed to produce bhadralok groups of any kind. Instead, it was the Britisher who learned the language of his subject: it was a rare Pathan from the Tribal Areas who spoke, dressed or ate like the English.

The British certainly had some influence in social terms. They bolstered and encouraged the growth of a 'chiefly' Malik class in the Tribal Areas and thus created the basis for conflict and contradiction in Pathan society between the elders (mashar, political 'haves') and youngers (kashar, political 'have-nots'). The very core of tribal democracy was touched. Those Maliks who could manipulate both internal agnatic ties and external political ones were able to emerge as a powerful class. At the same time, the British obtained a means of seeing what was going on in the Tribal Areas and of making their voices heard. Overall, however, the move met with little success. The Maliks, despite all their secret allowances and political privileges, remained little more than glorified 'tourist' chiefs; in the interior, the weight of their word depended to a great extent on their personal influence; and, at the slightest sign of political trouble with the British, it was the mullahs, the religious leaders, and not the Maliks, who took the initiative and emerged as leaders, stressing ethnic and religious themes. The Maliks were their first target.

By and large, social contact and administrative control in the Tribal Areas were minimal. Tribal structure in the interior remained whole, symmetrical and unitary in the classic anthropological sense (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1970), and there was equilibrium and continuity in the social order. The Tribal Areas remained a closed system, tribal in the most profound sense, and, in this respect, unencapsulated by larger state systems and civilizations. Raids and reprisals did not change social structure and may even have served to confirm it. The only extra-tribal encounters of any sort took place in dark ravines or on rough mountain crags, or perhaps in the exchange of wit with political officers. This was one of the most

barren meetings of cultures possible, an almost total failure in communication between two systems.

In this context, a miasma of romance and mystification came to envelop the encounter on the Frontier. In the remainder of this article, I outline these myths and consider the causes underlying the process of mystification.

The North-West Frontier Province remains one of the most fascinating areas and memories of the British Empire. Myth, legend and reality overlap here and it is difficult to be sure where the first two stop and the last begins. The Frontier was a place where careers, including those of Indian Viceroy and British Prime Ministers, could be made and unmade, where a simple incident could escalate rapidly into an international crisis and where in 1897, in the general uprisings in the Tribal Areas (Ahmed 1976), the British faced their greatest crisis in India after 1857. I shall quote a passage to portray the sense of drama and history that permeates the Frontier stage:

The North-West Frontier of India must surely be one of the most legendary of places on the earth's surface... Both Alexander the Great and Field Marshal Alexander of Tunis served here; and between them a great scroll of names - Tamerlann, Babur, Akbar, and with the coming of the British, Pollock, Napier, Lumsden, Nicholson, Roberts, Robertson, Bloor, Churchill, Wavell, Slim, Auchinleck, and even Lawrence of Arabia. Apart from soldiers, the Frontier has involved generations of administrators, politicians, and statesmen: Palmerston, Disraeli, Gladstone, Dalhousie, Lawrence, Lytton, Curzon, Gandhi, Nehru, Attlee, Jinnah, and Mountbatten have come to power or fallen, through their Frontier policies. The Frontier has not only been the concern of Britain, India and Afghanistan (and in recent years Pakistan); the mysterious pressures it generates have involved Russia, China, Persia, Turkey and even France; on two occasions these pressures have brought the world to the brink of war (Swinson 1967: 11).

Two types of writers created the myth of the Frontier: on the one hand people who had lived and served in the area, and, on the other, those who bowdlerized the subject for popular appeal. Of the former let us look at the most celebrated. The romance of the Frontier was to reach its literary apogee with Kipling, troubador of Empire. His most popular stories feature Pathan characters like Mahboob Ali in Kim and Shere Khan in The Jungle Book. Kipling reflects sympathy for the underdog, and his ethnic references are not wilfully malicious. In general, however, the African native prototype is still the 'Fuzzy-Wuzzy' - a 'big black boundin' beggar' (Kipling 1977: 163) - and the Indian prototype, the low-caste 'Gunga Din', 'of all them blackfaced crew the finest man I knew' (ibid: 166). The African and the Asian are 'the White Man's Burden':

Your new-caught, sullen peoples,  
half devil and half child (ibid: 128).

Contrasting strongly in theme and tone of address is the encounter between the Pathan and the Britisher in perhaps the best known of his Imperial poems, 'The Ballad of East and West'. The mood is grand and imperial. Here is a meeting of two races on equal footing reflecting a mutual admiration and an acceptance of each other's ways:

But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,  
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from  
the ends of the earth.

At the end of the poem 'the two strong men' have come to terms:

They have taken the Oath of the Brother-in-Blood on fire and  
fresh cut sod,  
On the hilt and the haft of the Khyber knife, and the wondrous  
names of God (ibid: 99-103).

This respect for the rough and wild tribesman contrasts with an open and general contempt for natives in the Empire. It is the Pathan in the Pass who forces questions and doubts about the 'Arithmetic on the Frontier' where

Two thousand pounds of education  
drops to a ten rupee jezail (ibid: 13).

Missionaries, doctors, soldiers and administrators have contributed for over a century to the multi-dimensional and intimate accounts of Pathan social and political life. In these the Pathan emerges as an Indian version of the 'noble savage'. There is a peculiar love-hate relationship inherent in this figure. These sources stress the 'noble' aspect of the figure, a 'different' type of native, his 'likeability', democracy, frankness, sense of humour, yet they also refer to his 'savageness', 'treachery' and the dangers of duty on the Frontier. To take an instance, Irene Edwards, a nurse in the early thirties in Peshawar, relates how she and Captain Coldstream were having coffee and talking about golf:

He knew that I was very keen on golf and asked me if I'd like a lesson from him. I said yes, I'd be very grateful, and he arranged to pick me up at five that afternoon. Then he went downstairs. When he got to the bottom he waved to me and said, 'I'll pick you up then, at five'. I said, 'Right', and I turned round to walk back to the duty room. Then I heard a peculiar sort of scuffling noise. Suddenly I heard shouts of 'Sister, Sister, come quietly'. I rushed to the top of the stairs and looked down and there were two of the babus carrying Captain Coldstream upstairs. I could see blood streaming from his neck and I said, 'What has happened?' 'He's been beaten' one babu said. The other babu said in Hindustani, 'No, he has been knifed'. I looked down at Captain Coldstream and I knew that he was dying. When assistance came I went back into the duty room and I saw our coffee cups. I looked at Captain Coldstream's coffee cup and I picked up mine, which was still warm. I sat there and cried and cried, till another sister came and put her arms around me. We then walked out on to the verandah and we saw Abdul Rashid, the orderly, standing there with blood pouring down his arm. I went up to him and said, 'Oh, Abdul Rashid, have you been hurt?' and they all looked at me queerly. I thought Abdul Rashid had gone to Captain Coldstream's assistance. Actually, he was the murderer (Allen 1977a: 201).

This incident of sudden violence and death took place in the middle of Peshawar, the military and civil heart of the Province. Outside the city it was an even more dangerous world. Every Frontier hand had similar tales to tell (Pettigrew: 80). Nonetheless and on balance, 'everyone liked the Pathan, his courage and his sense of humour ... although there was always the chance of a bullet and often a great deal of discomfort' (Woodruff 1965 II: 292).

The second kind of writing which contributed to the myth of the Frontier is found in highly romanticised novels with titles like Lean Brown Men, King of the Khyber Rifles and Khyber Calling (see North 1945). It is not surprising that Flashman begins his adventures in the first Afghan War (Fraser 1969). These novels were complemented by popular 'B' films like the Brigand of Kandahar or North-West Frontier. The worst novels of the genre create names for people, places and situations which are not even remotely accurate. Attempts even to approximate to the economic, sociological and historical realities are thrown to the wind. A good example is the currently popular series written by Duncan Macneil, with titles like Drums Along the Khyber and Sadhu on the Mountain Peak; their inaccuracies conform to stereotypes of rebellious tribesmen east of Suez living a life of luxury and sin. I shall resist the temptation to quote from the adventures of the intrepid officer Ogilvie in the heart of Waziristan, a puritanically isolated, economically backward zone in the Tribal Areas; he comes across Maliks named Ram Surengar (Macneil 1971:78); is housed in palaces with marble floors, statues of 'well-breasted naked women', and ceilings depicting paintings of debauchery (ibid 157-158); and is sent by his host a chosen girl to keep him company at night (ibid 165).

On the Frontier today the romance engendered by the colonial encounter is still preserved particularly by the political and military administration. It began from the moment of the Independence of Pakistan in 1947, when Sir George Cunningham, an ex-Governor of the North-West Frontier Province, was re-called from Glasgow by Mr. Jinnah, the Governor General of Pakistan, to become the first Governor of the Province. Memories of the colonial encounter remain untouched. The Billiards Room in the Miran Shah, North Waziristan, Scouts Mess is still dominated by the portrait of Captain G. Meynell V.C., Guides Frontier Force, 'killed in action Mohmand operations - 29 September 1935'. Lt.Colonel Harmen (immortalized by Howell's account of him - Caroe 1965, Appendix D) stares from a painting in the Dining Room of the Wana Mess in South Waziristan. Perpetuation of the tradition is itself part of the romance. On the Shabkadar tower that dominates the entire area the plaques commemorating fallen soldiers are still clear. The graveyard, too, is undisturbed, and the head-stones tell their tale clearly.

The continuing romance of the Frontier is best captured for me by a story Askar Ali Shah, the editor of The Khyber Mail (Peshawar) recounted of an old retired British officer who had served in the Frontier Scouts and who was given permission, obtained with difficulty, to visit Razmak, North Waziristan, with his wife. He requested the commanding officer to be allowed to accompany the local Scouts on a 'recce' trip (gasht) and wore his uniform still splendid after all the years. He observed that evening that he would go home and was now ready to die. Perhaps with the death of his generation the romance will also fade and die.

This romance, however, was not originally present in British accounts. Early contacts with Pathans in the middle of the nineteenth century followed the subjugation of more complex, sophisticated and affluent Indian states. The Pathans were referred to as 'absolute barbarians ... avaricious, thievish and predatory to the last degree' (Temple, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of the Punjab in 1855 - quoted in Wylly 1912: 5). Ibbetson thought the Pathan 'bloodthirsty, cruel and vindictive in the highest degree; he does not know what truth or faith is, in so much that the saying Afghan be iman (i.e. an Afghan is without conscience) has passed into a proverb among his neighbours' (Ibbetson 1883: 219). Two generations later, these attitudes were to be converted to those bordering on affection, respect and even admiration.

What then caused this great halo of romance to float over the British endeavour on the Frontier and continue to grow after it was all over? The

answers are many, and I shall consider them on various levels. Racially the British found that across the Indus there was a different world; the people were fairer and taller, and some, like Afridis, had blue eyes and blonde hair which helped create and perpetuate romantic theories of Greek origin (Bellew 1864, 1867, 1886). Geographically the climate and the physical environment reminded the British of home (Ahmed 1974; 1977). Psychologically the British found themselves, by the turn of the century, with no new worlds to conquer on the subcontinent: India lay passive and quiet. The major military pre-occupation was with the unruly North-West Frontier tribes; peripheral crises on the periphery of Empire. Imperial security bred a confidence in one's values and, as a consequence of this confidence, a better understanding of those of a remote and tribal people.

Perhaps most significant, however, was the change in the nature of colonial personnel. In 1858 India ceased to be the responsibility of a commercial company. It became a colony of the Crown and was turned over to civil and military officers drawn from the middle and upper classes of the most powerful nation of earth. Like school-boys in a state of boredom and security, the new breed of officers at the turn of the century craved some excitement. The Frontier was the French leave, involving an out-of-bounds adventure, the forbidden smoke, the forbidden drink, the innocently exciting infringement of school laws and social taboos.

Social reality appeared as an extension, a confirmation and a parody of public-school life. There was a particular Frontier code of its own that evolved as a consequence of the encounter: 'It became, therefore, a point of honour with us never to leave a wounded man behind. So if one of our men was wounded we counterattacked in order to get that wounded man back'. But above all the Frontier tested the man: 'To run away or to show cowardice on a Frontier campaign and come and wine or dine with your brother officers in the evening was a far worse punishment than risking death' (Allen 1977a:207). At the same time the concepts of 'sportmanship', 'games', 'honour', 'word', 'playing the referee', 'gentlemanly' and 'winning fairly or losing honourably', the key symbols of idealized British social behaviour, could be considered as having almost exact equivalents in the Pathan 'word' (jaba), 'honour' (nang), 'gentlemanly' (Pukhtun) and 'courage' (tora).

Because he seemed to be able to fit these concepts of 'honour' and 'the code' with his own equivalent concepts, the Pathan was placed in a different social category to the other natives on the subcontinent: 'There was among the Pathans something that called to the Englishman or the Scotsman - partly that the people looked you straight in the eye, that there was no equivocation and that you couldn't browbeat them even if you wished to. When we crossed the bridge at Attock we felt we'd come home' (Allen 1977a: 197-198). As a result of this identification, the Pathan-British encounter was seen in straight 'game' analogy:

It is a game - a contest with rules in which men kill without compunction and will die in order to win, in which kinship and friendship count less than winning - but in which there is no malice when the whistle blows and the game is over. And the transfer of an important player may be arranged at half-time while the demons are being sucked (Mason 1976: 337).

The colonial encounter was reduced to the nature of a cricket match, it was 'our chaps' versus 'your chaps':

The Political Agents would have been useless if they had not identified themselves thoroughly with the tribesmen's



thoughts and feelings, but we felt they often carried it too far. At the end of one day of fighting the Political Agent's young assistant came into our camp mess for a drink. M.L., in command, was in a good humour. After a confused beginning, the battalion had fought skilfully and well and several men were certain to win decorations.

The young political put down his glass. 'I thought our chaps fought very well today, sir,' he said.

M.L. beamed. 'So did I. Not at all bad'.

'And outnumbered about three to one, too, I should say'.

M.L. looked a little puzzled. 'Well, only in one or two places.

On the whole I think the tribesmen were outnumbered'.

The political said, 'Oh, I'm sorry. It's the tribesmen I was talking about.' (Masters 1965: 157).

Life on the Frontier was itself part of the Great Game played on three continents by international players. Even the sordid business of bombing tribesmen was cast in a 'sportsman-like' mould and a proper 'warning notice' issued before air-raids. Otherwise it simply would not be cricket:

Whereas lashkars (war parties) have collected to attack Gandab (Mohmand) and are to this end concentrated in your villages and lands, you are hereby warned that the area lying between Khapak-Nahakki line and the line Mullah Killi - Sam Chakai will be bombed on the morning of (date) beginning at 7 a.m. and daily till further notice.

You are hereby warned to remove all persons from all the villages named and from the area lying between them and the Khapak and Nahakki Passes and not to return till further written notice is sent to you. Any person who returns before receiving such further written notice will do so at his own risk.

Signed Griffith - Governor dated 4th September 1933.

Little wonder that a leader in The Statesman disapproved of this stance and warned that 'war is not a sentimental business and there will be no end to it so long as there is the least tendency to romanticize it as a gentlemanly and heroic and admirable pastime' (Statesman, 13.9.1935).

Above all, the Frontier represented a male world, and its masculine symbols a system that translated easily into classic British public school life. Women, on both sides, were generally out of sight and, when encountered, honoured. No stories of rapes, abductions or mistresses are told on either side. In any case almost the entire Tribal Area was strictly a 'no families' area for officials. In perhaps the most famous and unique affair of its kind Miss Ellis was kidnapped in 1923 from Kohat by an Afridi, Ajab Khan, as revenge for a British raid on his village and what he considered the violation of the Code by exposing his women to the presence of British troops. All accounts of Miss Ellis' treatment corroborate her own statements that her honour was never violated; she found respect and protection at the house of Akhundzada Mahmud among the Orakzai (Swinson 1967). It was this absence of the 'Mem-Sahib' that gave life on the Frontier its special public-schoolboy flavour, and women's presence in large numbers after the opening of the Suez Canal late last century may be thought of as erecting the final ethnic and social barrier between Indians and the British (Allen 1977a, 1977b; Spear 1963).

The mystification of the Frontier encounter created a mythical tribesman worthy of the honour to play opposite the British in the Frontier

game. This mystification helped to popularize a universal image of the Pathan as embodying the finest qualities of loyalty, courage and honour that transcend race, colour and creed (Caroe 1965: 344; Mason 1976: 338-339) - an image, moreover, that approximates to the Pathan's own notions of ideal Pathan behaviour as understood in terms of his Code. Contemporary British accounts end on a romantic and emotional note of contact with a people 'who looked him in the face' (Caroe 1965: xiii; Elliott 1968: 293); they speak of 'an affinity born of a hundred years of conflict, a mutual sense of honour, affection and esteem' (Caroe in Preface to Elliott 1968:v). The British created a special ethnic category of people whom they could elevate to 'noble savages' above the general run of 'savages'. It was an elevation not based on sophisticated intellectual or cultural criteria but an extension of the public-school analogy: someone not at your school but who could take a beating in the boxing ring or rugger without complaining, who could give as good as he got. The map of British India was dyed with various colours: red for British India, yellow for the 'protected areas' of the Indian States and so on. To these categories was added a special one, an acknowledged 'no-man's land', of the Tribal Areas. A land beyond the pale.

As a result of their romantic attitude, the British left social structure in the Tribal Areas largely untouched. Their presence created homogeneity within the tribe and encouraged the preservation of cultural values. In this way the anthropological 'purity' of the area was ensured. This was not the only effect of Britain's 'big-power' strategy, however. The introduction of allowances, estates and tithes exacerbated and deepened internal conflict based on internal rivalry. And the romantic gloss did not change the savagery or determination of the encounter - barbed wire and bombing do not win friends. It should be emphasised that, whatever the British imagined, their attitude was not reciprocated. None of the symbols of Frontier romance or nostalgia are visible among the tribes themselves. For the Pathans, the conflict with the British was not encompassed by standards applicable among themselves. While the British considered the Pathans, in some senses, as worthy opponents in a game, the Pathans considered the British as powerful, alien and unwanted intruders. Present bitterness toward twentieth century 'civilization' and 'modernization' results from an association of these processes with the colonizing British. Locally, official schemes sponsored by larger state systems are still regarded with suspicion.

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