

Baloch Musical Repertoires and Culture Production in the Post-Maritime Gulf Metropolis

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Wandering through a modestly sized supermarket in a peripheral section of Dubai one scorching hot day in July 2006, I came across an aisle solely devoted to coconuts. They were separated into bins based on specifiable origin and pedigree—Kenya, Ethiopia, Thailand, Indonesia, India, Oman, Philippines. The logic of this variety seemed to speak as directly to communities who favored coconuts from their own home regions as it did to a brisk trafficking in agricultural products. The Gulf port city of the pre-oil era has today been absorbed into the post-maritime Gulf metropolis, whose civic demographics are shaped by new economies, labor patterns, and jet-age networks of commerce and transsettlement.

In this chapter, drawing on fieldwork conducted between 2014 and 2017 in Oman, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait, I focus on the Baloch¹ citizenry of the Arab Gulf states while centering the circuitry of the Indian Ocean that has long bound together cultural spheres sited on disparate shores of the Indian Ocean littoral. Baloch society in the western Indian Ocean region presents an extremely complex picture when viewed through the lens of cultural texts and arts. The large Baloch communities sited in the Arab Gulf states attest to this history and this complexity as they navigate between a distinctive peninsular identity and a Balochistan-facing nationalism in which a rich heritage of cultural arts, including music, dance, and poetry, is proudly enshrined. My argument here is twofold. First, a geographically expansive, historicized perspective is needed to conceptualize and identify the ways in which the Indian Ocean as an “inter-regional arena” (Bose 2002, 368) is clearly legible in major

coastal towns of the eastern Arabian Peninsula. Second, Baloch, by virtue of intersecting with an array of otherwise culturally discrete groups such as Peninsular Arabs, expatriate South Asians, and slave-descended communities of East African heritage, confound the boundaries between these groups, between Baloch and non-Baloch, and between Gulf citizens and guest laborers. Musical and ritual contexts offer clear illustrations of these dynamics. Elsewhere,² I have devoted in-depth considerations to the ways Makrani Baloch culture has been reproduced, resited, or reconstituted in urban Peninsular environments. Here my focus is a unique Baloch positionality within western Indian Ocean networks, historical and post-maritime.

CULTURAL FLOWS AND DEMOGRAPHIC ENTANGLEMENTS IN THE URBAN GULF

It is challenging to approach the social and cultural character of the Gulf metropolis holistically. Underlying a veneer of cosmopolitan prosperity are the extremes of socioeconomic inequality created by the *kafala* system, whereby states and their ruling elites strictly control—through the instrumentality of private sponsoring entities—mammoth imported foreign labor forces, who come largely from countries struggling with poverty and unemployment. While numerous studies (e.g., Gardner 2010; Ahmad 2017; Lori 2019) confront the unforgiving circumstances and politicized bureaucracies guest workers must endure, curated cultural constructs such as “Gulf music” too often favor a serendipitously affluent *ḥaḍar*³ society’s collective self-imagining.

The incongruity of the unregulated power of the *kafeels* (sponsors) and the hyperregulation of the guest laborers has prompted human rights campaigns that are not exactly welcomed by officials or the public—the ubiquitous presence of hardworking (and in many cases overworked and abused) Indians, Pakistanis, Nepalese, Filipina/os, Bengalis, Indonesians, Eritreans, and Moroccans is rarely openly acknowledged in a socially conscious manner, and it does not take much to strike a nerve.

For instance, when asked to perform an Emirati accent for laughs on a Lebanese talk show, the Palestinian-Jordanian singer-comedian-actress Mayis Hamdan opted for an over-the-top impression of a Filipina boutique worker in Dubai, a performance that angered many Filipina/o social media commentators, who felt she was unjustly ridiculing a population who labor intensely and with dignity in disadvantageous circumstances to support their families, and generally display a solid command of English.

Overseas Filipina/o workers are conspicuously excluded from the panoramas of Gulf cosmopolitanism customarily cast in the mists of an Indian Ocean-inclined maritime past. It was a shock one Sunday in Kuwait to witness what turned out to be a regularly held church service in the makeshift setting of a hotel mezzanine

terrace. Filipina/o residents had left their ubiquitous posts at coffee shops, mall outlets, hotel reception desks, and supermarket check-out lanes and come together powerfully, audibly in a way that challenged their invisibility, shattering the monotonous, businesslike atmosphere of the lobby with a boisterous eruption of singing and clapping. When Indonesians and Malaysians are afforded roles in narratives concerning Indian Ocean society, it is mainly in the context of interactions with religious, mercantile, and musical currents from Hadhramawt.

Inspired by music emanating from Aden, Shihr, and Mukalla throughout the twentieth century (see Lavin this volume), the Kuwaiti genres of Adeni and Yamani⁴ represent a creative license to completely dismantle any boundaries separating South Asian, Cairene, Yemeni, Hijazi, and Gulf cultural orientations. Pakistani musicians are fixtures in these circles, while young Kuwaiti singers, violinists, and percussionists immerse themselves in popular Qawwali and filmi music, inspired by examples set by Hadhrami performers such as Mohammad Jum'ah Khan and Ali al-Khanbashi.⁵ Even given the omnipresence of South Asian laborers and entrepreneurs, the wild popularity of Bollywood, the great volume of Pakistani and South Indian eateries, this intermingling is much more of a hidden gem than an overt facet of Gulf society—it is percolated discreetly in the privileged settings of *diwāwīn* and *jalsāt* (customary—usually all male—private gatherings of varying size).

Baloch, while deeply entrenched as a cultural presence in the region through centuries of migration, are chronically underacknowledged on the surfaces of Gulf society. In several Gulf states, notably Oman and Bahrain, a considerable portion of the armed forces and police and security services are Baloch. These and other available vocations may translate into positions of relative privilege, but Baloch are often typecast as soldiers or even mercenaries, and there are firm lines governing the extent to which Baloch communities can assert their support for Baloch independence or even publicly showcase their cultural identity (map 5.1).

Fellow Gulf citizens might not easily distinguish Baloch as comprising a discrete group, since the longest established communities are—in their public presentation—completely assimilated into Peninsular Arab culture, while more recent arrivals and guest workers may be perceived as Iranians or Pakistanis. Nonetheless, the Arab Gulf States stand out as a part of the world where Baloch have a recognized, established position within the social fabric, whose superficially rigid contours they certainly complicate.

Understanding the geography of the Gulf as inscribed through Indian Ocean infrastructures of mobility and cultural contact requires a fluid engagement with a multiplicity of frames. Major Gulf cities consist in part of historic “quarters” (Arabic sing.: *hara*) associated with specific groups such as Yemenis and Hadharim⁶ in cities like Jeddah and al-'Ain, or Bastakis in Dubai and Bahrain (Stephenson 2018,



MAP 5.1. Map of key regions mentioned in the text around the western Indian Ocean littoral. (Map courtesy of Phoebe Hwang)

176). The Abdelaziz section of Doha represents a concentration of mainly South Asian guest works who live in barracks-like compounds, while Hawally in Kuwait City is populated by people from almost anywhere except Kuwait.

The Deira section of old Dubai is equated with conspicuous displays of “low-end globalization,” where migrant traders oversee a chaotic shopping district overflowing with cheap goods (Mathews, Lin, and Yang 2017, 108). As Pelican (2014, 283–84) writes of Deira,

a number of areas have informally been named after different nationalities. Most popular is Nasser Square, named after the late Egyptian president. But there is also the “Sudanese masjid” (mosque), the “Somali quarter,” and the “Ethiopian street” with ethnic shops and restaurants. Yet as my host Murad outlined, these names often relate to historical linkages, such as the nationality of the imam who initiated a congregation or the first occupants of a quarter. Today, they may no longer strictly apply as a result of the quarters’ transient character.

Singapore likewise has its Kampung Arab where Hadhrami heritage peeks out here and there through an increasingly opaque Singaporean palimpsest.

Social milieus throughout and across the Gulf are deeply imprinted by legacies of the slave trade, which have given rise to terms like Afro-Arabian, Afro-Iranian, or Afro-Baloch, while contemporary flows from Africa are no less pronounced. In latter-day Dubai, as in Guangzhou (Mathews, Lin, and Yang 2017, 14–16), certain neighborhoods are characterized by nightlife, cafes, and restaurants catering to resident African traders and laborers. At the same time, Swahili language and Zanzibari cuisine and music in Muscat and Salalah are emblematic not merely of an avowed “African” ancestry but also of Arab and Baloch Omani households who have been repatriated from Zanzibar, which was ruled by Oman until the mid-twentieth century. Recognizing these tensions and complexities helps us to grasp the extremely nodal position into which Baloch have settled over time.

BALOCH IN THE GULF AND WESTERN INDIAN
OCEAN IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The majority of the Baloch in the Arab Gulf States hail from the Makran sub-region of Balochistan, which lies directly across the Gulf of Oman (alternately, Gulf of Makran) from the Arabian Peninsula. A notable subset, concentrated in the UAE and in Oman's Batinah region, comes from the westernmost portion of Makran, an area that falls within the eastern portion of Iran's Hormozgan province and is part of a zone of cultural gradation between Baloch and Gulf Persian cultural landscapes, comprising subregions, languages, dialects, and cultural repertoires that have ended up represented on both sides of the Gulf. In the UAE, Qatar, and Bahrain, Achomi and Bastaki communities with roots in southern Iran maintain their languages as well as architectural features, notably the *badgirs* (wind towers) that mark their neighborhoods (see Stephenson 2018, 176), while Willem Floor (2010, 8) points to residential quarters of the south Iranian port city Bandar-e Lengeh designated as Rudbari, Minabi, Bastaki, and Balochi. Mingling topographic resonance with emotionally saturated mood, the taxonomy of Baloch *zahiroks* (melodic-modal entities that form the basis for composition and improvisation) includes Bashkard and Rudbar as the names of specific *zahiroks* (see Badalkhan 2009, 236).

There are famous examples of premodern Baloch poetry where the action revolves around naval exploits in the Persian Gulf or Indian Ocean, or descriptions are offered of journeys to the ports of Oman (see Mürer 2022, 8–9). Hammal, the subject of one widely known epic narrative, was a Baloch naval warrior—or pirate, depending who you ask—who fought to repel Portuguese colonists who sought to control the Persian Gulf. He was captured and imprisoned—in Southern India or in Portugal, in varying accounts (Badalkhan 2000, 159)—but continued resistance prevented the Portuguese from capturing the Makrani port of Pasni (Dashti 2012, 154; Baluch 1977, 351–54; Badalkhan 2000, 155–60). When Sabir Badalkhan (2000, 159) writes that, “in mourning for Mir Hammal, Baloch women still do not wash or comb their hair on Saturdays,” the significance of Saturday can be found in these verses:

Shanbeh e rôcha sar mashôd brâtânî gohâr
Shanbeh pa brâtân shar na int shânzdeh pa peta
Shanbeh e rôch o shânzdeh gon shus saâta
Shanbeh e rôcha Hammal e shâga nûl kuta
Hammal pa shâg o shâg pa mânil bû'in zera

Thou sister of thy brothers, do not wash thine [head] on Saturdays
 Saturday is not auspicious for brothers, [and] the sixteenth of the moon not for fathers;
 Saturday, and the sixteenth of moon, with their ill-omened hours,
 deprived Hammal of his boat and the boat of its blue sea. (Baluch 1977, 354, 357)

As we shall see, encounters with European Indian Ocean imperial powers strikingly crop up in other textual and ritual settings, as the politics of power and military might always exert direct, tangible effects on the communal lives of ordinary citizens, shaping the outlook, needs, and hardships they articulate through song, dance, and cathartic exertions.

TEXTS IN CIRCULATION

Forms of ritual knowledge, learning, doctrine, and practice speak clearly of the spatialized networks in which they are embedded. Despite the transregional importance of languages such as Persian, Urdu, Swahili, Malay, Dutch, Tamil, and Portuguese across the Indian Ocean region, it is the Arabic language that is inextricable from Muslim learning and practice, retaining a centrality from Zanzibar to Makran to Java. While Hadhrami Arabs from coastal Yemen have played a significant roles as agents in the transmission of this knowledge, other local littoral populations, notably WaSwahili⁷ in maritime East Africa and Baloch in the Gulf region, have been the recipients. The Baloch groups have thus developed intimate, localized relationships with ceremonial idioms and texts for which the Arabic language has been designated a conduit of spiritual authority.

Of the Arabic texts that are incorporated into ritual contexts across the Indian Ocean, the recitative of the life of the Prophet formally called *Mawlid Sharaf al-Anam* and less formally known as the *Barzanji*, after its author, Ja'far bin Isma'il al-Barzanji (d. 1764), is especially prominent and provides examples of intersections between Baloch and Hadrami circuits of mobility and settlement. The distribution of the *Barzanji* follows a geographic logic that recalls established maritime routes and patterns of migration, both voluntary—as with the distribution of Hadhrami 'ulama' across the Indian Ocean—and forced—as with the colonial importation of indentured labor from South and Southeast Asia to South Africa. The *Barzanji* is widely recited in Indonesia, where popular, often mediated songs expressive of Muslim piety—*sholawat*—are often based on extracts from its text (Rasmussen 2010, 180). Among the Cape Malays of South Africa, who until 1793 could only practice Islam in secret, Dutch written in the Arabic script emerged as a language of Islamic learning, and recitations of the *Barzanji* came to be set to multipart harmony arrangements recalling strains of European hymnody (Dangor 125–26; al-Zawiya Singers 2011).

It is important to note that *mawlūd* texts have grown over time from chiefly commemorating the Prophet's birthday to accommodating an array of votive and healing functions, ranging from inaugurating a new house to seeking guidance and blessings with respect to a personal practical challenge to addressing spirit possession. In Barka, the first town of the Batinah region north of Muscat, the main group of available specialists for a core range of ceremonial enactments,

including the recitation of the *Barzanji* as well as *lēwa* and *mālid* (to be discussed presently), are Baloch.

Among Mapilla Muslims in Kerala, the *Barzanji* is complemented by a condensed *mawlid*⁸ text known as the *Manqus Mawlid*, attributed to Zainuddin al-Makhdum al-Malabari, a sixteenth-century Qaderi sheikh and jurist of Hadhrami origin (Kuzhiyan 2016, 434–35). Ines Weinrich (2020, 27–30) makes the case that the introduction of the *manqus mawlid*, composed several centuries after the *Barzanji*, should be contextualized not only by transpositions of Muslim learning from Hadhramawt to Malabar following routes of maritime expansion and settlement, but also within the conditions brought about by the Portuguese, especially conflict and disease. It had been established by that time that *mawliūd* texts and *mālid* ceremonies could be employed to supplicate God, the Prophet, and an array of Sufi sheikhs (*mashāyekh*) for assistance and protection. Weinrich reads the *manqus mawlid* as a short, ceremonially oriented text heavily modeled on the *Barzanji* and as containing discernible allusions to plague outbreaks that accompanied Portuguese colonial incursions in the sixteenth century (Weinrich 2020, 27–30).

These texts, the ideas shaping their delivery, and associated ceremonial performances took form through networks binding Hejaz, Egypt, Iraq, Andalusia, and Hadhramawt as core sites of Muslim learning and scholarship (Weinrich 2020, 21). Over time then, *māliids* have come to represent a “traveling text” in their perambulations as ritual forms every bit as much as Weinrich argues they do as a literary genre of pious narration. For example, the choreography of the *maulidi ya homu* ceremony performed in Zanzibar, which has become something of a presence at international music festivals, closely matches that of the *huwwamah* row of performers of Omani *māliids*, with *homu* the Swahili variant of that term. Ellen Hebden (this volume) describes adaptations of the *Maulidi ya Homu* in northern Mozambique, first as a women’s dance called *tufo* (after the term *duff*, which designates in Arabic and Persian the frame drums used in the ritual) and then as a political performance employing Portuguese texts in praise of Mozambique’s ruling political party.

Anne K. Bang (2003, 148–49) emphasizes that while *mawliids* have been widely performed since the thirteenth century, with Hadhramawt a core site, the nineteenth-century Hadhrami scholar and Ba Alawi sheikh ‘Ali Bin Muhammed al-Hibshi (known in Indonesia as Habib Ali al-Habsyi⁹) was particularly instrumental in transmitting a reenergized embrace of *mawliūd* texts and *mawlid* ceremonial settings to East Africa, Malabar, and Nusantara.

As an extension of this same circuitry, in which Hadhrami ‘*ulama*’, Omani empire, and the Shafā’i school of Islamic jurisprudence all overlap or intersect at various junctures, *māliids* are common in Makran, southern Iran (where they are also called *mashāyekh*), and Oman. In Muscat, I have observed *māliids* representing a mixture of Omanis of Arab, East African, and Baloch heritage as well as *māliids* that were conducted within a clearly delineated Baloch community setting.

BAKHÛR/SÛCHKĪ: RITUAL ENVIRONMENTS

One of the famed commodities of the western Indian Ocean world is frankincense—in actuality a range of plants, some varieties more prized than others, that are chiefly harvested in South Arabia (Dhofar, Mahra, and Hadhramawt) and the Horn of Africa. This is an ancient trade that actively continues to the present. The incineration of frankincense, a material process, is framed within dense structures of belief that align with texts, musical performances, and ritual proceedings. One of the verses from the *Barzanji* that is commonly emphasized as a refrain during *mālid* ceremonies evokes the fragrance of frankincense filling and honoring a sacred space—the tomb of the Prophet (Holmes Katz 2010, 149). Incense used in spirit possession ceremonies such as *zār*¹⁰ and *mālid* is called *bakhūr* in Arabic and *sūchkī* in Baloch and is a potent component of the vivid ritual sensorium.

The first *mālid* I attended was with a Baloch friend who regularly attends such occasions. Together with a handful of former school friends—now adults—he maintains a WhatsApp group to navigate the ritual terrain in and around Muscat. This little cohort coordinates to attend various spirit possession ceremonies, often meeting at an inconspicuous roadside location to transfer to a single vehicle. Their investment in these events varies. One is known to host *mālids* himself. Two others, a set of twins, are habitual *huwwamah* participants—they described for me how they jointly harbor a spirit, who enables them to access each other's eyes and ears when they are apart. The fourth, my Baloch contact, is chiefly drawn in by curiosity and can be openly critical in his assessment of how people conduct themselves within the ritual settings.

The *mālid* was in the courtyard of a villa on a palm-lined residential street in a Baloch section of Azaibah, a neighborhood today quite central within Muscat's expanding urban landscape, which has spilled continuously northward and inland from its historical port, corniche, and fort districts, Old Muscat, Matrah, and Jibroo. The main officiant, known as the *mu'alleem*, presided over two facing rows of men—the principal singers (*ṣaf ar-ra'īsī*) and the respondents (*ṣaf al-huwwamah*),¹¹ who chanted in a responsorial fashion, at first unaccompanied but then increasingly propelled by strongly accented, hypnotic rhythms on the frame drums (*tārāt*, *duffūf*, cf. Hebden, this volume). People were seated in the courtyard roughly divided by gender and family unit.

As the ceremony gained momentum, it transitioned from a solemn, pious commemoration to an animated gathering focused on individuals whose resident spirits were activated by the chanting, drumming, and clouds of *sūchkī*. When people, inhabited by spirits, become *por* (Balochi, “filled”), they enter into a violent state, thrashing about, convulsing, wracked by contortions and grimaces, sometimes seeming to present themselves as objects of ridicule, making grotesque sounds or assuming comical voices. The first response to individuals becoming *por* is to fumigate them with *bakhūr/sūchkī*, an action called *tashmīm*.¹²

Community and household dynamics are upended and inverted by the force of the spirit presences. One woman, driven into a state, gestured to a man and indicated via pantomime that he was a drunk. Since it was the spirit of the *Pir-e Baghdad* (i.e., Abdelqadir Gilani)—and not her—who was levying this accusation, she would not be held accountable for it. At the same time, I had to wonder if this individual was singled out because he was vulnerable, powerless, already ostracized, so that he could be the public object of a woman's contempt without upsetting the day-to-day chain of authority.

Shortly afterward, a man became *por*, rising up on his knees and rhythmically thrusting his upper body right and left in the manner characteristic of *zār*, *guātī*, and *mālīd* possession ceremonies. His wife was seated close by holding their infant child. Suddenly, in the throes of his involuntary paroxysms, he seized the baby and held it facing him as he continued to thrash to and fro propulsively. Alarmed, the woman and another, perhaps his mother, delicately entrained to his motions and deftly made the sudden move to relieve him of the child. Upon being taken from his father, the child—who had been completely spellbound by the violent swinging motions—began to shriek and cry uncontrollably to the point where it was promptly handed back to its father, whose violent thrusting had only accelerated. Such dramatic spectacles clash with the reserve and immaculate presentation that characterize day-to-day public life in Oman.

Owing to sensitivities surrounding the physical-emotional comportment of participants, I was never permitted to film these ceremonies. I could record sound however, as attendees often do. On one subsequent evening at a Baloch friend's apartment, happily absorbed in listening to my friend's wife's sister recount a visit to Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine in Sindh, I was getting ready to meet the same small group and accompany them to another *mālīd* ceremony. Meanwhile, my friend was preoccupied with devising a tactic to facilitate my filming the ceremony. What if he lent me this ballpoint pen that concealed a teeny digital video camera and I wore it inconspicuously in my breast pocket? He loved gadgetry—drones and the like. I would not consider flouting this community's boundaries or code of propriety. "No one will know you are filming," he said. "Abdelqadir [Gilani] will know," I said, and immediately his wife and sister-in-law emphatically concurred.

How *mālīds* and other spirit possession ceremonies are variously framed—as superstitions, as religious devotion, as emotional therapy—bring forth neither schisms nor contradictions so much as a vivid sense of the multidimensional world people inhabit together. Farhat Sultana (2013) writes of how *guātī* ceremonies in Gwadar are suppressed and frowned upon in periods when communities want to demonstrate their conservative religiosity, but that they repropagate as a potent domain of Baloch cultural performance when the nationalist struggle is inflamed. While also structured as *zār* ceremonies, *guātī*¹³ ceremonies in Makran rely on repertoires whose musicality is considered purely Baloch.¹⁴ In the *guātī* context, the rhythmic strumming (*panjag*) and emotive modal constructs (*zahirök*) that

form the basis for Baloch musical genres such as *shēr*, *sōt*, *likū*, and *nāzenk* are present in a more relentlessly repetitive and fragmentary¹⁵ form. While *guātī* ceremonies are common in Makran and Karachi, in Muscat, *mālid*s are a much more common approach to addressing the various forms of distress traditionally diagnosed as deriving from spirit possession.¹⁶

Another core component of these densely interwoven ritual complexes is the *dammāl*, vigorous devotional dancing and drumming performed at shrines, most iconically by disheveled *malangs*¹⁷ in ragged attire. In particular, the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan, Sindh is acutely associated with *dammāl*. The shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar attracts large numbers of Baloch pilgrims, especially women. At possession ceremonies in Makran and Muscat, Lal Shahbaz Qalandar is one of the most explicitly engaged spirits (see Mürer 2022, 15).

From the point of view of rhythmic character, aside from enabling ecstatic dancing, it is held that a crucial aspect of Qalandari *dammāl* is that the formula “*dam a dam mast qalandar*”¹⁸ should be audibly legible in its rhythmic articulations. *Dammāl* performance permeates *guātī* ceremonies in Balochistan and entwines with *ngoma*¹⁹ ritual techniques among communities of East African heritage in Sindh, Gujarati,²⁰ and coastal Karnataka, communities colloquially—and in some senses pejoratively—known as Sidis or Sheedis (see Jackson, this volume). At the Gori Pir shrine in Gujarat, the term *dammāl* becomes interchangeable with *goma* (from *ngoma*)²¹ in festivities that explicitly celebrate the African origins of both the shrine’s *pīr* and his Sidi devotees (see Catlin-Jairazbhoy 2006; Basu 2008; and Jackson, this volume).

Tradition holds that Bava Gor²² made his way to Gujarat via Makran and Sindh, and there are also important shrines in Karachi that are focal for the Shidi community (Basu 2000, 257–58). As Brian Jackson (this volume) points out, in Pakistan (especially in the Karachi environs), the concepts Shidi and Afro-Baloch are often entangled. A professional *surōz*²³ player from Gwadar on a sponsored visit to Muscat explained to me that specific *guātī* melodies are required for Shidi spirits.

If the agency of Hadhrami ‘*ulama*’ is especially pronounced in the transmission and distribution of the *mālid*, the integration of figures like Bava Farid Ganjishakar and Lal Shahbaz Qalandar into *mālid* contexts is emblematic of the geography inhabited by Gulf Baloch, whose radial perspectives take in proximate worlds that equally encircle Makran and the coastal eastern Arabian Peninsula.

TODAY: BALOCH ARTS IN OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL SPACES

Substantial numbers of Makrani Baloch in Muscat are recent arrivals who maintain strong connections with Balochistan, but the Baloch term Mashkati (“from/of Muscat”) is applied to more long settled communities. While their origins are in Makran—or in many cases in East Africa via Makran—they speak a distinctive Baloch dialect that has evolved from Makrani Baloch, accumulating Omani

Arabic vocabulary and inflections and a variety of local slang features. The distinction between Makrani and Mashkati Baloch can be acute or extremely fluid, depending on the context.

Mashkati Baloch weddings spill out into public areas in the historically Baloch-populated quarters of Jibroo, Matrah, and Sidab or in more recent extensions of the city into which Baloch have been transplanted, such as Khoudh, Hail, Maabelah, Amarat, or Wadi Hattat. The music is hard driving, propelled by a drum kit, bass, and a dense percussion section. A synthesizer adds repetitive motifs, and the singing generally involves call and response patterns geared toward building excitement that culminates in an explosion of drumming and a frenzy of dancing. Tightly coordinated pauses and changes in time signature heighten the sense of tension and release. These weddings are *the* place for youth culture on display in Baloch Muscat. With a range of fashions from a sort of designer hip-hop look to futuristic glasses and beards cropped in angular patterns, they are crucial settings for observing how Mashkati Baloch position themselves culturally—predictably somewhere between Gwadar, Karachi, Mumbai, Dubai, Zanzibar, and Tehran (see Mürer 2019). The jumble of musical referents yields an almost amorphous nebula, yet one that has been distilled and finessed by successive generations of young wedding musicians in the back streets behind the Matrah corniche and the dusty lots amid Maabilah’s half-built apartment blocks. One of the most consistent rhythmic-motivic components in this repertoire is the exuberant circle dance called *l̥ewa* (figure 5.1).²⁴

L̥ewa is unfailingly included in any inventory of Oman’s traditional arts (see Mellah 1998; Kathiri 2005 and 2022; Shidi 2008; Shawqi 1994; and Christensen, Castelo-Branco, with Barwani 2009). These arts (Arabic: *funūn*—a term often used in lieu of music) are performed at national festivals and have been written about in detail by scholars, some foreign, some affiliated with the Omani Center for Traditional Music (OCTM), which houses a remarkable audiovisual archive. In recent decades, *l̥ewa* performances have receded in communal life while being maintained as a regulated expression of a complex Omani history and national heritage. Mounting *l̥ewa* as folkloric pageantry is a pattern that extends across the Arab Gulf States and to southern Iran and Karachi, these last two settings being marked by more freely imaginative interpretations (see Mürer 2019).

Emirati scholar Aisha Bilkhair (2021, 134–35) depicts *l̥ewa* as a potent festive idiom for which people develop a craving and that marks or references events and situations of national import, “such as the wedding of Shaykh Mohammad bin Rashid (the current ruler of Dubai and the vice-president of the UAE) [and] the return of Shaikh Maktoum al-Rashid after heart surgery.” Among the old guard of Muscat Baloch musicians who rose to prominence once a religious ban on music was relaxed when Sultan Qaboos took power in 1970 and whom



FIGURE 5.1. Baloch wedding band performing at a wedding party (*nadinag*) in Seeb, Oman. (Photo by the author)

I met during my period of fieldwork, a drummer named Tallab was known for welcoming Sultan Qaboos with his *dohol* (Baloch name for a large double headed drum known in Arabic as *rahmani* and Swahili as *chapuo*) whenever Sultan Qaboos arrived in Oman from abroad (see Mürer 2022). While Tallab at that point was too aged to participate, festive drumming again welcomed the sultan in 2017 when he returned from a lengthy period of cancer treatment in Germany.

In Muscat and Karachi, *lĕwa* is often understood as a Baloch—or Afro-Baloch—genre, practiced by Baloch communities while emblematic of ties to East Africa. Although *lĕwa* as a music-dance idiom does function as an expression of Baloch identity in Oman, UAE, and Karachi, many Baloch do not consider it to be representative of Baloch culture, regarding it instead as belonging to descendants of slaves who today have come to speak Baloch.

In his survey of popular song in Bahrain, ‘Aissa Mohammed Jasem al-Malaki provides examples of texts used within *lĕwa* performances, which he says contain many “unknown African words” (Al-Malaki 1999, 122), pointing to the need for much more extensive, informed analysis. For one example, he identifies a melody as *dingomārō*²⁵—the name of a spirit—and provides a short text that opens with the words “*bikā zumar huwa lĕwa bikā zumar huwa*” (Al-Malaki 1999, 126). It seems likely that *bikā zumar* is an approximation of *mpiga zumari*—Swahili for player of the double-reed shawm commonly called *mizmār* in Arabic and *sūrnāi* in Persian and Baloch (see Mürer 2019).

In Oman, it is essential for traditional *lĕwa* performances that they take place by the sea. This fact may further point to a history where—in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—British and French vessels moored at the harbors of Muscat and Matrah were invested with the authority to free Omani slaves (of African origin) who physically presented themselves to them in accordance with a series of international treaties incrementally abolishing slavery (Cox 1925, 196).²⁶ Freed Omani slaves were known for their musical ensembles celebrating these powers and the freedom they had bestowed when the occasion arose (Cox 1925, 196).

At Baloch wedding celebrations in Muscat, *lĕwa* is a dance segment rooted in its ritual context. The large-format, youth-driven wedding bands also weave explicit *lĕwa* themes, chants, and drumming patterns into upbeat pop songs, creating a push-and-pull tension that aligns with dramatic increases and decreases in the intensity and density of drumming textures and the dynamic regulation of the leader's vocalized exhortations.

A POST-MARITIME ERA OF REMIXED ROUTES AND POLITIES

At a wedding in Liwa, a coastal town in Oman's Batinah province, I heard the familiar strains of a Muscat Baloch wedding band emanating from a tent whose occupants were fully enclosed by its colorful, embroidered fabric. This was the women's space for celebrating the wedding, and they were inside dancing to a recording of one of the main bands active in Muscat (almost certainly Muna or Nawras or Ayla). In Baloch culture, there are unambiguously manly dances in which men dance in prescribed formations, but spontaneous, freely expressive dancing that manifests in intense, intimate encounters between individuals is acutely gendered as feminine, and is only acceptable in some degree of seclusion. In male environments, transgressions disrupting this moral code are what make a festive occasion lively and engaging, while male dancers presenting as women are commonly part of the professional entourage of a Muscat wedding band.

While the women danced the evening away in that tent, hundreds of seated men lined the perimeter of the open-air village clearing, in much the same fashion that men sit along all the interior walls of a mosque to mark the passing of a community member. In each case, a newly arrived guest will travel along the rows of seated men, shaking each of their hands and greeting them before taking his own seat. Musical commemoration of the wedding is more compact and precisely sequenced in this setting than for the women, but with live music consisting of a bagpipe (variably *habbūneh*, *qīrbah*, or *hīzak*, *hīzak* being a specifically regional Baloch term) player and several drummers (*dholi*) who play the *kāsīr* and *rahmānī* (or *jurūw* and *marsūz* in local Baloch terminology) double-headed drums. The

leader sings through a megaphone. It is striking how these long-settled Batinah Baloch communities offer a gendered diptych where the males present a tableau of seamless continuity through time and across the Gulf while the women are positioned on the twenty-first century, Arabian side of the rupture with the ancestral *mulk* (Baloch term for home region).

The dancing, colloquially known as *tamāshā*, takes the form of a large circle that becomes a procession (*malag*) (see Christensen, Castelo-Branco, with Barwani 2009, 190), whose climactic peak is marked by an almost convulsive shaking of the arms and shoulders, a motion known as *chamag*. The style of dancing and the posture of the drummers, who face each other as they process, are continuous with neighboring southern Iranian festive music and dance idioms and, among Baloch, specific to communities in the eastern Hormozgan province of Iran. Apart from key research by Iranian scholars (e.g., Darvishi 1373/1995, 63), the close intertwining of south Iranian and western Makrani Baloch musical culture is not often brought under consideration, especially when sited on the Arabian Peninsula.

A recent Iranian film called *Dingomaro* (2014, by Kamran Heidari) profiles a musician in the south Iranian Gulf port city of Bandar-e Abbas who proclaims the presence of this spirit inside of him as a powerful manifestation of his African identity, which he closely links to his music, which ranges from reggae to soul to Bandari wedding dances. I noted that wherever the word *dance* appears in the English subtitles for the film, the term that is actually uttered on-screen is *chamak*, a close cognate to the Baloch term previously cited.

In his discussion of the effects of the decline of the pearling industry and the explosion of an oil economy on Kuwaiti society and culture, Yacoub Yusuf al-Hijji points out that, when the oil industry emerged as an alternative to the danger and physical demands of pearl diving and seafaring, dhows owned by Kuwaiti captains and merchants were sold “to traders in other parts of the Gulf to be adapted for engines and put to whatever uses their new owners saw fit” (Hijji 2010, 132). A clue to these other uses follows a page later: “While the last Kuwaiti short-distance trading *nakhoda*, Yusuf Al-Hashil, embarked on his final voyage in 1965, there are still today numerous motorized dhows from the ports of Iran and Pakistan lining the creeks of Dubai and Sharjah, for example” (Hijji 2010, 133).

The shift in dhow usage from pearling and long-distance craft to motorized trans-Gulf transport is—along with the world of short-distance smuggling via speedboat—an outgrowth of the short-distance intra-Gulf routes known as *al-qīṭāh* (Hijji 2010, 93–95; Stephenson 2018, 13). The routes have fostered tight-knit linkages that continue to this day despite mounting tensions between US/Saudi Arabian and Iranian spheres of influence.

In contrast with such short-distance, trans-Gulf circuits, Baloch culture has also been imprinted by commodities in circulation along larger-scale routes that align with Engseng Ho’s “inter-Asia” (Ho 2017) through which he centers

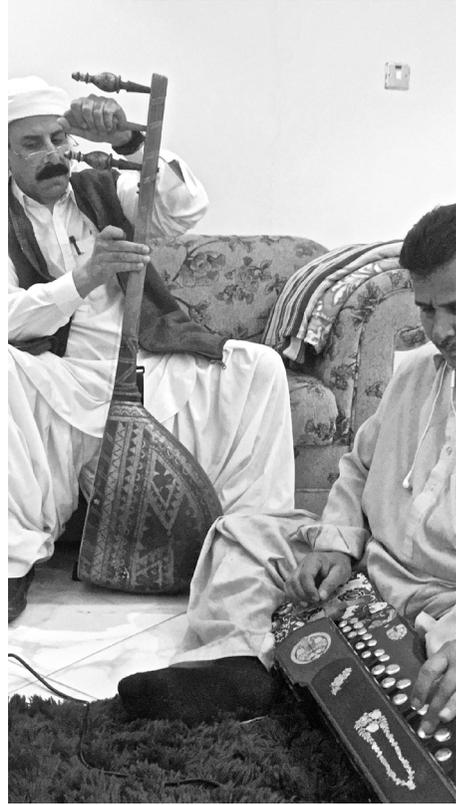


FIGURE 5.2. Makrani Baloch
benjū player with Makrani Baloch poet
holding tambūrang in Kuwait, 2016.
(Photo by the author)

the Indian Ocean to encapsulate a sphere of intensive interaction that can be regarded from a contemporary perspective as well as through a deep, *longue durée* historical lens. One striking example of an intersection on this scale in a Baloch context is the twentieth-century introduction of the keyed zither known as the *benjū* (figure 5.2).

In the first decades of the twentieth century, during roughly the same period that Japan developed and implemented methods of producing artificial pearls, which led to the decline of pearl diving in the Gulf, instruments used for courtly and folk repertoires in Japan experienced a dramatic technological reimagination in the wake of new cultural and industrial vistas inaugurated during the period known as the Meiji Restoration. The *koto* plucked zither was redesigned with fewer strings and fitted with typewriter-style keys as a fretting mechanism and named the *taishōgoto*, thereby celebrating the Tashi period for this surge in innovation (Malm 2000, 194; Charles 1994, 101; Jinko 1986; Johnson 2003, n. 3). The *taishōgoto* held a certain novelty appeal and by the mid-twentieth century had made its way to ports around the Indian Ocean littoral. Upon arrival in South Asia, it was

renamed *benjū*, after the banjo.²⁷ In Karachi, its potential for Hindustani *raga* interpretation was explored, and a succession of Baloch musicians gradually adopted it for contemporary *sōt* performances (see Brian Jackson's discussion in this volume of the famed *benjū* player Bilawal).

Ultimately, the Makrani Baloch musician and instrument maker Joma Surizehi enhanced its design (Surizehi 2006), and his son, Abdurrahman Surizehi, developed an enchanting textural template by integrating the *panjag* (rhythmic drone strumming patterns) and melodies of various Baloch popular and folk idioms, drawing heavily on *guātī* and *dammāli* repertoires.

Each Baloch folk instrument—the double fipple flute *dōnelī*, the open belly fiddle *surōz*, the skin belly lute *rubāb*, the jaw harp *chang*, the rhythmically strummed drone lute *tambūrag*—has its own distinctive sonority and sense of melodic-rhythmic patterning. The *benjū* was a modern addition to this traditional music spectrum, but its rich acoustic sonic properties have extended the palate of folk repertoires, while its electrified iteration has become a staple of contemporary Makrani Baloch studio recordings and live performances.

CONCLUSION

Musics in circulation through maritime routes and port cultures are emblematic of a complex circuitry whose paths range from those that appear to have stabilized over time to those that shift, flicker, and redirect in unpredictable surges. In May 2022, a Baloch culture exhibit was inaugurated in Mombasa's historic Fort Jesus Museum with contributions and support from an international community of Baloch cultural activists. Meanwhile, Baloch literary organizations, poetry salons, and communal festivities continue to imprint the cultural landscapes of Oman, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait. If the Gulf and the western Indian Ocean are culturally defined through fluid confluences of idioms and geocultural signifiers pointing to Bantuphone East Africa, the Horn of Africa, Makran, Iraq, Iran, Hejaz, Hadhramawt, Sindh, and Punjab, it is perhaps the Baloch communities who are most broadly conversant in this full spectrum, their historical experiences as a coastal society under the auspices of an intercontinental Omani empire ensures their membership in a dramatically variegated array of cultural milieus, no matter how firmly Baloch tend to cling to a proud ethnonationalism in the context of their struggle against cultural negation.

NOTES

1. Baloch is currently a more widely accepted rendering in English-language texts than Baluch, which was more common in the past and which the reader may be more used to. The vowel in the second syllable is generally pronounced as somewhere between “oh” and “oo.”

2. See Mürer (2021; 2022).

3. The binary construct *ḥaḍar/bedū* is a trope—often problematized today—whereby the cultural character of long-settled, culturally porous urban societies on the Arabian Peninsula is sharply contrasted with the values, comportment, and outlook of Bedouin lineages.

4. Parallel to my work on Baloch in the Arab Gulf States, I conducted fieldwork on these genres in Kuwait between 2013 and 2017.

5. For background on Mohammad Jum’ah Khan and Ali al-Khanbashi, see again Lavin this volume.

6. Plural of Hadhrami.

7. Swahili plural noun for coastal Swahili-speaking Bantu people.

8. I should distinguish here between *mawlūd* (narratives of the Prophet’s birth), *mawlıds* (commemorations of the Prophet’s birth in which *mawlıds* are recited), and *mālıds*, spirit possession ceremonies in northern Oman and coastal Makran that draw on both *mawlıd* sequences and *zār* ceremonies and seek to appease the spirits of important Sufi figures such as Abdelqader Gilani, Ahmad al-Rifa’i, and Ahmad al-Badawi, who are believed to have taken possession of a human host.

9. As a testament to his continued resonance, a text attributed to him, “Robbi Inni,” is widely performed to this day in Indonesia both in *Orkes Gambus* contexts (including by non-Arab Bugis performers—see Mürer [2013]) and in a style of cantillation informed by Qur’anic recitation.

10. For select descriptions of *zār* and closely related rituals in the Gulf region, see Bilkhair (2006); Gharasou (2008); Khosronejad (2013); and Boulos and Ayari (2021).

11. For detailed descriptions of the sequences of segments, content, and terminology associated with these ceremonies, see al-Faruqi (1985) and Shidi (2008, 254–67), but note that al-Faruqi does not discuss the variety that I am writing about, where the pious *mālıd* of coastal Oman is merged with the *zār* ceremonial template. Shidi (2008, 256–57) gives a good sense of how this came about as he enumerates the *mashāyekh* (sheikhs) who authored key texts for praising the Prophet adopted within this ceremonial idiom, many of whom turn up as spirits in possession-oriented *mālıds*. Al-Faruqi points to the belief that the spirit of the Prophet is present during the ceremony once sufficient praise has been offered.

12. Bilkhair (2022).

13. The terms *guāt*, *rīḥ*, *bād*, and *pepo* mean “wind” in Baloch, Arabic, Persian, and Swahili respectively and are employed in analogous circumstances to refer to invisible but powerful spirit beings capable of traversing vast expanses of land and sea.

14. For discussions explicitly relating *guātī* rituals to *zār* ceremonies and elaborating their social context, see During (1989; 1997); Sultana (1996; 2013); and Boyajian (2015).

15. By “more fragmentary” I mean what Ali Jihad Racy (1994, 49) calls “active motivic reiteration,” where short phrases are repeated indefinitely.

16. For a discussion of a circle of Baloch musicians in Muscat who perform—in some senses replicate or reconstitute—*guātī-dammālī* ceremonies in a capacity that strikingly straddles a nebulous amateur/professional divide, see Mascagni (2022).

17. Devotees of specific historical sheikhs, *malangs* are known for their dedicated participation in commemorative events involving drumming, dance, and ecstatic utterance at Muslim shrines, most particularly in the Indus valley vicinity, as well as for an ethos of poverty, eschewing wealth and respectability in favor of an all-consuming, intoxicated devotion to spiritual life.

18. “Breath by breath, the *qalandar* is [ever more] drunken/intoxicated” (See Wolf [2006, 255] for a discussion of this formula and its meaning in South Asian Sufism.) Frembgén (2011, 72) cites informants as specifying multiple *bols* (formulaic utterances) that can be heard in the same *dammālī* rhythms: “*Qalandar pāk*”; “*dam mast Qalandar*”; “*La ilaha illa Allah*”; “‘*Ali ‘Ali Haqq*”; and “*yā pāk yā pāk*,” and these too align closely with the content of Baloch *guātī-dammālī* chants.

19. A term that occurs across numerous Bantu languages representing drums, dance, and healing ceremonies centered on drumming and dance (see Janzen [1992, 197]).

20. Prita Sandy Meier (2004, 88–89) points to the period when, in the wake of international treaties abolishing slavery, imperial British naval forces would patrol the seas and seize individuals being trafficked as slaves, often bringing them to Bombay or Surat and freeing but also stranding them.

21. In an article concerning musical arts and government policy in Oman, Majid al-Harthy (2021, 168) cites Joseph Osgood as reporting in the mid-nineteenth century that the term “gooma” was widespread in Muscat, referring to dance performances accompanied by drumming involving men and women dancing together or men dancing with swords (1854, 106–8, cited in al-Harthy). To this day it is easy to find on YouTube examples of male sword dances accompanied by drumming and the *zumari* in the Lamu archipelago—quite possibly a legacy of the Mazrui branch of Omani imperial rule.

22. Bava Gor is said to have been initiated in Baghdad as a follower of the *tariqah* (Sufi order/path) of Ahmed Rifa'i (Basu 2008, 234). In Salalah, in the Dhofar region of Oman, Ahmad Rifa'i has his own regular ceremony, known as Ahmad al-Kabir (Shawqi 1994, 20).

23. A resonant double chamber fiddle with a unique intonation that is probably the most revered instrument within Makrani Baloch traditional music repertoires.

24. For much more extensive discussions of *lĕwa*, see Sebiane (2007, 2014, and 2017); Bilkhair (2021); al-Shidi (1329/2008); and Mürer (2019).

25. The names *lĕwa* and *katmiri*—the latter a segment of a traditional *lĕwa* performance (as well as the name of spirit possession ceremony in Zanzibar)—and texts invoking spirits such as *dingomārō* all have origins in the Bantu cultures of East Africa (Bakari 1903, 159, 162; and see Mürer 2019; al-Harthy 2010, 226; Sebiane 2014, 63).

26. For further discussion, see Sebiane (2014; 2017); and Mürer (2019).

27. In Swahili contexts in Tanzania and Kenya, where it is used somewhat minimally as a musical element, the instrument has retained the name *taishōgōto*. I thank Andrew J. Eisenberg for alerting me to this and providing examples.

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