

Colonization and the Shaping of Vernacular Knowledge

In the last part of the nineteenth century, the British ruled the entire Indian subcontinent. When Sindh was conquered in 1843, they already had significant experience in ruling India since they had been settled in Northeast India for about a century. In terms of administration, the British had first used the Moghul system, in particular for tax collection. Later on, a new issue was to be discussed: that of civilization. How was the superior European civilization to be brought to the uncivilized Indians? By utilizing local knowledge? By imposing the use of English for transmitting European knowledge? Would Christianity have a leading role to play in the civilizing process? Would the numerous churches and their missionaries be main actors in the process?

The different territories of India all had to face such issues after they fell under British domination. Since it was one of the last to be incorporated into the empire, with Punjab in 1849, Sindh should have benefited from the experience of the British—especially because, once it had been included in the Bombay Presidency, many British civil servants had worked in other areas of the presidency before being posted in Sindh. On the other hand, the singular situation that prevailed in Sindh was to provide singular answers to issues addressed at large all over the empire, and mostly related to the field of knowledge. The first part of this book wishes to highlight

the characteristics that Sindh shared with other provinces of the empire, especially Punjab and Gujarat as its neighbors, and what was singular to this province.

Thus, this portion of the book will deal with such issues as colonization, the building of a colonial knowledge on Sindh, and the making of a vernacular knowledge in Sindh. Of course, a main challenge in such studies is to deal with the fact that all of these processes are interrelated, and often at work in the same span of time. For example, despite the fact that I use a kind of chronological enumeration of the processes, this approach does not mean that the making of a vernacular knowledge started after the building of a colonial knowledge was over. The colonial knowledge on Sindh involved a long-term process, which lasted as long as the British were colonizing Sindh, through 1947. During the whole process, the main aim of the British was to compel the structures of Sindhi society and cultures to enter and conform to the categories they had built following their understanding of and then their representation of Sindhi society. Yet, their final goal was to increase the emphasis on education to allow British officers to be more efficient in their daily work.

Also, they had to educate some local Sindhis to collaborate with them in administrative jobs, without whom it would have been impossible to rule Sindh. Once again, this situation was not specific to Sindh, as the pan-Indian figure of the *munshi* shows. But gradually, as the construction of colonial knowledge continues, another process will be based on the appropriation of certain parts of this knowledge, in order to build a vernacular knowledge. Again, both processes were not exclusive, nor contradictory. In fact, some Sindhi civil servants did participate as actors in both, and sometimes it was not easy to see the limitations of colonial versus vernacular knowledge. Also, it must be noted that colonial officers could have played a leading role in the foundation of the vernacular, though they had hardly planned it. For example, as we shall see later, Richard Burton provided evidence of the existence of a literature in Sindhi, which was an important feature for ranking a society. Literacy and illiteracy were a primary cleavage for identifying civilized and uncivilized people.

Despite this fundamental action, Burton was still convinced that “knowledge is power,” which was a leading motto of the British policy in India. Furthermore, he also highlighted the importance of what he called *tasawwuf*, using the classical Arabic term for Sufism, in the society and culture of Sindh. The last step of the building of a colonial process would in this case be the first step of the making of a vernacular knowledge: the printing of the *Shah jo Risalo*, a Sufi work composed by Shah Abd al-Latif in the first

half of the eighteenth century. The selection made by Bartle Frere of this difficult text for educating the British officers learning Sindhi is still not totally understood. Probably, the choice came from the influence Burton still had after his departure from India. Another explanation could be related to Ernst Trumpp, the German missionary who Frere would fund to print the Sufi poetry for the first time in 1866.

In any event, the makings of the Sufi paradigm did not result from a planned incentive which would have aimed at consciously building a paradigm that could work to form a Sindhi vernacular knowledge. Rather, it was the result of a number of sometimes antagonistic forces, including the colonial masters and the new sections of Sindhi society, but the main part of this work was to be completed by dead actors: the deceased Sufi poets. A study on an issue such as the making of a Sufi paradigm and the making of a vernacular knowledge had to face a number of difficulties. Maybe the main one was to deal with the lack of sources, or, in other words, with the prevalence of oral tradition. Before turning to the study itself, I would like to share some reflections in this respect.

Indeed, it is a crucial issue when one deals with the transition between an oral tradition and a written one, or better a printed tradition: and this issue stands at the very core of the present study. Many individuals have already studied how the “printization” impacted a given tradition. Yet, I want to underscore that the challenge I am facing is to work on a paradigm, a Sufi paradigm, with sources which were written, published, and printed by a very small section of the Sindhi society: what about its distribution? What about the reception it had among the different social structures? Is it really relevant to claim that a written tradition solidifies and sets a tradition, which implies that an oral tradition would not? Many historians, anthropologists, and other scholars have tackled this problem. When he had to face it in his groundbreaking study on the popular traditions of nineteenth-century rural France, Eugen Weber spoke of songs, dances, proverbs, tales, and pictures as “particularly fruitful source of evidence” (Weber 1976: xii).

The first European scholars in this area of study, such as Burton and Trumpp, did mention numerous folktales and other non-written elements of knowledge. Unfortunately, and contrary to other Indian regions such as Punjab—with Richard Temple’s work on the legends of Punjab (Temple 1884–1886)—no one systematically collected such a corpus. Of course, Burton did include some in his books, but the dominant trend was to avoid considering these as being of interest. Hence, some blind spots are easy to identify, but the only way I have found to the oral tradition of

colonial Sindh is to use the anthropological data, which I have collected for about 25 years. I am fully aware of the distortion such a method introduces in the building of my argument. For me, however, the choice was between taking this approach and totally ignoring a main component on which the making of the Sufi paradigm will be built: the oral tradition.

In my view, an oral tradition is a corpus of oral texts which has authority and legitimacy to teach the people how to believe and to behave. Another main element that has convinced me to proceed as I have is the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of finding boundaries between oral and written traditions. The issue of performance cannot be used as a reliable process of distinction between them. As a case study I consider to be relevant, I shall take the case of the Manganhars, with whom I have spent some weeks in Sindh. They are a group of professional musicians. They sing a very large and varied repertoire of songs, which can be divided into devotional pieces and social pieces. They are the first to sing in *dargahs* and *darbars*, and in the celebrations pertaining to “rites de passage,” such as births, weddings, and funerals.

The professional musicians, as well as the non-professionals, have for centuries played a capital role in the transmission of the corpus that makes up the Sufi paradigm. I met the Manganhars in the *dargah* of Jhok Sharif. They had been asked by the *sajjada nashin* to perform a number of Sufi songs. After they had sung for him, we would stay together in the room they had been given for enjoying some rest. Their repertoires included many different works, whose authors belonged to different religious persuasions. Then, one night, the head of the group showed me a notebook with thousands of songs authored by many different poets, ranging from Shah Abd al-Latif to Kabir and Mira Bai. The songs were handwritten, and all transcribed in the Arabic Sindhi alphabet. During the performance, the master had a short look at the notebook, and he started to sing. The question is: was this an example of the oral or the written tradition?

REFERENCES

- Temple, Richard, *The legends of the Punjab*, 3 vols., Bombay, Education Society's Press, 1884–1886.
- Weber, Eugen, *Peasants into Frenchmen. The modernization of rural France, 1870–1914*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1976.