

Qurno and Nannorhaps Ritchieana: Thousand Years Old Traditions Alive in Balochistan

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Abstract:

This land 'Balochistan' has witnessed the rise and fall of many cultures. Despite the rough and harsh geographical conditions, Stone Age men dwelled here and started cultural activities. These Cultural Activities started in Balochistan in Paleolithic times around 35000 B.P as the Paleolithic evidence has been in eastern Balochistan, southeastern Balochistan, and Suleiman ranges. Mesolithic evidence has been found in Zhob are, while the Neolithic cultural activities are not limited to only one region of Balochistan, they are found in all parts of Balochistan. The cultural activities do not end here, they continued later in Chalcolithic Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age until late historic times. The interesting thing is that even today, these cultural traditions after a time span of thousand years, are still alive and practiced in Balochistan. There is strong continuity between the early Paleolithic settlements and later historic settlements in the region. Some of these continuities may have occurred due to living in similar environments, but other continuities clearly reflect strong social and ideological cultural linkages. Through the critical study of continuity and change between early settlements and modern towns in Balochistan, I have identified many cultural patterns and traditions. Such two traditions are the use of Pebble Tools and Nannorhaps Ritchieana. Pebble Tools Pebble tools in Neolithic times have been used for indirect heating or baking bread shows the present tradition of baking 'Qurno' which is quite common throughout Balochistan. The Neolithic people used Nannorhaps Ritchieana or palm leaves to make nets probably for catching fish and basket molds for making pottery, similar techniques are applied even today in Balochistan to make all household objects.

1. Introduction

The search for ancient remains in Balochistan was started in 19th century. Today there are more than two thousand archaeological sites, most of which were discovered by great archaeologist,

Sir Aurel Stein. (Stein, 1931, pp. 1-11) Some of them have been excavated and others are remaining. The cultural activities started in Balochistan thousand years ago when men for the first started to make stone tools as daily objects. (Qazi, 1998, p. 9) This activity was taken to the next level at Mehrgarh in 8000 B.C. (Jarrige J. F., 1995, p. 15) This Art was imitated and continued by their successors or contemporary people for a long period with a slight change in making technique or decoration. That is why, we have many specimens of various ceramic industries in Balochistan, mainly characterized by the style of decoration and making technique. These different styles and specific techniques have formed a particular cultural tradition persistent in Balochistan. After all what is a cultural tradition? It refers to, “persistent configurations of basic technologies and cultural systems within the context of temporal and geographical continuity”. (Shaffer J. G., 1992, p. 442) However, to better understand the South Asian Archaeology Jim G. Shaffer and Diane A. Lichtenstein state that, “available data indicate that South Asian cultural history must be studied within a context of indigenous cultural continuity, not intrusion and discontinuity. However, explaining indigenous cultural development within a context of continuity that allows for variable rates of change, and a degree of external interactions, is a difficult task without resorting to the inevitability of social evolution, complex systematic paradigms, ‘world system’ theory, and ecological factors”. (Shaffer & Lichtenstein, 1995) So, there is a strong continuity between the early Paleolithic and later historic settlements which somehow may be the result of living in the similar environments, but other continuities clearly reflect strong social and ideological cultural linkages. Through the critical study of continuity and change between early settlements and modern towns in Balochistan, it is known that many cultural patterns and traditions were practiced in prehistoric times and still are practiced. One such tradition is Qurno (a type of bread) is one of the examples.

2. Traditions of Qurno or Kaak

Cooking Qurno or Kaak is one of those cultural traditions that indigenous people of Balochistan have been following since Neolithic times. This tradition has been passed from generation to generations. It is continuing to this day in many parts of the world. In this tradition dough of the bread is rolled over a pre-heated stone and then baked in a *tandoor* (oven) as shown in the following image.



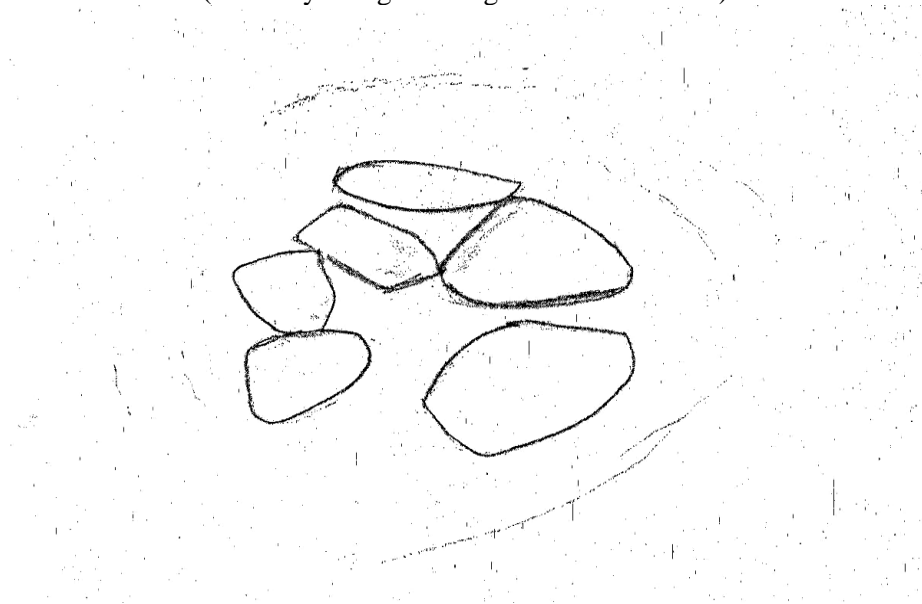
Baking of Qurno or Kaak

This tradition is practiced mainly in hilly areas where sources of survival are very scarce. People, when go to mountains either for travel or just picnic, just take wheat or barley with them to survive in the wild. They grind these grains making it dough and then bake them as Qurno or Kaak (name may vary from region to region) on heated round stones or stone slabs. This common practice has shaped into a tradition either by the harsh life in the wild or the common appeal for the local customs. That is why, this tradition has long lived for millenniums. As for the known fact, this tradition was first practiced at Mehrgarh.

The presence of pebble tools in fireplaces discovered from Mehrgarh show that this tradition was practiced at that time as well. In Mehrgarh, similar types of stones have been found in ovens or kilns which may have been used for the same purpose. According to Jarrige, fireplaces filled with pebbles have been found in many rooms which according to him have been used for indirect heating, even today in Balochistan heated stones are used for cooking food. As Jarrige states, “traces of fireplaces were found in many rooms. In the open spaces between houses, many circular fire-pits have been uncovered. Most of them contain heavily burnt cracked pebbles. But in one case many ovoid heated clay balls filled the fire-pit. It is obvious that the burnt pebbles and the clay balls were used for indirect heating. Even today in Balochistan, heated stones are used for cooking bread. It is pertinent to mention here that in the Harappan levels of Nausharo, near Mehrgarh; hundreds of ovoid clay balls as well as many triangular terracotta. cakes were found in the fillings of fireplaces” (Jarrige J. , 2006, p. 141).



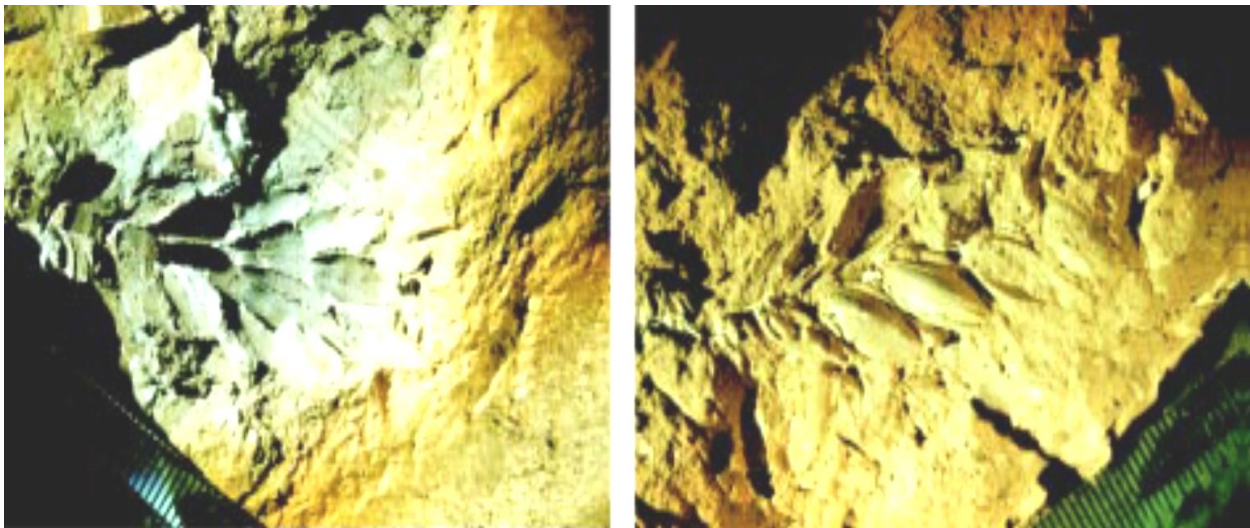
Hearth filled with pebbles. © C. Jarrige
(Courtesy Jarrige: Mehrgarh Neolithic 2006)



(Sketch by the Researcher)

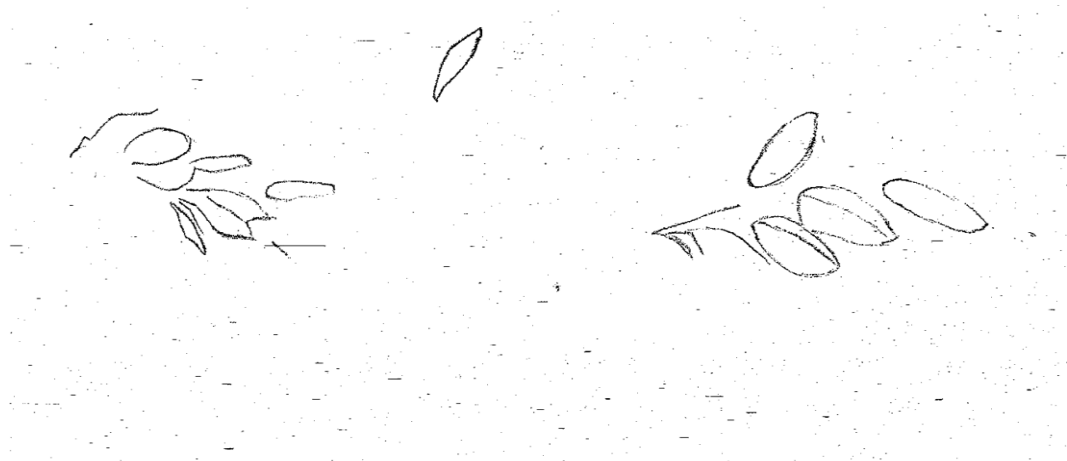
It is interesting to mention here that if these pebbles were not used for cooking or indirect heating purposes, so what they were used for? They were definitely used for the same purpose; it is evident from the fact that people of Mehrgarh used barley and wheat which proves that they were well aware about the agriculture. As Jonathan Mark Kenoyer states, “at Mehrgarh, the subsistence of earliest inhabitants was focused primarily on hunting-gathering, supplemented by some agriculture and animal husbandry. The domestic cereals found include some wheat but mostly barley”. (Kenoyer, *Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization*, 1998, p. 37) Barley was used more than wheat, in the Mehrgarh Period I, most of the plant assemblage discovered were of Barely. This assemblage accounts for more than ninety percent of the so far recorded seeds and imprints. As Jarrige states, “Lorenzo Costantini has shown that the plant assemblage of Period I is dominated by naked six row of barley which accounts for more than 90% of the so far recorded seeds and imprints. He has also pointed out the

sphaerococcoid form of the naked-barley grains with a short compact spike with shortened internodes and small rounded seeds. According to him, such characteristics in the aceramic Neolithic levels can be ascribed to probably cultivated but perhaps not fully domesticated plants. Domestic hulled six-row barley and wild and domestic hulled two-row barley have also been recorded, but in much smaller quantities. According to Zohary quoted by R.H. Meadow, the distribution of wild barley extends today to the head of the Bolan Pass. It is therefore likely that local wild barleys could have been brought under cultivation in the Mehrgarh area. So far, no morphological wild wheat has been identified in South Asia. Therefore, the small amount of wheat seeds at Mehrgarh, Period I, needs further explanation since obviously wheat did not have a great significance in the agricultural activities of the aceramic period” (Jarrige J. , 2006, p. 142). Following image shows the imprints of the barley and wheat discovered at Mehrgarh.



Period I: Imprints of barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) (L) and wheat (*Triticum dicoccum*) (R). © L. Costantini

(Courtesy Jarrige: Mehrgarh Neolithic 2006)



(Sketch by the Researcher)

However, Kenoyer adds that, “in the early periods these grains could have been cultivated either locally or brought the highlands, but eventually as the settlement became more established, they were cultivated on the Bolan River flood plain” (Kenoyer, *Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization*, 1998, p. 37). So, this proves that agriculture was common when these pebbles were being used further indicating that tradition of Qurno or Kaak was practice at Mehrgarh. Moreover, this tradition is not limited to one specific region. Baking bread on headed stones or slabs is a common practice throughout the world. In fact, in many regions of the world, this was the only way to bake or cook food since other cooking techniques were not yet discovered then. Moreover, the tradition of baking Qurno or Kaak was not the only tradition practiced in ancient Balochistan. There is another plant which was commonly used and still used. This is called Nannorhaps Ritchieana. Its leaflets were used to make household objects, nets for catching fish and molds were made from this plant to make pottery. In the time of scarcity of food, its fruit was used as a source of food.

3. Tradition of Nannorhaps Ritchieana and Palm Leaflets

The use of leaflets of Nannorhaps Ritchieana and Palm have become very common that they have become a very important part of Balochistan Culture. Their recurrent usage has transformed into a tradition. In this tradition, Ritchieana or palm are used for many purposes such as rope making, carpet making, mat making, shoe making, basket making, purse making and much more. People earn their livelihood form this tradition. In fact, it accounts for more than forty percent of the income of the people living in countryside. The remaining part of their income comes from cattle breeding, dairy farming and agriculture. Besenval and co-authors write that “*Nannorhaps* is of prime importance to the populations living in the deserts where it grows. Like the date, now extensively cultivated in the same regions, it has multiple uses. The leaflets are transformed through plying, braiding, weaving or coiling into various artefacts used in daily life: cords, mats, bags, baskets, fans, brooms, food covers, sandals, and caps etc.” (Thomas, 2011, p. 21)

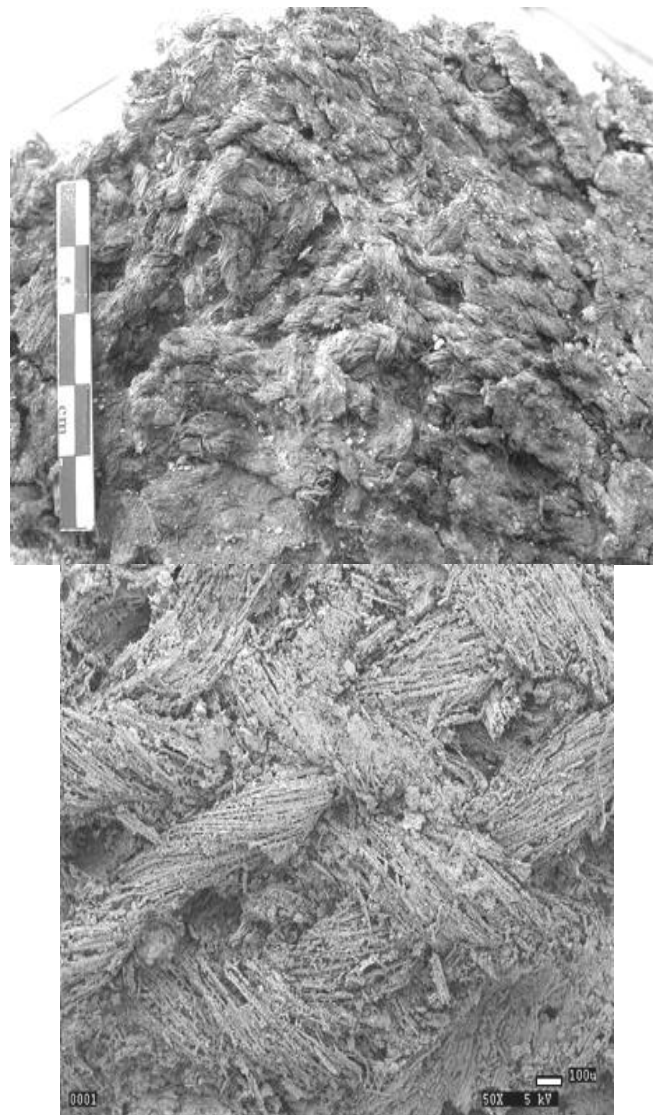


Nannorhops Ritchieana growing in dry region of Panjgur, Makran
(Image by the researcher)

Since Shahi Tump and Miri Kalat belong to Chalcolithic age, village-based agriculture and pastoralism is witnessed in these sites. According to Kenoyer, “in chalcolithic sites, stone tools continue to be used along with copper and bronze implements; widespread use of pottery and the development of many different craft technologies is also seen” (Kenoyer & Heuston, *The Ancient South Asian World*, 2005, p. 1). One such craft technology is the use of Nannorhops Ritchieana and Palm leaves to make household objects, mats, rugs and nets. The locals of Makran owe their survival and existence to their environment by a great deal. According to the Roland Besenval quoted by Thomas, “during the entire Protohistoric period, subsistence economies in the Kech valley were based on agro-pastoral activities as shown by the analysis of faunal and floral remains” (Thomas, 2011, p. 17) This means that livelihood of the locals of Balochistan depended on what nature provided (Hughes, 1977). So, they incorporated Nannorhops Ritchieana and Palm Leaves in their daily lives were and still are abundantly available in the region. They are the source of income of most of the locals. In fact, the half of the people living in *Halk* (countryside) owe their livelihood to these plants and trees. They have no other source of income except to make ropes, mats and nets from Nannorhops Ritchieana and Palm Leaves and to sell them in the market.

Like present, the local substance had a great value in the past as well. This is proved by a net made by the cord of Ritchieana or palms leaves at Shahi Tump dated to 4th millennium B.C. this is the prime example of continuity in traditions of two different eras. Besenval and co-authors further explain: “The net discussed in this article was found in 2005 during the excavation of a large building dated to period II, that is to the first half of the 4th millennium BCE. Several rooms were recognized during the excavation. The southernmost of these shows

clear traces of destruction by fire. Under the collapsed mud brick wall, the excavators discovered carbonized roof beams as well as several items trapped between the destruction level and the floor: pottery shards, animal bones, cereal remains, carbonized woven mats as well as the net. The carbonized net was found as a heap of entangled cord”. (Thomas, 2011, p. 17) The nets are still made from the same material in Makran and some other parts of Balochistan showing no breakage in traditions of past and the present. Following is the image of the net found during the excavation at Shahi Tump.



The carbonized net after excavation and consolidation (photograph by MAFM)
(Courtesy Archaeol Anthropol Sci 2012)

As discussed earlier that Nannorhops Ritchieana and Palm Leaves were the sources of income of the majority of the locals living in *Halk* (countryside), they also utilized the leaves of these plants and trees to make nets to catch fish or to use of other purposes. Since the coastal area of Gawadar is not far from Panjgur and Kech where the remains of a net have been discovered at Shahi Tump, it shows that the material for making the fish nets have been brought form these

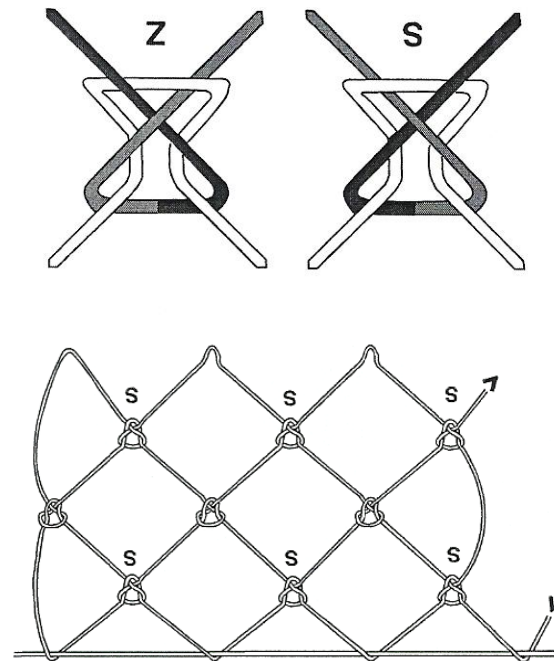
two areas. Nannorhaps Ritchieana and Palm Leaves are abundantly found in Panjgur and Kech. People from these areas made and sold fish nets to local of Gawadar incorporating some sort of trade system or a barter system which was in common use at that time.

Moreover, as far as the making technique of this net is considered, first bundles of fibers were twisted or plied together to form a fine yarn of around two milli meter in diameter and then transformed into a net by connecting two loops of the same strand in so-called mesh knots. Even today locals of Balochistan particularly Makran practice this tradition. The cord made by such method is called *Cheelak* in local language. Sometimes, similar technique is applied to make mats for houses or for temporary use. Following image explains the technique of cord making or *Cheelak* as practiced locally.



Structure of a double standard S-lay cord obtained by the association of two Z-lay yarns
(Courtesy Archaeol Anthropol Sci 2012)

The twisted or laid cord thus obtained is then transformed into a net (as shown in the following images) by connecting two loops of the same strand in so-called mesh knots.



Example of a S- and Z-lay mesh knots

Net made of S-lay mesh knots of the type found at
Shahi Tump

(Courtesy Archaeol Anthropol Sci 2012)

The above-mentioned technique is still applied in Balochistan. Leaflets of Nannorhops Ritchieana and Palm are used like ancient people to make cord, mats, or net as depicted in the following image. A local, sitting on a mat made by leaflets of either palm or Nannorhops Ritchieana, is busy making cord with leaflets of same plants and applying the same technique practiced at Shai Tump. This shows the continuity in traditions of two different eras.



Rope-making by plying (or twisting) four leaf strands of Nannorhops Ritchieana
The Rope-maker sits on a mat equally produced from palm leaves somewhere in Makran

The above picture shows a man sitting on a mat made from the same plant indicating the modern practice of this tradition in the region of Makran. The locals have followed the norms

and traditions of their forefathers. In fact, Miri Kalat and Shahi Tump were the centers where mats made from such plants have been regularly reported. (Besenval, 1993) Mats have regularly been reported from the Miri Qalat and Shahi Tump. This is shown by the imprints of molds made by pieces of mats on terracotta bangles and potteries indicating the immense use of Nannorhaps Ritchieana. As Thomas and co-writers state that, “mattings have been regularly attested during the excavation in the form of imprints on soils or even preserved by carbonization as the piece of mat found together with the net. From the same period, two other categories of objects indirectly bear witness to the presence of basketry and matting. Flat terracotta bangles produced in period II are decorated by the impression of interwoven leaf strips. It has been suggested that these were shaped on a mold made of leaves. The second category of object is a particular type of pottery— ‘basket-ware’ shaped inside a basket that has left its impression on the external wall of the vessels . (Thomas, 2011, p. 22) The discoveries at Miri Qalat and Shahi Tump show that these two were local cultures. It is clear from the immense use of Nannorhaps Ritchieana and Palm leaves in the shape of rope making, net making and most importantly matting that have been discovered in large numbers. The following image shows the recurrent use of mats made from the same plant in the region.



Sapt (a container), a sitting sheet or mat, and praying mat hanging on the hut and other items made from either Ritchieana leaflets or Palm leaves
(Image by the Researcher)

4. Other Manifestations of Nannorhaps Ritchieana and Palm Leaves in the Local Culture

As discussed earlier, the locals practice this tradition till today. Nannorhaps Ritchieana is used for many purposes and is still used; this is because of its availability in Balochistan or desert areas. The locals utilize this plant by making things such as rope, mats or rugs, shoes, sandals, slippers, baskets, purses, covering sheets for huts, containers for grass or daily purposes almost

for every purpose it is used in daily life of the locals. Following image shows various objects made from these plants.



Baskets, cap, pots and plates, small mats and many other objects made from either Ritchieana leaflets or Palm leaflets
(image by the researcher)

The above images show that almost every household item is made by Nannorhaps Ritchieana or palm leaves by the locals in Makran. They make use of what nature provides as their forefathers did. People belonging to middle class section still make use of this plant and make their mats, prayer mats, huts. People in *Halk* (countryside) still make ninety percent of their household objects even their slippers as shown by the following image.



Sandals made from Ritchieana leaflets placed on a mat equally made from the same material
(Image by the researcher)

However, the use of Nannorhaps Ritchieana or palms leaves was not limited to these objects, these plants were almost used for many purposes, according to the scholars the Nannorhaps Ritchieana was used as a source of food in times of scarcity. The fruits of the same plants have also been reported from Miri Kalat and Shahi Tump. (Besenval, 1993) Thomas adds to this that, “Nannorhaps Ritchieana may also serve as a source of food. The growing shoot of the

leaves is said to have been eaten uncooked as a vegetable in times of scarcity. The fruits were commonly consumed in various preparations. The consumption of Nannorhops fruits in the past is attested by the presence of carbonized berries throughout the occupation at Miri Kalat and Shahi Tump. A second palm species (*Phoenix* sp.) has also been identified at both sites by the archaeobotanical study". (Thomas, 2011, p. 21) So, this plant provided much to the inhabitants of this region. At times it was source of food and other a source of making materials. This shows adaptability to the conditions and longing for survival; the two factors essential for every resilient inhabitant of the desert and barren region.

5. Conclusion

The cultural remains in Balochistan remain very important to the present-day inhabitants. This land is of a dry and harsh characteristic. although the conditions were unfriendly for the survival, many cultures saw their rise and downfall during this long span of cultural activity in Balochistan. Some survived for centuries while others for millenniums; in both cases, they utilized the materials around them. For instance, pebbles tools were heated and used for baking purposes at Mehrgarh. This tradition of baking bread with pebble tools has continued to this day. It is now commonly known Qurno or Kaak. Similarly, the locals have adapted to the conditions like their forefathers at Shahi Tump and Miri Kalat by utilizing Nannorhops Ritchieana or leaves of palm extensively to make all their household objects. Using the leaflets of this plant, locals make rugs, mats, hats, prayer mats, cord or rope, baskets, nets probably for cashing fish, sandals, slippers, and other items. However, this tradition is mostly limited to Makran with scanty practice in other parts of Balochistan too. Moreover, at times this plant was also used as food during as shown by the findings at Shahi Tump and Miri Kalat. This shows every inhabitant of a desert and barren land such as Balochistan had to adapt to conditions and strive for survival; and make most use of what nature provided.

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