

Parallels in nature and culture diversity of the European and Asian Southern Peninsulas

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Abstract

The paper deals with interesting parallels noted between three pairs of the southern peninsulas in Europe and Asia. The similarities in natural features (e.g., relief structure, climate, land and sea distribution) and cultural particularities (such as parallels in history, cultural character and religion) have been observed between Iberian and Arabian, Apennine and Hindustan, Balkan and Indochina peninsulas. The example of parallels could include: Iberian and Arabian peninsulas both have the most continental, even arid climate, Apennine and Indian peninsulas both are situated between the highest continental mountains (Alps and Himalaya) and “hitched” large island (Sicily and Ceylon), Balkan and Indochina peninsulas both end with large archipelagos in the south (Aegean and Malay). Research was aimed at discovering as many as possible parallels in the afore-mentioned fields of these geographical regions, to present them and find the limit of the similarities as well as to discuss the possible reasons for such an inter-reflection or duplication.

Keywords: Iberian, Apennine, Balkan, Arabian, Indian, and Indochina peninsulas, parallels in nature and culture diversity.

Introduction

This paper is based on the observation of analogous features belonging to a pair of peninsular triplets (Iberian, Apennine, and Balkan, Arabian, Hindustan, and Indochina peninsulas). The author noticed this some 20 years ago in a science popularization book, written by a Russian geographer. In the course of time, the author of this paper lost all the information about this book and its author, with only one idea left in his mind – the analogies between peninsulas mentioned. This paper is an attempt to test the idea as well as to present some additional developments of it.

Going deeper into this matter can reveal some unexpected points of view about the regions in our planet that have often played such an important role in developing our civilizations that it cannot be overestimated. To start, there are several places that can be called cradles of civilizations. This is of course, an object of many discussions but generally the six peninsulas mentioned are very important regions in forming the civilization of our world.

Some parallels are noticed when comparing the six peninsulas by pairs: Iberian and Arabian, Apennine and Hindustan, Balkan and Indochina. These parallels or analogies belong to the sphere of geology, orography, climate, biodiversity, hydrography, culture, religions, history, people characters, political map, urbanization and so forth. Though not all the points correspond identically, multitude of congruities creates a quite curious view of inter-reflection or duplication of European and Asian “souths”.

The aim of the paper is to draw at least an outline of the reflective or symmetric diversities of the southern peninsulas in Europe and Asia. Being quite an amateur in these matters the

author thinks that this could be a good start for going deeper into research of this phenomenon of geographical “cloning”, possibly finding more examples in the world.

Natural Analogies

The six southern peninsulas of Eurasia are among the largest peninsulas in their respective subcontinents. Their size according to various sources (internet, Concise Atlas of the World, 2005) are approximately the following (in thousands of km²): Iberian – 582, Apennine – 149, Balkan – 505, Arabian – 3500, Hindustan – 2000, Indochina – 2000. The largest peninsulas in Europe and Asia respectively are Iberian and Arabian. All six peninsulas are surrounded by a large number of seas and bays, and generally the Indian Ocean in Asia has an analogue in the Mediterranean Sea in Europe. Due to the specific distribution of land and sea, the six peninsulas have interesting parallels in regard to geological, climate, and hydrographical data.

Geology and shape

The most obvious similarities of the two peninsular triplets belong to the orographic structure or land construction elements of these. Iberian and Arabian peninsulas both are bulk, square-shaped and consist of a number of plateaus. It must be specified that physically or tectonically the Arabian Peninsula includes the Mesopotamian plain and reaches the Zagros Mountains in the northeast, like the Iberian Peninsula ends at the Pyrenees. Though angles between the peninsulas' shape sides are different, shape elements and coast arches are almost the same. Southern parts of both peninsulas end with quite sharp capes forming narrow straits between Europe and Africa (both peninsulas have close contact with Africa but only through sharp capes). The north-eastern parts of both peninsulas lean to the continental mainland through orogenic depressions with the Aragon plain in Spain, and the Mesopotamian plain in Iraq, and the Pyrenees and Zagros mountain ridges.

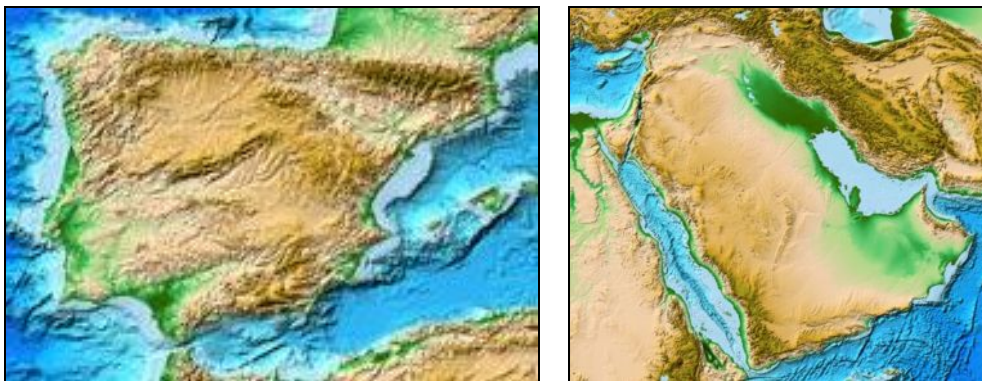


Figure 1: Relief of Iberian and Arabian peninsulas
(NB: the Arabian Peninsula is about six times larger).

The Apennine and Hindustan peninsulas have several geological and shape features in common. They both end with sharp capes (the Calabrian in Italy and Adams Bridge in India) in the southern parts separated by narrow straits (Messina and Palk) from extensive islands, respectively Sicily (25.5 thousand km²) and Sri Lanka (Ceylon) (65.6 thousand km²). Sicily and Sri Lanka are both islands with medium high mountains, similar in height but somewhat different in origin, though both having endured (Sicily is still in process) volcanism. The places of the peninsula contact with the continental mainland are marked by deep depressions (Po and Indo-Gang plains) at the base of the geologically young and highest mountains of the region, or even world (Alps and Himalaya).

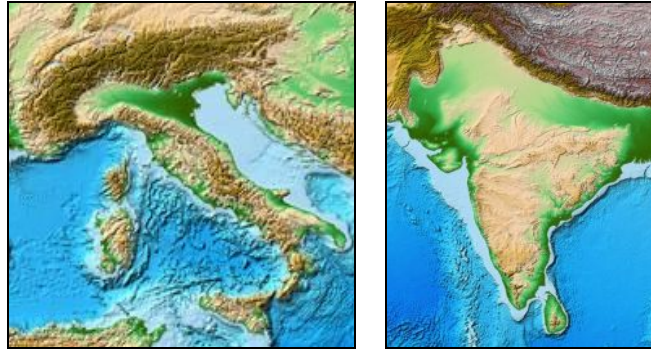


Figure 2: Relief of Apennine and Hindustan peninsulas
(NB: The Hindustan peninsula is about 13 times larger)

The southern parts of the Balkan and Indochina peninsulas have a specific combination of land and water: large peninsulas, almost semi-islands (Peloponnesus and Malay), separated from the main bodies of the Balkans and Indochina by narrow isthmuses – Corinth in Greece and Kra in Thailand-Burma. Mountains in both peninsulas extend from the northerlies to the southerlies. Besides that, the peninsulas have continuation to the south-eastern direction as large archipelagos – Aegean and Malay, both bend in a southerly arch. Crete and Java islands are almost identical in their shape with difference in area (Java is 15 times larger), having also a similar orographic structure. One more small detail – each archipelago hosts the remnants of ferociously erupted (in historical times) volcanoes – Santorini (~1625 years BC) in the Aegean (Santorini, 2009), and Krakatao (in 1883) in Malay.

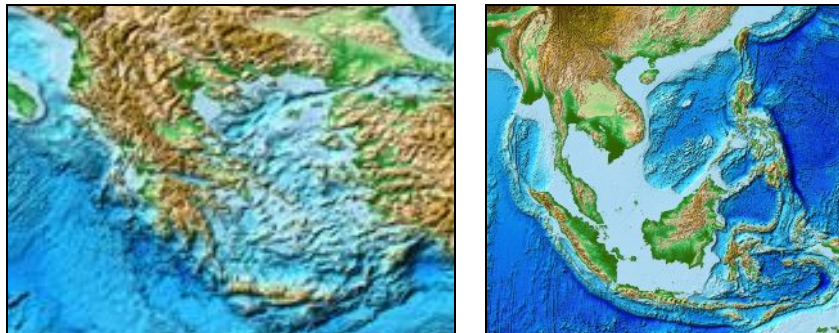


Figure 3: Relief of Balkan and Indochina peninsulas
(NB: Indochina is about 4 times larger)

Climate

Climatic features of the three pairs also have some interesting consonance. European peninsulas have similar climatic differentiation as in Asian, only in smaller amplitudes. For example, the Iberian Peninsula is marked by the most continental and arid climate of the three European peninsulas (with the Sierra de los Filabres semi-desert in the south-eastern part, with precipitation about 200 mm per year), while the Arabian Peninsula is practically a solid desert (with precipitation less than 100 mm per year). The Apennine and Indian peninsulas have a semi-humid/semi-arid climate, Italy – mild, India – hot. Two seasons – rainy and dry – are distinguished in these peninsulas, with different cause for this regime: the Apennines are influenced by subtropical weather fluctuations (rains from Atlantic in winter, heats from Sahara in summer), Hindustan is influenced by monsoon (bringing rains from the Indian Ocean in summer, and dry air from the Iranian plateaus in winter). The Balkan and Indochina peninsulas both being in warm climate areas have one interesting feature, that the western parts of both receive the highest amount of annual precipitation in the region: about 4,000-5,000 mm in Kotor Bay (Bay of Kotor, 2009), Montenegro and (that's not quite in Indochina,

but in the neighbourhood) more than 10,000 mm in the Khasi Hills, Cherrapunji Place, Assam (Cherrapunji, 2009).

Hydrographical elements

Rivers and lakes depend mostly on climatic features of the region and relief and rock composition. The Arabia Peninsula doesn't have any constant water streams – Iberia in this regard is a close follower due to many creeks that go dry in summer. At the same time, the Apennine and Hindustan peninsulas have the Po and the Ganges in their northern plains (actually the Ebro in Spain and the Euphrates-Tigris in Iraq are analogous too), as well as, cross-peninsula rivers like the Tevere in Italy and the Krishna, and Godavari in India. River networks in the Balkans and Indochina are complicated similarly. Though the Balkans doesn't have such grand rivers as the Mekong or the Irrawaddi, the Maritsa-Ervos (Bulgarian-Greek-Turkish river) and the Lumi-i-Drinit (Albanian river) with its extensive delta could be proportional analogs. Natural lakes are relatively large in the Balkans like Scutari (Shkoder), Ohrid, and Prespa. Indochina cannot boast having proportional analogues, but many artificial ponds constructed on rivers are common there.

Cultural Analogies

When we look at the socio-geographical features of the six peninsulas, parallels and even interrelations manifest themselves again in pairs: Iberia and Arabia, Italy and India. Direct relations between Balkan and Indochina peoples are not so obvious, but here we can find some other parallels concerning religion distribution, political structure, and so forth. Of course, to comprise all the facts of so many countries (about 10 in each – Balkans and Indochina) is too wide in so short a paper.

Historical parallels and heritage

It is a well-known fact that Spain was heavily influenced by Arabic culture for a large parts its history (8th to 15th centuries) while under the control of Arab-Berber rulers, the Muslims were called Moors by the Spanish. Most of the peninsula was invaded and occupied for about 750 years, when the Christian *Reconquista* finally dislodged the Muslim from Iberia in 1492. From then on, the Spanish Empire began to get stronger, leading the Great Geographical Discoveries, initiating the Inquisition, and so forth (History of Spain, 2009). Arab culture left so much monumental architectural heritage in Spain that still can be seen in Cordoba, Toledo, Granada and many other Spanish places.

Italy and India have impressive parallels in their history, as well as the interrelations between each other. These countries centuries ago were the centres of vast empires that were separated by Persia. Therefore they had many contacts, comprising of culture, architecture, religion and trade. It is known that India had trade relations with the Roman Empire since 77 AD, and that in Kerala there were 1,200 Roman troops located in defence of trade. Coins with the image of Augustus were found in numbers parts of southern India, indicating a large amount of money flowing from Rome to purchase many Indian goods that eventually constituted part of the luxury and ornaments of the Romans. An interesting parallel is that the Indus Valley Civilization influenced primarily India; the Aryans later overruled the Harappans. Similarly, in Italy, the Italic tribes later assimilated the original Etruscans. History hides many riddles: who were the Aryans, who were the Etruscans (History of India, 2009; Etruscan Civilization, 2009; India and Italy, 2009).

In the multinational peninsulas of the Balkans and Indochina it is difficult to distinguish any particular parallels except, maybe, religious history – but religions will be dealt with later.

History of the two regions is full of international wars. Thailand was the only country that remained unoccupied by European colonialists; the French, Dutch, and other European cultures influenced the other countries (History of Thailand, 2009).

Nations, States and religions

National composition of the Iberian and Arabian peninsulas is not very diverse, comprising quite few nations and countries. More states are on the Arabian side, though the national composition is quite homogeneous. But here again are some analogs: Basques and Kurds are two nations (proportionally large – Basques are only 1.25 million, Kurds are an estimated 35 million people) that live in the northern parts of the regions and both don't have their own independent state, both have a long story of struggle for it, both are exceptional and unique nations in the region (Basque people, 2009; Kurdish people, 2009).

From the six peninsulas, the Apennine and Hindustan are the only ones that are quite homogeneous politically. Italy has only two micro-states inside – Vatican and San Marino, while India is totally united. Only Sri Lanka is a separate country, something that doesn't quite correspond to the analogy with Sicily, although Sicily in its turn is quite different from the whole of Italy by culture and nature, and it is the largest autonomous region of Italy itself. However this situation is rather new as Italy and India are quite young as states – Italy was united only in 1861, and India regained its sovereignty in 1947. In the Indian Parliament there is one important political figure, Italian by origin – Sonia Gandhi, wife of Rajiv Gandhi. Italy and India are the countries of the largest 'religions thrones' in the world – Christianity and Hinduism. According to the number of followers Islam stands between both of the latter religions. Analysts of the religions see many similarities between Indian pantheon and ancient Roman religion (Neptune and Shiva with tridents and snakes, Heracles and Krishna, Romulus and Remus, and Rama, etc., Jupiter and Indra). It is known that the Romans even imported many religious details from India like the worshipping of the God Mithras (in India Mitra was the patron of honesty, friendship, contracts and meetings), using the suffix "-dev" at the end of a ruler's name, *tilak* ("U" shaped) the sign on the forehead of the ruler (like Pompey), and so forth. On the other hand, Christianity largely spread in India, Jesus and Mary being accepted even by many Hindus as new members of their pantheon. Generally, both Italy and India throughout their history were open to various cultural influences from other regions (India and Italy, 2009).

The Balkan and Indochina regions endured much turmoil during their history due to the rather mixed national and religion composition. About ten countries on each side intermingled in culture, customs, and religions. There are some parallels between them. First of all, they hosted a kind of "splinter" religion like Orthodox Christianity in the Balkans (Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, partly Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Theravada Buddhism in Indochina (Thailand, Burma, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia). Both regions have large inclusions of Islamic states (Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Balkans and Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia in Indochina) or separate Muslim communities in non-Muslim countries. Some countries (countries of the former Yugoslavia, Albania, Vietnam, Laos, Burma, Cambodia) in both regions endured a certain (in many places – just inhuman) impact from various types of communist regimes, still influencing the lives of the people (Cambodia, 2009; Burma, 2009; Indochina, 2009).

Discussion – Cause of the parallelism

Overall, parallels between two triplets of peninsulas are relative, not strictly scientific, and not precise, but yet quite obvious. The regularity is that analogies are expressed rather as free,

unrestricted recurrence than identical proportional copying: one can find the same elements repeated in a distance of several thousands kilometres, but these elements are different in their shape, inner composition and spatial distribution at a local scale. For example, the Po plain and Alps are quite different in their inner composition and shape compared to the Indus-Ganga plain and Himalayas, but their principle scheme is the same. Not only the physical, but also the cultural elements can be characterized by this regularity, like the Basque and Kurd nations that are different in size, culture, religion, and origin, but both are struggling for their independence. The same is observable with processes like historical civilization shifts (Etruscans – Italians, Harappans – Aryans), regime changes (like communist movements in Balkans and Indochina).

The other rule that could be premised basing on many facts is that most active cultural (and perhaps natural also) interchanges take place between respective peninsulas (counting from the West, for example), i.e. Iberian and Arabian, Apennine and Hindustan, Balkan and Indochina. For example, according to quite recent news Spain and Saudi Arabia are cooperating in the fight against terrorism, and Italy and India are wildly intensifying their trade relations (Kamal Nath, 2006). At the same time international relations between the Balkans and Indochina seem not to be as well expressed as the relations inside the region, among the immediate neighbours, and this applies to the first regularity of structural similarity between corresponding peninsulas.

However, the most important question is what causes such a parallelism? It is too early to answer this question because of lack of research. Analogous physical features of the peninsulas can be easily attributed to natural coincidence, but cultural parallels following the same regularities need some further explanation. The situation reminds us that analogical ecosystems and species diversity exists (occupying analogical ecological niches) in different continents, but also in the same climatic zones like it is in Africa, South America, and Australia. But the latter fact is well equipped with modern theories of ecosystem and species evolution, plate tectonic, and so forth (Lekevičius, 2000).

What is the cause of parallelism in geological structures and cultural features? The only supposition coming to mind at this point of time, is that some kind of waves exist on our planet that repeat at some distance the initiation of similar if not the same processes. The rest – the interrelation between the corresponding parts (like Spain-Arabia, Italy-India, etc.) – is the secondary regularity, known in social psychology as the law of “attraction of the similarities”. Of course, for effective cooperation, some space should be left for complementarities too (Interpersonal attraction, 2009).

Further investigations should include full analysis of parallels, and their correlations in the six peninsulas. Quantitative and statistical data could give quite different views of the situation and even reduce or enhance (both are possible) the rate of similarity. If parallelism keeps its position here why not look for it elsewhere in the world? This could be the next step, together with trials to find the cause of such a parallelism.

Conclusions

Firstly, the similarities of physical geographical features of the Iberian and Arabian, Apennine and Hindustan, Balkan and Indochina peninsulas are related to the orographic and tectonic fields (corresponding mountain and plain distribution, land and sea mosaics); climate (especially distribution of humidity), hydrographical (more or less dependent on tectonic and

climate factors). However, the parallels mentioned are rather free interpretations of each other rather than precise copies.

Secondly, cultural parallels are related to nation interrelations in historical times, distribution of religions, and political regimes, and so forth. Some analogies resemble the physical similarities and they too are but unrestricted modifications of each other (like the Basques and Kurds in the northern parts of the Iberian and Arabian regions), while pair interrelations (like Spain – Saudi Arabia, Italy – India, etc.) are a reflection of the “similarities attraction” law. Thirdly, there are no causes of parallelism between two peninsular triplets known so far, as well as no statistical or other quantitative analysis performed to prove that parallelism is not a coincidence. These problems imply tasks for future investigations, as well.

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