

## Construction of Baloch Ethnic Identity through Ethnolinguistic Awareness and Cultural Dynamics

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### Abstract

*The paper is based on a qualitative ethnographic study to explore the role of ethnolinguistic awareness and cultural dynamics in the construction of the ethnic identity of Baloch. The data was collected through focussed group interviews of twenty participants who were sampled through non-random criterion sampling and they belonged to at least thirteen different tribes of Baloch. The study was conducted within the theoretical perspective of Smolicz Core Value. The analysis of the rich data found the group members to be consciously self-aware of their distinct ethnic identity and more so in the present political situation of the province. The group members were also found to express their ethnicity through cultural dynamics such as common traditional dress and Balochi as the group language even though Balochi was not the mother tongue of all the participants as they are an ethnic group that speaks at least four different languages.*

**Key Words:** Ethnic identity, Baloch, cultural dynamics, ethnolinguistic awareness.

### Introduction

The study of ethnicity has remained problematic over the years. Different approaches were used to study the phenomenon but not with full success due to difficulty in categorizing people into ethnic groups and in determining identity markers. One of the major issues is the distribution of varied languages, which sometimes cross political boundaries (Emberling, 1997). The population under study i.e. ‘Balochs’ live in three different countries; Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan. Their national identity might be different but their ethnic identity is one. Such divisions are a common phenomenon in regions that remained under colonialism. The colonial division was ambiguous because people from different groups were made one tribe and similar groups were given one name. This foreign given name could not become the identity of the group members.

There is no common definition of ethnicity but it can be generally defined as the self-knowledge among the people of a group about possessing a separate identity, the basis of which is language, culture, religion or territory (Pamir, 1997). One of the reasons for the lack of a proper definition of ethnicity is the absence of a well-formulated theory of ethnicity. Another reason is the probable presence of many groups within an ethnic group. This depends on how ethnicity is being used or what is being considered as the marker of ethnic identity that is reinforcing the cohesion between the group members. For instance, if ethnicity is being manipulated to gain certain political or economic interests, then the group can be called an interest group. Similarly, if a language is the index of group identity then it becomes a linguistic group, if it shares a common descent then it can be called a racial group and finally if excluded by the majority group then marginalized is the term used, to define the group. The selected community of Baloch people for this study is a combination of all these groups.

Ethnicity is one’s relationship with his ethnic group and any component of ethnicity such as language, culture, territory, ancestry can dominate the other while forming the basis of this relationship and plays its role in further strengthening of it. It is usually these components of ethnicity that are manipulated at the time of ethnic

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Conflicts (Ali, 1996). Fani et al. (2011) declare that ethnicity emerges as an outcome of certain happenings in the society around. Ethnicity is 'performed' more in a situation, where the members of the ethnic group find their identity under threat in some way. This performance of ethnic identity is done by the use of those indicators that are the core components of the group. The present study explored two of such components i.e. cultural dynamics and ethnolinguistic awareness for the expression of ethnic identity among Baloch

## **Literature Review**

Vincent (1974) differentiates well between the minority groups and the ethnic groups, as she defines ethnicity with special reference to the United States of America. She believes that minority groups refer to the economically, socially and politically subjugated segment of a dominant society whereas ethnic groups are politically mobilized population whom self-define themselves and their goals. The different kinds of ethnic groups that Erikson (1993) differentiates is urban ethnic minorities, proto-nations, the groups that aim to become a nation, indigenous people and ethnic groups in plural society (Cited in John 1997).

In the area of Human Sciences, ethnicity is defined under so many factors (John, 1997) that tend to influence its definition. The word 'Ethnicity' has come to be used in different fields today like anthropology, sociology, sociolinguistics, social psychology and needs to be defined accordingly. It may also depend on the aspect of ethnicity that is being researched and the population under study. There have been very few writers who have written on ethnicity and defined it as well. Isajw (1974) surveyed sociological and anthropological works and studies on the ethnicity, and found that out of sixty-five works only thirteen had some sort of definition of ethnicity. The remaining did not have an explicit definition of ethnicity. However, all studies, whether with an explicit or implicit definition of ethnicity have divided it into two kinds. The objectivist definition of ethnicity is purely based on analyst perception of the socio-cultural group and its way of differentiating it from other groups. On the other hand, the subjectivist definition relies on the self-categorization of group members. There has been much criticism on the categorization of the definition of ethnicity into objectivists and subjectivists (John, 1997) because even the objectivist definition has the subjectivity of the researcher. The natural longing for rootedness becomes the source of the subjective definition of ethnicity. Ethnicity can be said to be a combination of self-ascribed and other ascribed ethnic labels. These labels are overt manifestations of ethnicity. Person's self-identification strategies are an important dimension of ethnicity (Padilla, 1999). A group with clear boundaries in terms of culture and territory can also be termed as an ethnic group. The members forming such an ethnic group can share language, religion, culture or other social aspects. Ethnicity can also be defined by the extent of the sense of belonging to an ethnic group, which varies even within the members of the same group.

De Vos (1982) defines an ethnic group as consisting of people who are self-consciously united around a common ancestry, tradition, territory and language but none of these are a necessary criterion. In other words, ethnic identity is a highly subjective concept that makes use of symbolic aspects of culture to differentiate one group from another. These emblematic aspects do not remain constant throughout but keep on changing (Cited in John, 1997).

Different researchers have emphasized different aspects of culture as primary criteria in defining ethnicity and ethnic group. These can be language, descent, history etc. The definition can change with the changing socio-political factors like Yinker (1985) sees an ethnic group as a part of a bigger multi-ethnic society, whose members share a common origin and other important segments of culture. They think themselves and are also thought by others to belong to one group because of common culture and origin.

There can be two versions of ethnicity according to Gumperz (1982) who distinguishes between the old and the new definition of ethnicity. Old ethnicity was based on common geographical boundaries, culture, regional background, a social network that tied people together whereas the new version of ethnicity focuses not on the commonality but the differences with the other group in culture, language, geographical proximity etc. (cited in Sallabank 2006). The new version goes in line with Tajfel's Social Identity theory, which emphasizes on the accentuation of ethnicity with increased comparison and differences with another group. However, ethnicity is an essential part of social identity, (Beswick, 2007. Issac, 1974). In a traditional sense, Ethnicity has a pejorative connotation and ethnic groups are

“Viewed as exclusive, divisive and primitive, representing misguided nostalgia and outmoded characteristics, whereas a ‘nation state’ is thought to be all embracing, modern construct that provide cohesion to its members”. ([May, 2001 cited in Beswick, 2007 p.30](#)).

The study on identities has gained importance over the years. The subject has grown especially in the last two decades where the scholarly shift has taken place from personal ‘I’ identity to collective ‘we’ identity in a group where identity construction is now taken as a process ([Cerulo, 1997](#)).

All of us are carriers of at least two identities. Tajfel (1978) distinguishes between personal and group identities. His social identity theory recognizes the display of these identities in different contexts and varied situations. In a situation where personal identity becomes salient, individual behavior and aspects of personality gain importance. On the other hand, people tend to accentuate similarities and uniformities of their group in cases where group identity is manifested. This is done through language, the way a person talks and many other similar characteristics while identifying with a group. Social Identity Theory of Tajfel holds that when contrast is made between the groups the behaviour of the group members would accentuate to highlight the differences between the groups. Another important function of this differentiation is to give people a good feeling of ‘us’, which needs a ‘them’ for its existence. To categories ‘others’ ethnically is a need of group members for in-group unity ([Cited in Meyerhoff, 2006](#)).

The existence of an ethnic group is always due to the presence of other groups in the society in the form of a state, which usually is a larger political entity. For instance, Hispanics, Asians, Chinese and Arabs are the ethnic groups within a state. Asian and Chinese are no ethnic groups outside the states. Arabs on the other hand, are a majority group residing in different states like the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Jordan etc. while Kurds form a weaker minority group residing in different parts of the world. It can be therefore concluded that ethnic groups live longer than the states. The states can be divided due to a number of socio-political reasons but not the varied ethnic groups living within them ([Emberling, 1997](#)).

## Methodology

The research is an ethnographic study of Baloch community living in Balochistan. The research site for the study was Quetta, the capital city of Balochistan. The study takes up qualitative research paradigm. Non-random criterion sampling was done. Besides observation, which is the basic tool for ethnographical research, (Borg and Gall, 1995) semi-structured interviews were used as data collecting instruments.

The study has made use of two approaches in this exploration, the ‘situational approach’ and the subjectivist approach of ethnicity, ([Isajiw, 1992](#)) as the work is based on both the objective and the subjective aspects of ethnicity. The objective aspects like the dress Baloch wear, the language they speak and the way they live were analysed through the basic tool of observation. As for the subjective dimensions of ethnicity like the attitude of Baloch towards each other as a group that speaks four different languages and their attitude towards other ethnic groups living in Balochistan, semi-structured interviews were used. The subjective aspect needed more of the interpretations. The respondents were made an equal participant in the interpretation of the data as the questions and their interpretations were shared and one question was put in several ways and the understanding of it and its meanings were repeated. Subjectivist approach to ethnicity also involves the perception of ‘us’ and ‘them’ that determines to a large extent the inclusion and exclusion of people from the group and groups’ ethnolinguistic awareness.

## Theoretical framework

[Smolicz \(1991\)](#) Core value theory that is taken up for this project contends that core values are central to the reputation, creativity and ultimate cultural survival of ethnic groups, so their patronage is essential to the maintenance and development of its identity. Core Values belong to a given group, and their function is often to emphasise the group’s linguistic, social or other differentiations. Smolicz believes that language is a central and essential core value for most ethnolinguistic groups, without which their ethnic identity cannot survive many generations, but he concedes that this identity can also be based on other factors such as culture, religion, family social structure, racial affiliation or descent ([Beswick, 2007](#)).

## **Data Analysis**

In order to find out the ethnolinguistic awareness and cultural dynamics in the construction of ethnic identity among Baloch, semi-structured interviews were conducted within the frame of Smolicz's Core Value theory, in Quetta, a multi-ethnic city. Due to this multi ethnicity, the ethno linguistic profile of the research respondents became crucial that can also be taken as a marker of ethnolinguistic awareness. The question to evaluate ethnolinguistic profile was structured and they were asked if they identify themselves as Baloch. The answers in the affirmative approved of their participation in this study. All respondents answered that they classified themselves as Baloch despite speaking four different languages. These participants belonged to at least thirteen different Baloch tribes like Dehwar, Mullazai, Khosa, Malghani, Rind, Sanjeranee, Hasnee, Mengal, Jamaldeenee, Qamberanee, Kodae, Buzdar. They resided in various parts of Balochistan that added to the richness of data.

## **Ethnic Identity and Ethnolinguistic Awareness**

To know further about their ethnolinguistic awareness, the participants were asked if they mention their caste/tribe along with your name.' Fourteen interview participants said that they mentioned their caste along with their names while six said that did not. When they were asked about the reason for mentioning their caste along with their name, they came up with similar answers of basically wanting an explicit identification with their ethnic group. Naming practices in a group are also a part of the cultural and linguistic dynamics for establishing and expressing loyalty to one's group (Thomas et al, 2004). Tagging of castes with the name is much too common especially in the tribal societies of Pakistan and Baloch are no exception. First names of some of the respondents were typically Baloch names and could be identified with it such as 'Beburg', Kiyya, Gul Naz, Shameer etc. Naming rituals are significant linguistic practices in this part of Pakistan. Its significance has increased for the members of the Baloch community in the present-day Balochistan, where they are trying to assert and reassert their identity, in which they take pride; as one of the respondents said. 'My name is my pride my identification'. Another replied 'I think and feel that mentioning Baloch with our name is not only important but essential as I am a Baloch since 6000 BC, and my history, culture and motherland and everything about me is Baloch, that is why my name includes the word Baloch'. Baloch is a pithy word and reflects the identity along with the history and culture of the group

The name of a person is, therefore, not just a name for personal identification but it means a lot more and plays a greater role by providing and acting as a loud expression of ethnicity. People whose names are devoid of the caste are often questioned about their tribes and it is thought necessary for a person to at least know about it if he does not explicitly show it through his name.

To know more about the ethnolinguistic awareness, the participants were asked 'How has the recent turn of events in Balochistan affected the Baloch ethnic identity? It has reinforced the sense of identity among the members of the Baloch community was the popular reply. According to Eidhein (1960), enhancement and suppression of identity are situation-dependent (cited in John,1997). 'Maybe I did not have this awareness of being a Baloch previously, which I have now', said a respondent. Another replied, 'we feel more Baloch today, previously we did not show our signs of identity like dresses but now the trend is increasing towards expressing our identity'.

The events and happenings in Balochistan have spread awareness about the rights of Baloch. This wide-spread awareness has become a source of reinforcement of Baloch ethnic identity 'before we were not aware of our rights but now we feel that it is high time to be together and fight for our rights', and when such realization becomes a mind-set of an ethnic group, it reinforces and enhances their ethnic identity along with strengthening the in-group bonding among the members of the group. This identity is then asserted through explicit expression of language and culture.

The participants were further asked as to when and how they became aware of their Baloch ethnic identity. To this the interviewee replied 'Right from my childhood in my early school days when I came across children from other ethnic groups like Punjabis, Pathans, Urdu speaking then I realized that I was linguistically and culturally different from them. Another referred to a chain of unfortunate events in Balochistan that were against Baloch which made her more aware of her Baloch ethnicity. 'I think it was a gradual thing that came, it was not just one event that made me realize about my ethnicity'. The awareness of Baloch ethnic identity was always

There but has increased during these times. 'It was not till the eighth grade that I started realizing that there are people from other ethnic groups, but strongly I have started feeling it now'. More importantly, it was how Baloch were treating other groups and how they were being treated. This type of grouping brought a strong sense of ethnicity.

The Baloch land was seldom at peace but the situation got worse with some specifically unfortunate events as this respondent answered, 'the death of Akbar Bugti gave me the awareness that people are suppressing Baloch, after this incident, I got more focused on my Baloch identity. I realized it more'. Similarly, another said 'I know I was a Baloch since birth but I became aware of it when I realized that Baloch were being suppressed, other people trying to destroy their separate identity they were tyrannical towards Baloch. My feeling of being a Baloch is definitely more today'. For many, it was a general observation as a school going child that their language was not understood by everyone, as it was used to be at home, and in a very general way people would ask about 'who I was'? So it was basically the people started asking and I started thinking that I am a Baloch'.

Sometimes it is the parents who not only genetically transfer ethnicity but also verbally inform the children about ethnicities, as my respondent who informs 'my father keeps on discussing the history of Baloch with us, to which ethnic group we belong and about our language. I came to know at the age of 15 who we are and how are we different'.

Ethnolinguistic awareness also comes from the presence of a perceived out-group (Tajfel, 1979). 'Punjabis are the out-group right now and Baloch the in-group it has definitely enhanced Baloch identity, if Baloch are united today they want to prove themselves against that out-group', one interviewee replied. Baloch is the collection of tribes and clans that are never known for unity. Today they seem to be united and the presence of an out-group has certainly a role to play in this scenario. They are only representing Baloch and they are united against one opponent.

The intense feeling of deprivation of not getting the rights because of the presence of the other groups has added to the rise of ethnic identity of the Baloch. As an interviewee opined 'It is because of the presence of other groups all around them which makes them assume that they have to do something about it in order to survive'. Now that the Baloch have realized that they are not being treated equally where they should be treated superiorly in this region, and they are not getting equal rights so they have decided to do something about it. Balochistan is ethnically diverse, which stays to be a demographic fact. There are many ethnic groups whose presence cannot be denied or negated so in-groups and out-groups are enhancing each other's identity, 'here the presence of other groups enhance Baloch identity and vice versa'. One of the respondents correctly analysed.

## Cultural Dynamics

To investigate the cultural and social dynamics for in-group bonding the participants were asked about the marriage pattern in the Baloch community. 'Do you have interethnic marriages in the family?' was the question. Some respondents were found to be very strict and conservative who said they never marry even in the neighbouring tribes as a participant, Buzdar by caste and Balochi speaking Baloch said 'we do not marry outside the tribe, not even in Balochi speaking adjoining tribes like Marris. Marriage is preferred within the family'. Another mentioned that they marry among Baloch only and language is not an important consideration while deciding for the partner but he/she has to be a Baloch, no matter whichever of the four languages he/she speaks. 'By interethnic if you mean among Baloch who speak different language from ours so we do marry with them. My aunts are Sindhi and Saraiki and Balochi speaking Baloch, we all are Baloch'. For obvious reasons in a diverse group with so many languages, people have preferences as she said, 'Being Brahvi speaking Baloch we prefer Brahvi speakers and the second option is Balochi, then Sindhi and Saraiki comes as a fourth option'. Another respondent called inter-ethnic marriage an exception among Baloch. Many of the Balochi speaking respondents answered to this question with a categorical 'no'. Balochi speaking Baloch marry in Brahvi speaking tribes and vice versa which is not the trend among Sindhi speaking and Saraiki speaking Baloch as one of them said 'we don't marry outside our tribes but sometimes in Brahvis'. Another mentioned 'we are Jamaldeenies but we marry in Balochi and Brahvi speaking tribes'. According to this respondent, the assertion of ethnicity through explicit expression of language and culture is observed more among the Baloch of Makran than among the Baloch of the peaceful region of Naseerabad.

To evaluate the significance of the traditional Baloch dress as a cultural dynamic for the expression of ethnicity, the interview responses suggested that there is a deep association between the traditional dress and Baloch ethnic identity. Ethnicity relies and makes use of the material culture for its expression. Sometimes the relation is so explicit that 'individuals wear ethnically charged clothes' (Clark, 2005 p. 440). In fact, there can be doubts about language being the cultural ethnic core value of the linguistically diverse group but other parts of culture specially the dress which is common among all Baloch no matter whether they speak Balochi, Brahvi, Saraiki or Sindhi. They named it differently according to their area but the dress was found to be one and common. For men it is a special kind of a shirt and a big Shalwar, which is made of yards and yards of cloth. I was informed during the interviews that it is called as Bugti dress, Kheterani suit, Pashk shalwar but more often easy to understand Balochi suit. For ladies it is an embroidered frock with a large pocket and are very expensive as the traditional embroidery is still done by hand. It is sometimes called as Chola, Dal Gulani Gul, and popularly known as Balochi frock.

To know more about the relation of cultural dress and identity I put the question 'if they wear it with the intention of identifying themselves with Baloch? or to show and inform other of their ethnicity? or wearing of this dress gives them this identity? A very staunch Baloch participant from Turbat informed that there is only one dress worth wearing and that is Balochi dress and there is no space for any other dress. If someone wears something else especially in family functions he is seen as going against Baloch traditions 'I strictly follow my culture, and I am proud to be a Baloch.' 'My dress is my identity and I am wearing it since my childhood as my forefathers have been wearing it'. 'People identify me by my dress. This is our identification'. Baloch who have been living in Quetta for a long time do not wear this dress as often as they have started wearing it now, 'I have started wearing it now more than before'. The traditional dress constructs, maintains, reinforces and asserts ethnic identities. It is an identity marker and perhaps stronger than the language as the dress is one as all the interviewees agreed and the languages are at least four. Therefore the dress can be said to be the cultural/ethnic core value of Baloch.

To ascertain if this dress is central to their identity or some other cultural component is more significant? A question 'what is central to their identity?' was asked The spontaneous answer of most of the Balochi speaking and Brahvi Baloch was 'language is central to Baloch identity'. Many also said 'dress is same among us'. Another emphasized that the acceptability of one single language by all Baloch that is Balochi shows that language is central to Baloch identity. 'It is the culture, and it is the language too, in a way that no matter whatever language they speak but they give importance to Balochi language. For example, Khosas are basically Baloch who speak Sindhi, if you ask any Khosa what is your mother tongue he would never say Sindhi, he would say Balochi', said a participant.

Many respondents realizing linguistic diversity, called their traditional dress as central to Baloch identity. Another confirmed, 'basically the way they dress up, that is one thing, no matter what type of Baloch one is, the dress is the same. Besides they have a single mind set, they are more focused on their identity more than ever before'. A participant from Turbat kept on emphasizing on language besides culture and traditions. 'Our language is one, culture is one and tradition if followed would be a uniting factor for our identity'. Besides language, culture and tradition, few respondents also talked about ancestry which is a uniting factor among all Baloch, and therefore centre of their identity as well. 'The basis of unity is not and should not be language because Baloch speak different languages, basis should be common ancestry'. Another similar reply from another respondent was 'for me my identity is my language and ancestry'.

The participants were speakers of four different languages i.e. Balochi, Brahvi, Saraiki and Sindhi. Many of the speakers of Balochi knew Brahvi as well and vice versa. Speakers of Sindhi and Saraiki were mostly found to be monolinguals but kept their Baloch identity apart from their language. It is an interesting finding that speaking a different language; many still identified themselves with the ethnic group.

## **Conclusion**

The in depth interviews showed that ethnic identity among Baloch is constructed to a certain extent through language among Baloch but it is not the differentiating factor or a characteristic that separates the group from other ethnolinguistic groups. All Balochi speaking people or to put it more precisely all people with Balochi as their mother tongue are necessarily Baloch but all the speakers of Sindhi and Saraiki might not share Baloch

Ethnicity. Therefore, Baloch ethnicity is constructed more through certain cultural dynamics such as the traditional dress, which is one and the same over the centuries for all members of the ethnic group no matter whatever language they might speak. The interview data also showed elevated ethnolinguistic awareness among the group members because of the presence of out-group and also due to the current political and social situation in the province.

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