

**A Model for Studying Ethnicity and Ethnic Groups; Based on a Case
Study in Sistan-va-Baluchestan Province**

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Abstract

Through giving some evidences about the importance of ethnicity and ethnic groups in certain social settings, and evincing the significance of ethnocentrism in social, cultural and political disputes, this article tries to give a model for studying this phenomenon and its consequences. This is done by initially reviewing the theories about the subject matter, followed by presenting a case in Sistan-va- Baluchestan province. In the end a model for further studies is presented.

Keywords

ethnic groups, ethnocentrism, ethnic movements, Primordialism, instrumentalism, rational choice approach, ethno- Political approach, identity-forming discourses, stratification approach, Sistan-va-Baluchestan, ethnic identity.

Introduction

The tradition of sociological thought has always been concerned about ethnicity and ethnocentricity as a form of traditional collective life. This concern originates from a historical look at “society”, in which ethnocentricity is associated with a specific era that is due to decline through social evolution (Cohen:1985:5). In this idea the evolution process is inevitable and would lead

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to a modern formation of societies, decline of traditional relations based on blood kinship and kinfolk's emotions, supersession of ins relations based on self-interest in urban relations, and dominance of modern bureaucracy in place of warm friendly relations. All these are to be considered among the dilemmas which make confrontation between ethnicity and modern urban life, to a certain extent, a possible matter.

The growth of ethnical tendencies and the emergence of ethnical movements show that the traditional sociological patterns are not efficient for describing and defining the new situation. These ethnical movements take a dim view of the assumption that ethnical affairs and considerations are incompatible with economic and technological growths and developments.

Theoretical Attempts to Explain Ethnicity

There are several theoretical trends which attempt to explain the re-emergence and revivification of ethnical identity from different viewpoints. Primordialism, emphasises on primordial aspects and sees the ethnical claims and considerations as the attributes of the nature of an ethnic group. On the other hand the instrumentalist approach perceives the ethnical identity-seeking as the utilitarian options of social actors.

Clifford Geertz is one of the prominent characters of the former approach who believes that primordial identities are ascribed characteristics which stand in opposition with the affairs that originate from social interactions. When born into a particular cultural group and environment, one finds him/herself in a given setting with given set of knowledge and learning, which are not necessarily resulted from social interactions, therefore they cannot be explained through sociological understanding. Due to this Geertz considers ancient bonds as unexplainable. He asserts that as primordial bonds are natural, possess a powerful force and are imposed on a person (Geertz 1963:111).

According to Geertz by disregarding or, better said, intentionally ignoring primeval concerns in favour of modern state essentials and prerequisites, modern state provokes archaism, ethnocentrism included.

However, in this theoretical framework one cannot explain the developments in ethnical communities, and their emergences and eradications. The evolution and development of ethnical identity, the displacement of constituent elements of an ethnic identity, changes in ethnical hierarchy, are among the problems that primordialism cannot deal with.

The theories presented in the body of instrumentalist approach have something in common in their presuppositions; ethnicity is constructed and has its origin in socio-political relations. Ethnocentricity is the result of a dynamic process of reconstructing ethnic symbols, in which the elites have major roles.

From Brass viewpoint some elites make use of ethnic symbols to give rise to social solidarity. Just as class consciousness generates a sense of supremacy over, or at least equality with, other social classes, ethnocentricity or ethnic consciousness sows the seeds of equality with other ethnic groups. In fact those ethnic groups that have the benefit of ethnocentricity present their claims in the domain of political rivalry and struggle and demand changes in their situation and taking more advantages of social, political and economic priorities. The process of formation of ethnic identities is constantly accompanied with rivalry and struggle for gaining more political power, material interests and status privileges. Therefore the differentiation in language and culture is not solely the necessity for the formation of ethnic identities; it is the confrontational condition of political struggles and competitions that incites the elites to give meaning to these differentiations in the frame of ethnic identities (Brass 1996: 85-9, Martinussen 1996: 323-6).

Abner Cohen sees ethnocentricity as the result of hostile competition and interactions among ethnic groups. He believes many of the ethnicities at the time of European colonial domination were apparently affected by homogenizing and centralising policies and accepted the governing state supported by the colonial powers. Under this circumstance these ethnicities seemed to be something like declining identities. However when the colonial powers left their territories these identities re-emerged. Cohen assumes that colonialism in African countries usually led to the dominance of elites associated with one ethnic group and therefore this group took it for granted to take advantage and benefit more from education, wealth and power. In the postcolonial era the elites related to subordinate ethnic groups saw the revival of ethnical sensation through re-presentation of ethnical symbols and traditions as a way of altering colonial counterbalance.

Ethnocentrism has never been the result of conservative continuation of ethnical traditions. On the contrary it has been the result of a dynamic reconstruction process of ethnical symbols. Sometimes this recreation was inclined to alterations in provocative symbols and creation of new symbols, at times traditional and former symbols emerged with different functions and meanings.

Ethnicity is a political phenomenon by nature. As stated by Cohen, bloody rivalry and conflicts between African tribes by no means could be merely because of ethnical and cultural differences, and at the same time it is quite unlikely to believe that the genocides committed by them are solely rooted in their beliefs and emotional orientation. African tribes have fatal clashes with one another at times, and sometimes shake hands in unity and coalition. These clashes and unities can be perceived and defined through political and power struggle (Cohen 1969: 201).

The rational choice approach in analysing ethnical identity emphasises on the role played by the social actors. The scene of this social act is to represent a market in which actors have several options to choose in accordance with rational figuring and estimation in order to gain most benefits. According to the original rational choice approach “men have demands, objectives, values or utilitarian goals. As we live in a world of scarcity these objectives are not ascertained simultaneously. Consequently every individual has to choose the best way or ways amid accessible means” (Maghsoudi 2001: 127).

According to rational choice approach ethnical organisations are formed through two strands; the source of award and punishment, which stimulates participation in a collective act, and the structure, in which individual estimate and calculation of cost-benefit is carried out in the network of ethnical relations where mutual information transformation is organised. When there is no other choice apart from the ethnical network to gain information, it is decided on for achieving success. In this way the rational choice theory tries to explain ethnical ties by a pattern linking structurally-oriented elements with elements associated with the actor.

In the frame of rational choice theory and by accepting that “individual membership in ethnic groups is the result of ethnic consciousness that itself is derived from individual or collective choices” (Ibid), Banton assumes that an ethnic group lacks stability and permanent boundaries. “In Banton’s opinion this act of choosing is constantly happening and ethnic groups are forever going through changes assuming that members are continually evaluating benefits and costs of pursuing different plans of action. These members distinguish their own differences with other individuals and groups and form their collective actions (whether peaceful or hostile, hidden or visible, inside or outside the system) according to existing or potential interests” (Ibid 127-8). Banton refers to individual choices, for instance individual preferences in shopping from a person belonging to same country, religious and ethnic group can be interpreted as a nationalist, religious or ethnically oriented action. In fact it can be seen as related to the first, but at times to the second or the third factor. Pointing to one source as the individual motivating action can be interpreted and perceived in accordance with a given condition.

Sowell uses rational choice approach to explain discrimination in job settings. He brings into scene a society in which an ethnic minority with a subordinate status, the members of such a group gain lower wages in the labour market. This in turn causes a gap between ethnic groups. In order to preserve this gap which is beneficial for the superior groups, the relations of the subordinate and the superior groups are restricted and controlled. Social, economic and even political arrangements are formed in a way to prevent the subordinate group from making any coalition and alliance with other groups to achieve its own

objectives and interests. Apparently this situation would motivate the subordinate group to form and organise resistance against superior group (Sowell 1975: 165-187).

Anthony Smith's ethno-political approach considers three simultaneous processes in the formation of ethnocentrism; cultural politicization, vernacular mobilization and ethnic purification. In cultural politicization process the cultural, historic and traditional sources of an ethnic group turns to a mobilization source in the political domain through a specific political reading and gives out the desired result in the ethnic mobilization. Ethnic purification refers to a condition that the demands of a mobilised nation expand to a degree that causes the emergence of ethnic nationalism (Smith 1999: 31-35). Consequently any differentiation between various kinds of ethnic identities and ethnocentrism ought to consider two different elements; first the aspects which are generated based on traditions, ethnic and historical reminiscences and second the ideologies formulated by political elites in any given condition and situation of political conflicts. In other words Smith distinguishes two different conditions: ethnic community that rarely appears explicitly, and existing ethnic identities or ethnic nationalism that refers to the emergence of an ethnic group in cultural, social and political conflicts. According to Smith moving from ethnic communities to ethnic nationalism is rooted in the interference of political elites and politically mobilising ideologies.

In Armstrong's belief all identity-forming discourses, including ethnocentrism, are rooted in myths and beliefs that have been going on for a long time in an ethnic group or a nation. Although the intelligentsia have a prominent role in mobilising the public for specific political objective or other modern changes, in order to adapt appropriate symbols and myths they have options to choose in the set which have been known to the people for a long time (J.A. Armstrong 1982:5).

The stratification approach tries to explain the sustainability of ethnic identities on the bases of the situation of different groups in the social system. According to the ideas presented by the advocates of this approach the inequality among the ethnicities is the cause of perseverance and continuation of ethnic identities. The discrimination and differences between ethnicities is the key to understanding their survival. There are two sets of theories in this approach which explain the dynamics of inequality continuation. According to some of the theoreticians supporting this approach the continuation of inequality is of an ideological origin that can be found in prejudices and stereotypes. The key concept in their ideas is social distance that has been empirically used in their researches. There are other proponents of this approach that see the origins of inequality in structural and institutional elements, as an

example they refer to the concealed inequality inside the educational system that ignores cultural themes of each ethnicity (Alba 1992: 578-9).

Another point of view relates ethnic inequality with the political domain and pays attentions to the dominations of groups over one another. To win the competition with their rivals, ethnic groups take advantage of certain parameters such as the number of the group members, required integrity and potentiality for forming informal domains or marginal economic spheres of influence. According to this viewpoint the link between an individual and the group continues to the point where the individual can enjoy the privileges gained through these ties or acquire identity within a group. From this aspect the theories related to ethnic sources are contrasting homogenization theories (Ibid 581-2).

Daniel Bell thinks that politics is increasingly taking the place of the market as the major means of distribution. Because politics only approves the claims and demands of a group, the political meaning of ethnicity increases in scope (Ibid 582).

Glazer and Moynihan are the main critics of homogenization theories and present a political explanation of continuance of ethnicity in the United States. From their point of view the cultural differences of the immigrants pass into oblivion in homogenization process and this is the right point of such theories. From a cultural aspect this is why there are insignificant differences between "ethnic groups" in the United States. These ethnic groups are only different from a historical vantage point and also differ in their position towards the US political economy structure. Meanwhile ethnicity has simultaneity with differences like centralised jobs and places of residence, which are in turn affected by the policies and procedures of the governing state. A person is tied to his/her group through kinship and friendly relationships. Therefore in a political domain, ethnicity, as a co-benefited group, echoes the interests of homogeneous individuals (Banks 1999: 70, Alba 1992: 582).

A Case: Ethnical Relation in Sistan va Baluchestan

Based on the main assumptions of the instrumentalist approach and at the same time being critical on its inadequacies, this article tries to present a model for explaining the ethnic relations in Sistan va Baluchestan province. Although the role played by elites in the formation of the identity and politicization of an ethnic group, their mere competition is not sufficient for explaining ethnic changes. Notwithstanding the fact that elites try to congregate people round some socio-cultural ideas and mobilise them, the ordinary people have their own specific choices. Identity-formation is a multiple process that leads to multiple identities of the rivals. If this process was linear it would (or would

not) result in formation of specific ethnic community and evolve into a nationalist movement. One of these identities might become dominant at one time and the other at some other time. For instance a Sunni Baluchi and non-Baluchi Shia have a common idea about the “centre” because they want a bigger share of economic resources; nevertheless they have different ideas and position in religious issues. In other words, there is an “option”, a situational option that is related to the setting. Accordingly the formation of the identity is not something to be done from the top, which means this formation does not take place on the request of the elites and through their manipulation of symbols, it is rather dependent on the perception of the potential advocates of their own situation and their accessible option.

The aforementioned theories mostly deal with the emergence of ethnic identity and its politicization. They, however, do not say anything about the content and burden of identity, the role this content plays in political and other domains of social life, like the formation of neighbourhoods according to the ethnic relations of the residents. On the other hand they have seen ethnic identity as a subject matter forged and developed by elites and nation-state or the ruling power. In other words it is seen to be the outcome of political actions and power coalitions.

Contrary to that view, a look from the bottom focuses identity, understanding and perception elements of an ethnic group. It is important to know how an individual associates him/herself to an ethnic group, how does these perceptions affect his/her behaviour, and how this identity is preserved in coming generations.

Under the condition that multiple and rival identities exist simultaneously in one place, some aspects of identities are placed in the centre and some are marginalised. Thereafter both sets of identities would make efforts to challenge the other; the marginalised or peripheral identities would stand against the central identity and the latter would do its best to preserve the existing relations. This confrontation lays the bedrock for identity evolution. In this rivalry and competitive atmosphere, the elites initiate a narration of resistance against the formal account of identity with the aim of achieving political, economic, social interests through mobilising ethnic resources. It is in this frame and pattern that a model for explaining ethnic tendencies in Sīstān va Balūchestān province.

A Theoretical Model

Due to ethnic policies and inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities two different identity patterns, bearing two diverse values, were formed. A formal/central/superior identity as opposed to an informal/peripheral/subordinate identity. The positioning of these two identity patterns has caused the informal identity to acquire an internal integrity and those bearing it to be more loyal towards it. Contrary to this identity pattern the formal identity due to the possibility of promotion in administrative and educational system and accepting individualistic values, would suffer the loss of its coherence. Thus in accordance with the ethnic division of the region two value systems would emerge; an ethnocentric, collectivistic and traditional value system facing an individualistic and relatively modern system.

The formation of two relatively different value systems has caused the institution of family to have two different demographical performances in two ethnic groups. Hence the Baluchi family has high demographic performance whereas the same performance is low for non-Baluchi family. Furthermore the desire to emigrate from the region is high amid non-Baluchi population, due to the acceptance of individualistic values and the attention paid to individual growth and development. All these processes have played their role in changing the ethnic, religious combination in this region. The approval of this hypothesis would mean that the implementation of ethnic policies has led to the undermining of the same policies.

Based on the theoretical issues about the political nature of identity, the presupposition of this study is that the distinct identity forms are competing and contending one another in the domains of social and political systems. In such competition any efforts for establishing a political or economic order, distribution of opportunities and resources on the basis of social and cultural differences and features, which intends to eliminate or marginalise other identities, would be considered as measures to institutionalise social inequalities and would urge different identities (ethnic identities) to become more politicised. The role of elites is such a situation is quite significant as they both can formulate this competition and rivalry, and present the result is cultural, symbolic and more alarmingly in ideological patterns to people, and also as a reference group by the major bearers of these patterns. For this reason it is expected that the tendency to political identity would be more visible among the Baluchi degree-holders in comparison with other groups.

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