

REVISITING THE ETHNICITY OF TAJIKISTAN
Riyaz Ahmad Naik

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Research Scholar

*Department of Centre of Central Asian Studies (CCAS),
University of Kashmir, Jammu and Kashmir, India.*

Abstract

The concept of “ethnic territory” is considered to be a cognitive construct in this article, and it is constantly debated in Tajikistan. Additionally, there is a good reason why we are redefining a term that is fashionable and has occasionally been used by many ethnologists. Every ethnic group is said to live in separate communities, and this discreteness is based on cultural diversity (primordial stance on ethnicity). This study examines how this distinction is upheld in contemporary Tajikistan, where residents of many cultural origins coexist side by side in a plural setting. This effort will also bear in mind that, rather than emphasizing “what group has been attributed,” it will instead concentrate on “how ethnic territory is preserved in the current environment.” This article will also attempt to address the question of whether a group’s ability to distinguish itself from others is aided by culture alone or by factors other than culture.

Keywords

Discreteness, Constructionist, Subjectivity, Objectivity, Multiculturalism, ethnic boundary.

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Introduction

Discreteness of an ethnic group is a clear illusion in a society having a plural setup (Moerman, 1965). Moreover, it was during 1960-1970 that the predictions made by theories like integration and assimilation were negated and it was felt that ethnicity is a phenomenon that is very complex. The hope behind those theories was that the minority subgroups in a plural society will finally succumb to the pressure of the majority group. Perhaps the greater difference in between the literature on ethnicity prior to cultural diffusion/immigration and contemporary ethnic literature is that the former was dealing with the assimilation perspective whereas the latter focuses on pluralistic literature (Jimmy, 2002). The prevailing scenario with regard to the term 'ethnicity' was also that 'ethnicity is culture and this culture is shared'. In this way, the groups were thought to be emerging and developing in discreteness.

While making an understanding of the term ethnicity and its related dimensions, ethnicity was divided into two perspectives; *objective* and *subjective*. The distinction between the two is made on the basis of '*observability*'. The objective aspect of ethnicity is those which are 'overt' and can be observed as facts; like kinship, specific territory and descent. While as subjective dimension, which remains very important for this article refers to the attitudes, values and preconceptions whose meaning has to be interpreted in the context of the process of communication (Isajiw, 1993). It was through this subjectivist perspective that the scholars moved their attention toward the fact that ethnicity is more than ascription and is also constructive in nature. The subjective dimension of ethnicity focused on the ethnic boundaries and their maintenance rather than what the group encloses.

Before the emergence of the subjectivist perspective of ethnicity, it was realized continuous cultural contact between different ethnic groups would lessen the cultural diversity with a greater *homogenization* in the social order. M. M. Gordon's *assimilation of American life* (Gordon, 1975), F. Parkin's *social stratification* (Jones, 1997), Israel Zangwill's *melting pot* (Shumsky, 1975), Gellner in *nations and Nationalism* (Gellner, 1983) and many more pronounced the same faith that industrialism, globalization, advancement in telecommunication, modern nationalism... will leave little space for 'sub-national' ethnic identities to emerge. Contrary to all of this, we see that in cultural hybridity, where acculturation is happening or has already happened, but that "cultural distinctiveness" is still being maintained, and in some cases, new components of diversity are introduced, aiding in the maintenance of ethnic boundaries. In this context, the present-day studies on ethnic groups put more focus on the 'subjectivist' or 'constructive' approach to ethnicity.

It was through the efforts of Fredrick Barth who in his work ‘ethnic groups and boundaries’ delivered more upon this issue and moved our attention from the objective aspect to the subjective or cognitive dimension of *situational ethnicity*. He narrated:

Most critically, it allows us to assume that boundary maintenance is unproblematic and follows from the isolation which the itemized characteristics imply: racial difference, cultural difference, and social separation and language barriers, spontaneous and organized enmity. (Barth, 1969).

His understanding of this is flawed for two reasons. One is that ethnic groups defined by “cultural uniqueness” give a false impression that groups tend to be distinct. Barth disagrees and argues that rather than being an inherent or fundamental character of the group, cultural distinctiveness may have developed through time as a result of ongoing, long-term social interactions and processes. Second, as was already said, these culturally-based implications lead us to assume that maintaining boundaries is not unproblematic. However, Barth disagrees and contends that while studying plural settings, preservation and consequences of ethnic boundaries should be the key areas of investigation.

It was not only Barth who believed in such criteria of ethnicity but the multiculturalist scholars of his time or his successors too advocated subjectivity and restricted the selection of ethnicity to the individual’s choice. Abner Cohen, depicts ethnicity as an acoustic device that is used to gain resources when the need arises (Cohen, 1969). Wsevolod W. Isajiw defined ethnicity as *a rational choice* (Isajiw, 1993) available to individuals, who switch over to different identity domains as per individual needs. He even defined ethnicity as being powwowed and constructed in everyday life.

One significant argument that has come out of the study of this group differentiation is that by focusing on differences based on the Herderian principle in anthropology, which defines ethnic groups primarily on the basis of cultural differentiation, we are ignoring how the *ethnic group boundary* is maintained throughout the course of social interaction. By proceeding in this manner, we insist that we are not denying that cultural diversity is not the defining characteristic of an ethnic group. However, we are attempting to add a fresh perspective to how ethnicity in Tajikistan can be researched further. From a Barthian standpoint, it is more valuable to investigate what actually preserves the boundary that distinguished group ‘A’ from group ‘B’ rather than studying two groups separately on the basis of cultural differentiation and then concluding that group one has a different culture than the other group. The groupings that were there will continue to exist despite the fact that the source of distinction, which for primordialists is culture, changes with time.

General Approach

The intention of writing this article was subsidiary in character and was never in our target in our field study in Tajikistan. It emerged out of coincidence when it was realized that as an outsider your upbringing halts the factual reality that is available to the common people. In the streets of Dushanbe, you wander from morning to evening, but you will not find ‘ethnicity’ unless you get involved with people. Ethnic wear, language, and culture aren’t sufficient indicators to escort you while reading ethnicity. Instead through the preliminary observation, it is more than that. In this regard ethnography as a larger methodological approach was taken into consideration. While using this approach the service of ‘constructionists’ was also utilized. For that matter, constructionists try to understand the social reality through the experiences of common people.

Revisiting ethnicity of Tajikistan: Findings

The respondents for this study were seen and questioned in their own regional settings first, and subsequently elsewhere, mostly where they were living in a multiethnic environment. The aim of the study was to discover how respondents in both of the aforementioned scenarios maintained their ethnic identities, which define an ethnic border, despite altering membership and involvement.

The queries raised earlier in this study were answered serendipitously in Dushanbe (Tajikistan). Pasha from Khorog, a Facebook acquaintance of the researcher actually met in a Dushanbe restaurant. Academically, we discussed many aspects, but when the researcher first saw Pasha entering the restaurant and heard him speak, the researcher began to question his initial understanding that whether his appearance, language, or any other cultural characteristics made him a member of a certain ethnic group. No, not necessarily, because our friend from Khorog is quite similar to the original inhabitants of Dushanbe. His attire is similar to what people wear in Dushanbe, and his speech is also similar. How can one claim that only speaking or adopting a specific dialect, dressing in a certain way, following certain food customs, and so on are ethnic identity markers?

In another situation, the researcher was conducting a field study in the Khojand market of Panjshanbe when he noticed a non-Khojandi shopkeeper making an effort to draw the attention of customers present in the market. Knowing that he has a non-local residence, the researcher approached him and inquired as to whether his business was impacted by his non-local dialect. He responded as follows:

We have been here for a while, so we should know how to blend in with the Khojand natives. I am not the only non-native here; there are many of us, but at the same time, you won’t be able to find a single one [smiles]. We frequently use our

clients' accents to invite or attract them. We are experts at it (laughs out loudly). In addition to knowing what we do to sell goods, our other shop owners who are locals also know who we are, yet we are powerless in this situation.

So, it is because of some interest or interests either economic or any other they change their former position or actual identity and switch to other identities. Remember, this second identity is not always a total takeover of the erstwhile identity. For instance, in this case, although people in order to sell maximum products used Khojandi attire and language to impress the local customers but with the change in situations they switch from being a "*shadow Player Khojandi*" to their local/native way of living.

An acquaintance of the researcher working in Dushanbe, but her native place was Kulob [Khatlon]. She accompanied the researcher during almost all the field study. Her husband was also known to the researcher and he also was from Kulob. Although having their non-native residents, their attire and dialect were not in any way different from the actual inhabitants of Dushanbe. In their company, we were all prepared to tour Khatlon and the surrounding locations for the entire day. The primary objective of this tour was that it was crucial for the researcher to visit various ethnic groups, secondarily, and more crucially, it was to see if they [our friend and her husband] would *flip over* their urban attire in light of the changing circumstances. We saw that not just their parents or other family members, but the entire neighborhood, differed from other Tajiks in appearance. The two also "*switched over*" to indigenous garb after they arrived in Kulob. They had to "swap over" in order to appear like other people from their locality. Once more, we realized that their "attire" was not necessary to establish a group border. They resembled Dushanbians in Dushanbe and Khatlonese in Khatlon. This sort of cultural material, such as dress, language, or dialect, was thus insufficient for them to preserve the ethnic barrier and did not, at the same time, aid me in drawing boundaries as an outsider. This entire observation leads one to believe that culture is what man needs at a specific point in time and may be substituted for or denied at various points in time.

All of this complies with the E Hummell's assertion. When arguing against the idea that 'culture has no influence on establishing ethnic boundaries', Hummell states that some of these features are given priority or are over-communicated, whilst others are understated, denied, or replaced and may even be reinterpreted and reintroduced at a later date. It is impossible to fully comprehend an ethnic group's history by tracing the evolution of cultural practices across time. Current 'objective' cultural traits may show little, or indeed no, similarity to cultural practices exhibited in the past - distant or recent (Hummell, 2014).

This entails that some cultural qualities are given precedence while others are occasionally rejected, changed, generated, and regenerated. We witnessed “shadow puppetry” or “shadow play” by the non-locals in Khojand city. This observation was made to help people understand the dynamic nature of language and attire, which are frequently used as tools by people to assert their ethnicity, either in reality or in a fictitious way. We discovered that it is incorrect to declare language and dress as the only factors that determine one’s, ethnic group.

Most of the similar situations the researcher saw in the field study lead us to assume that ethnicity is a wholly distinct entity that manifests itself differently depending on the context. How can someone be so prejudiced that they would assign you to a certain ethnic group just because you speak a certain dialect or are dressed differently? The cultural elements that a group originally believed were adequate to distinguish “group A” from “group B” evolve with time and location.

One of the initial questions, which was whether or not culture alone determines ethnic boundaries or membership, is answered, but a second question is still unresolved, that is, how ethnicity is upheld when a person crosses boundaries? Overall communication made by the researcher with regard to the above query is to be summed up in the following paragraph.

Continuous interactions with the respondents of this category suggest that rather than total acculturation, the respondents were able to keep their ethnic distance because of the trust, mutual duties, comfort, distinctiveness, and continuous cultural interactions among non-native populations in a cultural complex. According to respondents, borders are not a factor in how a group defines itself as an ethnic group. Therefore, the dichotomy that is believed to be maintainable only within a boundary “overflows” the borders and frontiers that encompass an ethnic group.

Due to the financial limitations of non-natives in Khojand, ethnic affiliations were perceived as being irrelevant in the urban environment; however, they claimed that they made ‘ethnic affiliations’ *situational* to the point where they over-communicated (Okamura, 2010) it occasionally, usually when they were in need, but that the same phenomenon was sometimes purposefully under-communicated.

In this sense, ethnicity is sometimes referred to as a “situational phenomenon,” and it is up to the actor to determine whether to use it or not. The fact that ethnic groups must interact in order to grow and maintain their existence is another important issue. Ethnic groups cannot survive in isolation. Its discreteness can only be verified after approaching another group for the purpose of interaction (Barth, 1969). The presence of an ethnic group cannot be established only by looking

at someone's attire or language, however, these factors can only aid in the development of relationships. The implication drawn from this is that distinctness can only be represented in an interactive and comparative mode, which is required to draw the borders in the form of dichotomization.

In conclusion, it may be said that the development of *ethnic territory* is not aided by culture or its products. The concept of ethnicity goes beyond culture. The subjective belief is what aids in creating ethnicity, but at the same time if this subjective belief is only held by one person, it cannot aid in the development of an ethnicity; it must be shared. According to Weber (Weber, 1997), ethnicity cannot be produced, regardless of the acceptance of shared origin; rather, ethnic creation depends on specific social and political activity. The formation of ethnic group as per our findings are due to the fact that each person carries their own ethnic labels and uses them while interacting with others. This interaction aids in the development of dichotomization and the creation of an ethnic boundary.

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