Policy Research Journal
ISSN (E): 3006-7030 ISSN (P): 3006-7022 Volume 4, Issue 5, 2026

THE CIVILISED CENTRE AND ITS UNCIVILISED FRONTIER: HETEROGENEOUS DISCOURSE, POWER, AND THE CONTESTED FORMATION OF BALOCH IDENTITY FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE POSTCOLONIAL PRESENT

Dr. Muhammad Altaf Tahir[*1], Muhammad Rafaqat Baig[2]

[*1,2]*Dept. of Criminology, University of Karachi, Pakistan*

[*1]draltaftahir@gmail.com, [2]muhammad.rafaqat.baig@gmail.com

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20132625

Keywords
Baloch Identity · Critical Discourse Analysis · Civilised Centre–Uncivilised Frontier · Postcolonial Theory · Orientalism · Nationalism · Frontier Governmentality · Pakistan

Article History
Received: 14 March 2026
Accepted: 22 April 2026
Published: 12 May 2026

Corresponding Author: *
Dr. Muhammad Altaf Tahir

Abstract

The formation of Baloch ethnic and national identity has generated substantial scholarly debate across disciplines, yet the existing literature remains fragmented between three dominant explanatory frameworks: nationalist primordialism, which naturalises Baloch identity as historically continuous and organically given; modernist constructivism, which locates its genesis in British colonialism or the exclusionary policies of the Pakistani postcolonial state; and anthropological constructivism, which foregrounds the role of tribal structure and inter-ethnic boundary processes. This article argues that none of these frameworks, taken individually, adequately accounts for the complexity of Baloch identity formation because each restricts its historical horizon and ignores the competing discursive fields that have simultaneously and contradictorily constructed Baloch subjectivity across millennia. Drawing on Foucauldian discourse analysis, postcolonial theory, particularly the contributions of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Partha Chatterjee, and the anthropological literature on Balochistan, this article proposes that Baloch tribal, ethnic, and national identity is best understood as the product of heterogeneous and historically layered discourses operating from the pre-colonial era through the postcolonial present. Tracing a continuous yet internally contradictory archive of representations from Greek and Persian geographical texts through Arab historiography, British colonial knowledge production, postcolonial state discourse, and the rival counterdiscourses of Baloch nationalists and Western anthropologists, the article demonstrates that each dominant discourse organised Baloch identity around the structuring opposition of a civilised centre versus an uncivilised frontier, yet none succeeded in fixing a stable, unified image of Baloch selfhood. The persistence of this discursive failure, it is argued, explains both the fluid and contested character of Baloch identity politics today and the theoretical inadequacy of frameworks that privilege any single state or era as the origin of that identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Few questions in South Asian studies have generated more sustained intellectual dispute than the origins and character of Baloch ethnic and national identity. For scholars invested in that question, the stakes are considerable: the answer shapes how one understands the legitimacy of

Baloch political demands, the nature of Pakistan's constitutional order, and the historical depth of one of the most geographically expansive but least analytically examined peoples of the South Asian subcontinent. Yet for all the attention it has attracted, the question has repeatedly produced answers that are theoretically parochial, confined within the explanatory boundaries of a single discipline, a single historical period, or a single discursive tradition.

This article intervenes in this debate with a methodological reorientation. Rather than asking which institution or period produced Baloch identity, it asks how a succession of historically diverse, politically antagonistic, and epistemologically distinct discursive formations, from Hellenistic geographical writing to British imperial knowledge to postcolonial nationalist rhetoric, have collectively, contradictorily, and cumulatively shaped the field within which Baloch identity has been imagined, contested, and performed. The theoretical framework is Foucauldian: discourse, in this analysis, is understood not merely as a vehicle for representing a pre-existing reality but as the very medium through which identities, territories, and collectivities are produced, governed, and contested. When Arrian's Anabasis represented the inhabitants of Gedroshia as barbarians living beyond the reach of civilisation, it was not simply describing a population: it was constituting a discursive object, the uncivilised frontier dweller—that would circulate, mutate, and return in Persian epics, Arab geographical compendia, British frontier reports, and Pakistani state narratives down to the present day.

The article proceeds through four analytical movements. The first situates the inquiry theoretically, reviewing the relevant literature on identity formation, nationalism, and colonial discourse. The second traces the pre-colonial archive, Greek, Persian, and Arab texts, that first assembled the civilised centre/uncivilised frontier dichotomy in relation to the territory now called Balochistan. The third examines the British colonial discursive formation and its institutional consolidation of Baloch identity. The fourth analyses the competing postcolonial discourses, state, nationalist, and anthropological—that have both reproduced and contested that colonial inheritance. The conclusion reflects on what a heterogeneous discourse framework contributes to the field and what its practical implications might be for understanding the contemporary Baloch political situation.

2. Theoretical Framework: Identity, Discourse, and the Postcolonial Condition

2.1 Contested Approaches to Ethnic and National Identity

The theoretical literature on ethnic and national identity is organised around three enduring disputes: whether identity is discovered or constructed, static or fluid, and primarily personal or collective in character. These debates are not merely academic. In the Baloch case, they carry direct political consequences, since the primordialist argument, that Baloch identity is natural, ancient, and organically given, provides the philosophical infrastructure for claims of self-determination, while constructivist counter-arguments have been deployed, sometimes tendentiously, to delegitimise those claims.

Primordialist theories, from Herder's romantic nationalism to van den Berghe's sociobiological approach and Shils and Geertz's cultural primordialism, share the premise that national and ethnic identities are not modern inventions but expressions of deep attachments, to kinship, to language, to shared memory, that predate and underpin political organisation. Johann Gottfried Herder's influential distinction between the nation, as a natural and organic community, and the state, as an artificial and contingent construction, gave philosophical form to the intuition that peoples exist prior to political structures and cannot simply be dissolved into or subsumed by them (Ichijo and Uzelac, 2005). In the Baloch political tradition, this framing is ubiquitous: the Baloch nation is presented as immemorial, its identity rooted in a distinctive language, code of conduct, and genealogical memory that predates both British colonialism and the Pakistani state.

Against this, the modernist school of nationalism, associated principally with Ernest Gellner,

Benedict Anderson, and Eric Hobsbawm, insists that nations and national identities are distinctively modern phenomena, products of the transformations in communication, economy, and political organisation that accompanied European industrialisation. For Anderson (2006), print capitalism enabled populations sharing a vernacular language to imagine themselves as part of a bounded community of simultaneous readers; for Gellner, it was the cultural homogenisation required by industrial society that produced the correspondence between political unit and cultural unit that we call nationalism. In the Baloch case, modernist scholars situate the emergence of Baloch nationalism firmly in the colonial or postcolonial era, treating earlier forms of collective solidarity as pre-national tribalism rather than nascent nationalism.

Occupying a theoretically productive middle ground, the ethno-symbolist school, associated principally with Anthony D. Smith, argues that modern nationalism is best understood not as a rupture from the pre-modern past but as a transformation of pre-existing ethnic cores, or ethnies, constituted by shared myths, memories, values, and symbols. Smith's critique of modernism's Eurocentrism is particularly relevant to the Baloch case, where the attempt to apply European civic nationalism as a universal template has consistently produced analytical distortions (Smith, 1991). In acknowledging the historical depth of ethnic identity while insisting on the modernity of nationalist politics, ethno-symbolism opens analytical space that neither primordialists nor strict modernists occupy.

2.2 Foucault, Discourse, and the Production of Colonial Identities

The theoretical move that most decisively reorients this inquiry is the shift from ideology to discourse as the analytical category through which collective identity formation is understood. In the Marxist tradition, ideology, understood as the ideational superstructure erected on an economic base, is the primary mechanism through which ruling-class interests are naturalised as universal truths. For Marx, ideology is false consciousness: a systematic misrepresentation of social reality that can in principle be overcome through critique and class consciousness (Mills, 1997).

Michel Foucault's genealogical approach displaces this framework in several important ways. First, Foucault reconceptualises power not as a commodity concentrated in the hands of a sovereign or ruling class but as a relational, productive force that circulates through heterogeneous institutions, practices, and discourses. Power, in Foucault's formulation, does not merely repress or distort; it produces subjects, identities, and forms of knowledge. Second, discourse, for Foucault, is not reducible to language or ideology but names the ensemble of statements, rules, and practices that constitute the conditions of possibility for what can be said, thought, or known about a given object. The world, in this view, does not pre-exist its discursive constitution; rather, it is within discourse that objects, including identity categories, come into being (Foucault, 2003; Mills, 1997).

Applied to colonial contexts, this framework was given its fullest theoretical expression in Edward Said's Orientalism (1978), which argued that European scholarship on the non-Western world was not a neutral accumulation of knowledge but a "corporative institution" whose primary function was to produce, govern, and legitimise the colonial relationship by constructing the Orient as the subordinate, irrational, and static Other of a rational, dynamic, and superior West. Said's identification of the power-knowledge nexus, the way in which colonial authority both depended on and produced orientalist knowledge, remains foundational (Said, 1979).

Homi K. Bhabha's critique of Said extended this analysis by insisting on the inherent instability, or ambivalence, of colonial discourse. For Bhabha, the colonial project was not the monolithic, self-confident enterprise that Said's account sometimes implied, but a formation riddled with anxiety, the coloniser's simultaneous desire to assimilate the colonised and to maintain difference from them, to fix the colonised in a stable identity and to remain permanently uncertain whether that fixity had been achieved. This ambivalence, Bhabha argued, opened the colonised to forms of mimicry and resistance that

undermined the colonial project from within (Bhabha, 1994). The concept proves particularly generative for the Baloch case, where British colonial texts display precisely this oscillation between a desire to definitively characterise Baloch identity and a recurring failure to achieve stable characterisation.

Partha Chatterjee's contribution lies in his analysis of the postcolonial condition, specifically, his argument that postcolonial nationalist movements, while presenting themselves as ruptures from the colonial order, were in crucial respects "derivative discourses" that reproduced the conceptual frameworks of Western modular nationalism (Chatterjee, 1993). His concept of the rule of colonial difference, the way in which colonial authority, particularly after 1857, maintained itself by constructing the colonised as fundamentally and irremediably different from the coloniser, unready for the liberal freedoms the coloniser claimed to embody, provides a powerful analytical tool for understanding both the British discourse on Balochistan and its continuation in Pakistan's postcolonial state narrative.

2.3 Frontier Governmentality and the Spatial Production of Identity

A further theoretical resource of particular value for the Baloch case is Benjamin D. Hopkins's concept of frontier governmentality, the specific rationality through which modern states, first colonial and later postcolonial, have governed the populations of their peripheral territories. Hopkins argues that frontiers are not simply geographical facts but temporal and political constructs: "not static but rather dynamic, changing location and meaning" as the ambitions and capacities of governing powers shift (Hopkins, 2020, p. 17). Frontier governmentality names the ensemble of techniques through which colonial and postcolonial states have simultaneously produced frontier territories as zones of exception, spaces where ordinary laws and rights do not apply, and the people who inhabit them as objects of a specifically condescending form of power.

In the British Indian context, frontier governmentality found its institutional expression in the Frontier Crimes Regulations of 1876, which applied a parallel juridical regime to the tribal areas of the North-West, including Balochistan, excluding their populations from the ordinary civil and criminal law available to other British subjects. The persistence of this framework in postcolonial Pakistan, where variants of frontier regulations remained in force in Balochistan for decades after 1947, illustrates the theoretical point that the postcolonial state did not simply inherit colonial institutions but reproduced the colonial rationality that made them seem natural and necessary. Identity, in this framework, is not merely discursively produced but spatially and juridically inscribed: to be Baloch in both colonial and postcolonial Pakistan has been, among other things, to occupy a frontier, to be governed through exception rather than through the normal mechanisms of citizenship.

3. The Pre-Colonial Archive: Greek, Persian, and Arab Discourses on Balochistan

3.1 The Greek Episteme and the Civilised Centre/Uncivilised Frontier

The earliest textual records of the territory now called Balochistan emerge from the Greek and Macedonian accounts of Alexander the Great's campaigns, particularly his ill-fated march through the Gedrosphian desert, modern Makran, in 325 BCE. These accounts, preserved principally in Arrian's Anabasis Alexandri and Strabo's Geography, are not simply military or geographical documents: they are discursive events that constructed both a territory and its inhabitants within a specific epistemological framework.

The Greeks organised their understanding of the known world around the opposition between the polis, the city-state, the site of civilisation, law, and rational governance, and the barbarian periphery, inhabited by peoples who lacked the linguistic, institutional, and cultural attributes that defined civilised existence. The term barbaroi, from which "barbarian" derives, initially designated simply those who did not speak Greek; but the semantic field quickly expanded to encompass a range of deficiencies: nomadism instead of settled agriculture, tribal organisation instead of civic government, violence and plunder instead of commerce and law.

Arrian's account of the Gedrosphian march exemplifies this framework. The Arabitians flee into the desert rather than submit to Alexander; the Oritians resist by force and are subjugated. The Ichthyophagi, the fish-eating coastal dwellers described by Diodorus and other sources following Megasthenes, are depicted in terms that explicitly refuse them the markers of humanity: naked, having women and children "in common like their flocks," living in huts built from whale-bones, armed with fire-hardened stakes, and resembling "monkeys more than men" (Diodorus, 1967, p. 123). These descriptions operate not merely as ethnographic observations but as discursive productions: they constitute the people of Gedroshia as the antithesis of civilised humanity, and in doing so, they simultaneously produce the identity of the Greeks as civilised.

What is theoretically significant about this founding moment is its consequential longevity. As subsequent sections will demonstrate, the same fundamental dichotomy, civilised centre versus uncivilised frontier, settled cultivation versus nomadic pastoralism, law versus violence, recurs in Persian, Arab, British, and Pakistani representations of Balochistan with a consistency that cannot be explained by independent observation. The Greek archive did not merely describe Balochistan: it established the discursive conditions within which Balochistan would continue to be described for more than two millennia.

3.2 Persian Discourse: Ferdowsi's Shahnama and the Continuation of Greek Episteme

The Persian discursive tradition on Balochistan exhibits both its debts to the Greek episteme and its distinctive elaborations of it. Ferdowsi's Shahnama (c. 1010 CE), the foundational epic of Persian literary culture, occupies a pivotal position in this genealogy. In the Shahnama's mythological sections, the Baloch appear as warriors fighting alongside Kuch under various Persian commanders against Turanian enemies, a representation that simultaneously acknowledges Baloch martial capacity and positions them as subordinate auxiliaries of the Persian imperial order. In the historical sections, the Baloch appear as predatory adversaries: plunderers of Persian subjects whom Khosrow Anushirvan must subjugate through force, analogised explicitly to Alexander's Gedrosphian campaign (Badalkhan, 2013).

The structural parallel between the Greek and Persian representations is not coincidental. Halia Manteghi Amin's (2016) research on the Alexander Romance tradition demonstrates the extent to which Persian historiography absorbed and reworked Greek accounts of Alexander, positioning itself as the legitimate heir of the Hellenistic tradition. The archive, in Foucault's sense, the set of discursive mechanisms that constrain what can be said, in what form, about a given object, operated across linguistic and imperial boundaries, ensuring that the civilised centre/uncivilised frontier dichotomy was reproduced in new cultural idioms while its fundamental structure remained intact.

Brian Spooner's anthropological research adds a further dimension to Persian discourse on Balochistan by tracing the constitutive role of the Iranian Qajar dynasty (1794–1925) in defining the territorial and political parameters of Baloch identity. In Spooner's analysis, the external pressures exerted by Qajar imperial expansion on the Balochistan borderlands forced the region's heterogeneous tribal populations into a heightened consciousness of their collective difference from surrounding powers, a difference crystallised around the term "Baloch" and the social structures associated with it (Spooner, 1992). This argument, which locates the consolidation of a distinctively Baloch identity in the dynamic between external imperial pressure and internal tribal organisation, anticipates central themes of the later anthropological literature.

3.3 Arab Geographical and Historical Discourse: Contradiction and the Limits of Imperial Knowledge

The Arab conquest of Persia in the seventh century CE brought the forces of the nascent Islamic empire into direct contact with the territories and populations of Makran and Balochistan. The resulting body of Arab

geographical and historical writing on the region offers a particularly instructive case study in the internal contradictions of imperial discourse.

On the one hand, the mainstream of Arab historical writing follows the civilised centre/uncivilised frontier framework with remarkable fidelity to its Greek and Persian predecessors. Ahmad ibn Yahya al-Baladhuri's Kitab Futuh al-Buldan (ninth century CE) presents Makran as a borderland defined by poverty, danger, and the absence of the economic and civic attributes of the Arab imperial centre. The legendary exchange attributed to the second caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab, in which a scout describes Makran as "a land of undulating plains, with only drops of water and poor dates", captures the discourse's characteristic gesture: the reduction of a complex territory to a set of deficiencies that simultaneously justify the imperial centre's superiority and its territorial claims (Al-Baladhuri, 1986).

On the other hand, Arab geographical writing contains counter-currents that significantly complicate this picture. Valeria Fiorani Piacentini's (1996) research on Arab accounts of Makran reveals a body of textual evidence describing the coastal city of Kech (Kich/Kaj) as a prosperous commercial centre that "equalled in size and splendour the most important and renowned cities of Sind" at the time of the Arab conquest. Ibn Hawqal's Surat al-Ard presents a pastoral, peaceable image of the Baloch that sits in tension with the dominant representation of them as predatory bandits. And the Arab geographers' racial taxonomy of the region, which distinguished between "Qufs" (Brahui speakers, characterised as Semitic Arabs) and "Baloch" (characterised as Aryan Kurds), introduced a further layer of classificatory complexity that neither the Greek nor Persian traditions had generated.

These contradictions within Arab discourse are precisely what Bhabha's concept of colonial ambivalence would predict. A discourse organised around the desire to fix the identity of its Others, to produce stable, governable knowledge about frontier populations, will always exceed and undermine its own intentions, because the anxiety that drives the fixing project also generates the epistemic instability that defeats it. For the present argument, the significance of Arab discourse lies not in any particular claim it makes about Balochistan but in the demonstration that the civilised centre/uncivilised frontier framework was already internally contradictory before it was taken up and institutionalised by British colonialism.

4. British Colonial Discourse and the Institutionalisation of Baloch Identity

4.1 The Knowledge Project: Pottinger, Masson, and the Construction of the Colonial Archive

British engagement with Balochistan began in earnest in the early nineteenth century, driven initially by the strategic imperatives of the Great Game, the imperial competition between Britain and Russia for influence across Central Asia. The dispatch of agents such as Henry Pottinger and Charles Christie to explore the territory in 1810, disguised as Muslim traders, represents the opening moment of a systematic knowledge project that would, over the course of the century, produce the comprehensive colonial archive on which subsequent governance was based.

Pottinger's Travels in Beloochistan and Sind (1816) stands as the founding document of British colonial discourse on Balochistan. Its significance lies not only in the geographical and ethnographic information it assembled but in the discursive framework within which that information was organised. As Spooner (2019) notes, Pottinger came to the task already equipped with an education steeped in Greek and Latin classics, and his account draws explicitly on Alexander's Gedrosphian campaign as both a historical precedent and a rhetorical touchstone. The representation of Balochistan as a frontier zone beyond the reach of civilization, where three "principal" Baloch tribes combine martial courage with lawlessness, and where Brahui tribes exercise "despotic authority" unconstrained by any higher law, reproduces the Greek/Persian epistemological framework in a new imperial idiom.

Charles Masson's Narrative of Various Journeys in Balochistan, Afghanistan, the Panjab, and Kalat (1844) extended Pottinger's account and deepened

its classificatory ambitions, introducing elaborate typologies of Baloch tribal character, "predatory," "violent," "lawless", that would become the standard vocabulary of subsequent colonial administration. T. Postans applied these categories to the Baloch of Sindh with equal confidence, presenting Baloch mountain dwellers as "ignorant, wild, indolent, and insolent" and their women as slaves (Postans, 1843, pp. 47–48). What is notable across this literature is the combination of first-hand observation and prior-determined conclusion: each colonial observer arrived in Balochistan already knowing what kind of people they would find there, because the discursive archive had already established the categories within which any observation would be interpreted.

Said's concept of Orientalism provides the most economical theoretical account of this process. The colonial knowledge project on Balochistan did not simply describe a pre-existing population but constituted a discursive object, "the Baloch", whose characteristics were determined in advance by the epistemological framework the colonial observer brought to the encounter. The practical consequence was that the colonial archive became a self-confirming system: evidence that contradicted the framework was either assimilated to it or ignored, while evidence that confirmed it was amplified and systematised.

4.2 Jacob, Sandeman, and the Institutionalisation of Frontier Governmentality

The intellectual framework consolidated by Pottinger, Masson, and their contemporaries was translated into institutional form through the administrative careers of John Jacob in Sindh and Robert Sandeman in Balochistan. Their contrasting approaches to Baloch governance, Jacob's "Close Border Policy" and Sandeman's "Forward Policy", represent two competing strategies within a shared discursive framework rather than fundamentally different conceptions of the Baloch.

Jacob's approach, as articulated in his various military and administrative writings, combined a frank recognition of Baloch martial qualities with a confident programme of civilisational transformation. The Baloch were, in his analysis, uncivilised and lawless because they were nomadic and pastoral, their economic structure determined their moral character, and the corrective was to settle them in agricultural communities and subject them to the rule of law. The failure of this programme, repeatedly documented in the historical record, did not prompt a revision of the underlying assumptions but only a justification for the use of greater coercive force.

Sandeman's approach was procedurally different but structurally similar. Rather than attempting to transform Baloch society, Sandeman worked through the tribal structure, empowering Sardars (tribal chiefs) to police their own populations under British supervision. This approach, which Hopkins identifies as a classic instance of "frontier governmentality", reproduced and strengthened the tribal categories of colonial classification by making them the administrative units of colonial governance. The Sardar became simultaneously a Baloch tribal institution and a colonial administrative officer; Baloch tribal identity became simultaneously a cultural formation and a juridical category.

The significance of this administrative history for identity formation is considerable. The Sandeman system, by empowering and institutionalising tribal leadership, created the conditions for a form of Baloch identity organised around loyalty to the tribe and deference to its chief, a form of identity that was simultaneously presented by colonial observers as primordially Baloch and was, in fact, a colonial construction. The anthropological literature's subsequent debate about whether Baloch tribal identity is a colonial invention or a pre-colonial formation that colonialism merely adapted is thus, in an important sense, a debate produced by the institutional legacy of the Sandeman system itself.

5. Postcolonial Discourses: State, Nationalists, and Anthropologists

5.1 The Pakistani State and the Reproduction of Colonial Discourse

The accession of the princely states of Balochistan to Pakistan in 1947, contested in the case of Kalat and never fully accepted by significant segments of

Baloch political opinion, initiated the third major phase of state-based discourse on Baloch identity. The Pakistani state's approach to Balochistan has combined elements that scholars have described as both continuous with and discontinuous from the British colonial framework.

The continuities are extensive. Pakistan inherited and preserved the administrative structure of the former British Balochistan, including its status as a directly governed territory answerable to the federal centre rather than a fully self-governing province. The Frontier Crimes Regulations, the colonial instrument that applied a separate and inferior juridical regime to tribal areas, remained in operation in significant parts of Balochistan for decades after independence. The conceptual vocabulary through which Pakistani state officials, media, and development institutions characterised Balochistan, as remote, underdeveloped, tribal, backward, was borrowed almost without modification from the colonial archive (Titus, 1998; Swidler, 2014). The discourse of development, which became the postcolonial state's primary justification for its administrative and military interventions in Balochistan, reproduced the colonial civilising mission's fundamental structure: Balochistan is deficient; the state brings progress; resistance to state intervention is the irrationality of a tribal population that cannot understand its own interests.

The discontinuities are also real, however, and theoretically important. The Pakistani state's approach to Balochistan has not been consistently exclusionary but alternately and sometimes simultaneously exclusionary and inclusionary, seeking to incorporate the Baloch into a Pakistani national identity while simultaneously treating Balochistan as a frontier zone requiring special administrative arrangements. This oscillation between inclusion and exclusion, between civic nationalism and ethnic or religious hierarchy, is precisely the "contradiction within postcolonial state policies" that Bhabha's ambivalence framework would predict: a state that has never been confident enough in its own identity to offer secure inclusion to its peripheral populations, and not authoritarian enough to impose submission without generating permanent resistance.

5.2 Baloch Nationalist Discourse: Primordialism, Counter-Discourse, and Internal Contradictions

Baloch nationalist discourse emerged in its recognisably modern form in the colonial period, when educated Baloch encountering the nationalist movements of the Indian National Congress and the socialist internationalism of the Soviet Union developed a political vocabulary for articulating Baloch claims against both British colonial rule and the prospect of absorption into a Hindu- or Muslim-majority successor state. That vocabulary was, from the outset, shaped by the discursive materials the colonial archive had provided, a point that creates a fundamental tension at the heart of Baloch nationalist thought. The early nationalist scholars, figures such as Muhammad Sardar Khan Baloch, followed the colonial discourse's racial taxonomy in defining Baloch identity through the criterion of Semitic origin and common linguistic descent. Others followed the alternative colonial hypothesis of Aryan origin. Still others located Baloch origins in the Arabian Peninsula or in the region between the Caspian Sea and Lake Van. This proliferation of origin myths, far from confirming the primordialist premise of a stable and ancient Baloch identity, illustrates its opposite: that the identity whose antiquity is being asserted is itself a discursive construction whose content is perpetually contested.

The most important theoretical division within Baloch nationalist discourse concerns the relationship between tribal, ethnic, and national identity. The dominant strand of Baloch nationalism treats these categories as continuous expressions of a single primordial identity: Baloch tribal confederacies, the Rind-Lashar of the fifteenth century, the Khanate of Kalat in its various phases, are presented as proto-national formations that expressed a Baloch national consciousness centuries before the modern nation-state system gave that consciousness its contemporary political form. The Khanate of Kalat, in this account, is the Baloch state, and its

accession to Pakistan was an annexation that violated both international treaty law and the right of nations to self-determination.

Against this, the anti-Sardar current within Baloch nationalism, associated with the progressive, leftist movements that became prominent after 1968, developed a class-based critique of tribalism as an obstacle to Baloch liberation rather than its foundation. For this current, the tribal chiefs and their colonial-era empowerment represented not the authentic expression of Baloch identity but its distortion by colonial and postcolonial manipulation. This internal debate, which mirrors the broader theoretical dispute between primordialist and constructivist accounts of national identity, remains unresolved within Baloch nationalism and contributes to its inability to consolidate a unified political programme.

5.3 Anthropological Discourse: Constructivism, Fluid Identity, and Epistemic Complicity

The anthropological literature on Balochistan constitutes the third major postcolonial discourse on Baloch identity, and its relationship with both the state and nationalist discourses is characterised by productive tension and inadvertent complicity. Anthropologists have made the most sustained contribution to theorising Baloch identity as a historical construction rather than a primordial given, and the ethnographic richness of their work has provided indispensable empirical grounding for theoretical debates that might otherwise remain abstract.

The foundational contributions come from Fredrik Barth's analysis of Baloch-Pathan ethnic boundaries, Brian Spooner's work on Baloch identity in the context of Iranian imperial history, and Philip Salzman's research on the relationship between nomadic and settled populations in Makran. Barth's argument that Baloch ethnic identity is defined not by cultural content but by the social processes of boundary maintenance, processes that include and assimilate non-Baloch members while excluding others, challenged the primordialist assumption of a fixed, inherited Baloch ethnicity and provided a model of ethnic identity as dynamic and relational (Barth, 1981). Spooner's research on the Qajar dynasty's role in crystallising Baloch identity, and his application of Ibn Khaldun's asabiyya theory to the relationship between nomadic and settled Baloch in Makran, offered a sophisticated account of how internal social dynamics interact with external imperial pressure to produce ethnic consciousness (Spooner, 1992; 2013).

Nina Swidler's concept of "remote colonialism", the argument that Balochistan's topological and economic marginality from both the colonial and postcolonial centres produced a distinctive form of identity organised around that very remoteness, is perhaps the most theoretically ambitious attempt to account for the specific character of Baloch identity formation within a constructivist framework (Swidler, 2014). Her identification of the parodic relationship between anthropological and nationalist discourse, each dismantling the other's theoretical foundations while remaining unable to escape its own dependence on colonial conceptual frameworks, captures a central feature of the field that the present analysis seeks to theorise more systematically.

The anthropological literature has, however, attracted a serious challenge from within postcolonial studies: the charge of epistemic complicity with the colonial and postcolonial state's discourse on Balochistan. Fouzieyha Towghi's research demonstrates that the anthropological characterisation of Balochistan as remote, tribal, and traditional, however sympathetically intended, reproduces the colonial discourse's fundamental categories and thereby provides inadvertent epistemological support for the postcolonial state's exclusionary policies and development rhetoric (Towghi, 2007). This critique does not invalidate anthropological scholarship but it does highlight the extent to which even the most reflexive knowledge production about Balochistan remains embedded within the discursive archive it seeks to analyse.

6. Discussion: Why No Discourse Has Fixed a Baloch Identity

The foregoing analysis supports a theoretical conclusion that has significant implications for how scholars approach Baloch identity politics: the failure to produce a fixed, unified Baloch

identity is not a contingent failure, the result of insufficient information, inadequate policy, or unresolved political disputes, but a structural feature of the discursive field within which Baloch identity has been contested.

Each dominant discourse, Greek, Persian, Arab, British, Pakistani state, has been animated by the desire to fix the identity of the Baloch: to produce stable knowledge about who they are, where they come from, and what their relationship to the governing centre should be. This desire is inseparable from the exercise of power: to name and classify a population is a prerequisite for governing it, and the instability of classification is correspondingly experienced as a threat to governmental rationality. Yet each attempt at fixation has generated its own contradictions, because the anxiety that drives the project, the coloniser's ambivalence about the colonial Other, in Bhabha's formulation, inevitably produces inconsistency, contradiction, and excess.

The Baloch have not been passive objects of these discursive constructions. Nationalist discourse represents their most sustained attempt to contest the terms on which their identity has been defined by external powers, to substitute a self-authored account of Baloch history and identity for the archive of external representations. Yet even this counter-discourse, as the analysis has shown, remains partially captured by the conceptual framework it opposes: the primordialist nationalism of the Baloch independence movement reproduces the colonial discourse's essentialisation of Baloch identity even as it inverts its political valence.

The practical implication of this analysis is that neither the Pakistani state's development discourse, which implicitly promises to resolve the "Baloch question" through economic integration and provincial uplift, nor the Baloch nationalist discourse of primordial nationhood and self-determination can provide a stable foundation for political resolution, because both remain structured by the civilised centre/uncivilised frontier opposition that has organised the discursive field for more than two millennia. A genuinely new politics of Baloch identity would require not merely a change of policy but a transformation of the conceptual vocabulary through which Baloch, Balochistan, and their relationship to the Pakistani state are imagined and articulated.

7. Conclusion

This article has argued that Baloch tribal, ethnic, and national identity is best understood as the product of a historically layered, internally contradictory, and politically contested ensemble of heterogeneous discourses, from Greek geographical writing through Persian epics, Arab historiographical tradition, British colonial knowledge production, postcolonial state narrative, and the competing discourses of Baloch nationalists and Western anthropologists. The key theoretical claim is that no single state, institution, or historical period can be identified as the origin of Baloch identity, because the discursive field within which that identity has been constituted extends across millennia and encompasses multiple imperial, colonial, and postcolonial formations.

The organising opposition of this field, the civilised centre versus the uncivilised frontier, is remarkably durable, appearing with consistent structural features in discourses that differ radically in language, cultural context, and political purpose. Its durability is not the product of its truth or accuracy but of its functional utility for governing power: it provides a justification for conquest, a rationale for exclusion, and a framework for the civilising mission that has justified state intervention in Balochistan across successive regimes. The failure of each discourse to fix a stable Baloch identity, the internal contradictions and ambivalences that undermine each attempt at definitive characterization, is the predictable consequence of the anxiety with which powerful states have always approached their unruly frontiers.

Three contributions stand out. First, the heterogeneous discourse framework proposed here enables a more adequate historical account of Baloch identity formation than either nationalist primordialism or postcolonial constructivism can provide, because it takes seriously the pre-colonial dimensions of the discursive field without

collapsing into essentialism. Second, the framework has methodological implications for scholars of Balochistan: research that draws on the nationalist or anthropological literature without critically examining the colonial conceptual frameworks embedded within it risks reproducing the very discourse it seeks to analyse. Third, and most practically, the analysis suggests that resolution of the contemporary Baloch political conflict will require not merely material redistribution or constitutional renegotiation but a discursive transformation, a willingness, on the part of both the Pakistani state and Baloch political movements, to conceptualise their relationship in terms that have not been pre-scripted by two thousand years of civilised-centre/uncivilised-frontier discourse.

These are large tasks. But identifying them clearly is, at minimum, a necessary first step.

References

Anderson, B. (2006). Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism. Verso.

Axmann, M. (2009). Back to the future: The Khanate of Kalat and the genesis of Baloch nationalism, 1915–1955. Oxford University Press.

Badalkhan, S. (2013). Two essays on Baloch history and folklore. Università degli Studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale'.

Barth, F. (1981). Ethnic processes on the Pathan-Baluch boundary. In Features of person and society in Swat: Collected essays on Pathans (Vol. 2). Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Bayly, C. A. (1999). Empire and information: Intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780–1870. Cambridge University Press.

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). The location of culture. Routledge.

Bruce, R. I. (1900). The forward policy and its results. Longmans, Green.

Chatterjee, P. (1993a). The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories. Princeton University Press.

Chatterjee, P. (1993b). Nationalist thought and the colonial world: A derivative discourse. Zed Books.

Dashti, N. (2012). The Baloch and Balochistan: A historical account from the beginning to the fall of the Baloch state. Trafford Publishing.

Foucault, M. (2003). 'Society must be defended': Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76 (D. Macey, Trans.). Picador.

Guha, R. (1997). Dominance without hegemony: History and power in colonial India. Harvard University Press.

Hopkins, B. D. (2020). Ruling the savage periphery: Frontier governance and the making of the modern state. Harvard University Press.

Ichijo, A., & Uzelac, G. (Eds.). (2005). When is the nation? Towards an understanding of theories of nationalism. Routledge.

Jamali, H. A. (2014). A harbor in the tempest: Megaprojects, identity, and the politics of place in Gwadar, Pakistan [Doctoral dissertation, University of Texas].

Lambrick, H. T. (1975). John Jacob of Jacobabad. Oxford University Press.

Masson, C. (1844). Narrative of various journeys in Balochistan, Afghanistan, the Panjab, and Kalat (Vol. 4). Richard Bentley.

Mills, S. (1997). Discourse. Routledge.

Mills, S. (2003). Michel Foucault. Routledge.

Noraiee, H. (Year). The Baloch nationalism in Pakistan. [Journal/source as cited in thesis].

Ozkirimli, U. (2000). Theories of nationalism: A critical introduction. Macmillan.

Piacentini, V. F. (1996). Traces of early Muslim presence in Makran. Islamic Studies, 35(2), 119–145.

Pottinger, H. (1816). Travels in Beloochistan and Sind. Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown.

Said, E. W. (1979). Orientalism. Vintage Books.

Salzman, P. C. (2008). Politics and change among the Baluch in Iran. Middle East Papers, 2, 1–25.

Scholz, F. (2002). Nomadism and colonialism: A hundred years of Baluchistan, 1872–1972. Oxford University Press.

Scott, D. (1999). Refashioning futures: Criticism after postcoloniality. Princeton University Press.

Sheikh, S. R. (2018). The genesis of Baloch nationalism: Politics and ethnicity in Pakistan, 1947–1977. Routledge.

Smith, A. D. (1991). National identity. Penguin Books.

Spooner, B. (1992). Who are the Baloch? A preliminary investigation into the dynamics of an ethnic identity from Qajar Iran. In C. E. Bosworth & C. Hillenbrand (Eds.), Qajar Iran: Political, social, and cultural change, 1800–1925 (pp. 93–110). Mazda Publishers.

Spooner, B. (2013). Investment and translocality: Recontextualizing the Baloch in Islamic and global history. Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, 14, 1–25.

Spooner, B. (2019). Lieutenant Henry Pottinger and 150 years of Baloch history. In S. M. Hanifi (Ed.), Mountstuart Elphinstone in South Asia: Pioneer of British colonial rule. Oxford University Press.

Swidler, N. (1996). Beyond parody: Ethnography engages nationalist discourse. In P. Titus (Ed.), Marginality and modernity: Ethnicity and change in post-colonial Balochistan. Oxford University Press.

Swidler, N. (2014). Remotely colonial: History and politics in Balochistan. Oxford University Press.

Thornton, T. H. (1885). Colonel Sir Robert Sandeman: His life and work on our Indian frontier. John Murray.

Titus, P. (1998). Honor the Baloch, buy the Pashtun: Stereotypes, social organization, and history in western Pakistan. Modern Asian Studies, 32(3), 657–687.

Towghi, F. (2007). Scales of marginalities: Transformations in women's bodies, medicines, and land in postcolonial Balochistan, Pakistan [Doctoral dissertation, University of California].

Young, R. J. C. (2004). White mythologies. Routledge.

Zeb, R. (2020). Ethno-political conflict in Pakistan: The Baloch movement. Routledge.