



# A postcolonial perspective on cultural identity: the Balti people “of” Pakistan

Balti people  
“of” Pakistan

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Estelle Dryland

*Department of Anthropology, Macquarie University, North Ryde,  
Australia, and*

Jawad Syed

*Kent Business School, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The aim of this paper is to explore issues of cultural identity of the people of Baltistan and any challenges they face in the nation state of Pakistan.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper uses a postcolonial lens to offer a review and synthesis of issues of cultural identity of the Balti people of Pakistan.

**Findings** – The review demonstrates how the historical and socio-political context is intertwined with the Balti people’s cultural identity which remains hybrid as well as contextual in its construction. It reveals that while the state of Pakistan has been able to assert its control over the Balti people and the region of Baltistan predominantly through military means, the critical issues of cultural pluralism and the basic human rights of the Balti people have remained generally ignored throughout the 63 years since partition.

**Research limitations/implications** – The contentions offered in this paper need to be refined through in-depth empirical studies. Future scholars may wish to examine the class and cultural politics at work in the emerging renaissance movement in Baltistan. Scholars may also examine how the lack of economic development and investment in Baltistan may be forcing the Balti people to resign (at least some elements of) their cultural identity to seek employment in urban areas of Pakistan.

**Originality/value** – The paper brings to the fore issues of cultural identity of the people of Baltistan, which have – to a large extent – remained ignored by Pakistan as well as internationally.

**Keywords** Culture, Ethnic groups, Pakistan

**Paper type** General review

spyanku mi ltogs pa, lu-rzi mi thserba

[A Balti proverb: Wolf not hungry, shepherd not miss.] (Hasni, 2004).

## Introduction

It is now increasingly recognised that identity becomes somewhat salient “when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty” (Mercer, 1990, p. 43). The breakup or re-emergence of old identities and the forging of new, hybrid identities are frequently seen not only as defining features of postcolonial societies but also as among the driving forces of change, particularly in the context of “ethnic” conflicts in various nation states (Barker *et al.*, 1996; Bhabha, 1994, 1996; Desai and Nair, 2005; Keegan, 1993; Spohn, 2003).

Previous research has highlighted how postcolonial nation building in many countries and continents has followed an uneasy trajectory characterised by unfulfilled



aspirations, subdued identity assertions and conflicting notions of national authenticity and purity. For example, Krishna (1999) explores the tensions between nation building and ethnic identity through the prism of ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka and the self-confessionary hegemonic role played by India. Blanton *et al.* (2001) examine issues of ethnicity, conflict and war in postcolonial Africa, highlighting the continued role of a British colonial legacy in the prevailing ethnic conflicts.

This paper uses a postcolonial lens to review and highlight issues and challenges of cultural identity facing a relatively unknown ethnic group, i.e. the Balti people in the nation state of Pakistan. While the British colonisation of the South Asian subcontinent formally ended in 1947, we argue that the treatment of the people of Baltistan in the post-1947 nation state of Pakistan is tantamount to a continued state of their colonisation albeit with some differences in the form and nature of colonisation.

According to Young (1998), one characteristic aspect of postcolonial scholarship is its attention to historical and political context and its focus on individual consciousness and experience. We use postcolonial theory because of its attention to issues of identity and ethnicity and also because of its consideration of the colonised's creative resistance to the coloniser (Maxwell, 1994; Said, 1989). Our aim here is to understand the complex and emerging interplay of the Balti people's (the colonised) identity and its suppression in a (not yet) postcolonial context, i.e. the nation state of Pakistan (the coloniser).

The paper takes into account that despite recent protestations by Pakistan that it has "not annexed" the "disputed territory", i.e. "Northern Areas 'of Pakistan" (recently renamed Gilgit-Baltistan by the Federal Government of Pakistan in 2009)[1], a process of annexation and assimilation is in fact proceeding steadily, seemingly without question from the outside world (Nicholson, 2007). At the same time, as claiming that it cannot give the peoples of the Northern Areas their constitutional rights because they are not part of Pakistan, Pakistan (or currently the Pakistan Army) has effectively taken control of these areas without a single shot being fired (Schofield, 2001).

Several sources of information were used in the current review, including research articles (the few addressing this topic), newspaper reports, political analyses and reports by international organisations. While this is a review article, it may be noted that the first author (hereon referred to as the FA), a Caucasian female anthropologist working at a university in Sydney, spent considerable time (18 months) over a period of nine years (1999-2007) in the Northern Areas as a part of her study of various aspects of the Balti people's culture and identity (including four months at the Baltistan Cultural Centre, Skardu, compiling and editing a taped version of the Tibetan *Kesar* epic in 2000). Given that at least some of the media reports and political analyses of or related to this topic may have a political bias (e.g. based on Pakistani or Indian versions), the FA's personal experiences and observations in the region were helpful in corroborating the contentions offered in this review. Employing a postcolonial perspective, this paper's focus is upon identifying common themes of identity and culture in the available literature on Baltistan and the Balti people.

The paper is structured as follows: the next two sections offer postcolonial insights and discuss the need to apply a postcolonial approach in order to understand the complex socio-cultural challenges that the Balti people face in Pakistan. This is followed by a review of the different phases of colonisation experienced by the peoples of this area. In the ensuing section, the paper discusses how the politics of colonial domination has

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persisted in the area resulting in a loss of the Balti people's rights to self-determination and self-administration.

### **Postcolonial insights**

Postcolonialism is a post-modern discourse that consists of reactions to, and analyses of, the cultural legacy of colonialism. In particular, it aims at combating the residual effects of colonialism on cultures. Postcolonial thinkers (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988) recognise that many of the assumptions which earlier underlay colonialism are still active forces today, and that exposing and deconstructing the ethnocentric, racist and imperialist nature of such assumptions may be useful to weaken their power of persuasion, coercion and oppression.

A particular feature of postcolonialism is its ability to deal with cultural identity in colonised societies: the dilemmas of developing a national (or cultural) identity after colonial rule and the ways in which identity is constructed and celebrated (often reclaiming it from and maintaining strong connections with the coloniser) (Maxwell, 1994; Said, 1989).

Gilbert and Tompkins (1996) maintain that postcolonialism, rather than being a naive teleological sequence which supersedes colonialism, is an engagement with – and contestation of – colonialism's power structures, discourse and social hierarchies. A theory of postcolonialism is, therefore, much more than a merely chronological construction of post-independence or a discursive experience of imperialism. It is worth noting that postcolonialism is not just about colonised societies: postcolonial studies also address issues such as migration, equality, diversity and cultural rights (Appiah, 2007; Desai and Nair, 2005).

A key goal of postcolonial theorists is creating space for multiple voices. This is especially true of those voices (subalterns) that have been previously silenced by dominant ideologies (Spivak, 1988). However, it is now widely recognised that such space for multiple voices must first be created within academic scholarship. Said (1978) provides a picture of the ways in which social scientists may disregard the views of the subaltern.

Bhabha (1996) argues that a new hybrid identity emerges from the interweaving of elements of the coloniser and colonised challenging the validity and authenticity of any essentialist cultural identity. Hybridity is positioned as antidote to essentialism or “the belief in invariable and fixed properties which define the ‘whatness’ of a given entity” (Fuss, 1991, p. xi). However, recognising the problematic nature of the postcolonial project, Spivak (1988) notes that recovery and presentation of a subaltern voice may essentialise its message, negating the subaltern masses' heterogeneity. She suggests that “strategic essentialism” – speaking on behalf of a group while using a clear image of identity to fight opposition – may be a solution to this problem. We now explain our rationale for using postcolonial theory in the present paper.

### **Why the postcolonial concern for the Northern Areas?**

While the international spotlight falls invariably upon the Indian control of Jammu province and its linguistic and cultural heritage and the Vale of Kashmir (Bhatt, 2003), somewhat curiously one-third of the State of Jammu and Kashmir – the Northern Areas – lies forgotten. Today, the Gilgit-Baltistan areas, together totalling approximately 72,500 square kilometres[2] and with an estimated population of one

million, continue to be disputed territory, considered by some a third province of the Jammu and Kashmir state, the other two being the Muslim majority Kashmir valley and the Jammu province, ancestral home of the Rajput Dogras (Figure 1).

The geographical as well as cultural identity of the Northern Areas, including Baltistan, is inscribed by a successive series of colonial and postcolonial events with little distinction drawn between when the colonial period ended and the postcolonial commenced. As Gilbert and Tompkins (1996) note, the term “postcolonialism” is generally misunderstood as a temporal concept, meaning the time after colonialism ceased or the time following the politically determined date on which a country broke away from its governance by another state. This description is particularly true of the peoples of Gilgit and Baltistan, who gained brief independence after more than a century of Kashmiri Dogra and British rule only to become subordinate to administration by post-independence Pakistani masters. In the words of Sökefeld (2005, p. 940):

Gilgit and the surrounding mountain country [including Baltistan] have been subjected to three different powers in the last 150 years: Kashmiri [Dogra], British and Pakistani. Instead of locating a uni- or multilineal transition from colonialism to the postcolonial, we discover only transition between specific relations and modes of domination and subalternity in the history of the Northern Areas.

The Northern Areas are administered by – but have never been fully integrated into – the nation state of Pakistan. In Pakistan’s 1973 Constitution, the country’s listed four provinces included Balochistan, the North West Frontier Province (now renamed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), Sindh and the Punjab. Included also were Islamabad (the nation’s capital) and the federally administered tribal areas. While Pakistan has an interest in the water and other natural resources of the region (Sarai, 2009), the Northern Areas are neither constitutionally nor geographically included in any one of these areas. Testimony to this non-inclusion was borne out by a court verdict handed down in Gilgit on Golden Jubilee Day 1998 (a celebration marking the establishment of Pakistan) exonerating disaffected locals’ burning of the flag of Pakistan on the grounds that the area is not part of Pakistan.



**Figure 1.**  
Map of Gilgit and  
Baltistan

**Source:** Adapted from Northern Areas Maps, available at:  
[www.northernareas.org.pk/MapAdmin.htm](http://www.northernareas.org.pk/MapAdmin.htm) (accessed 8 February 2008)

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By focusing our attention on the changing trajectories of colonisation in Baltistan, we seek to support the fundamental human rights of the Balti people, and, in pursuit of this, explore any challenges they face as adjuncts to the postcolonial nation state of Pakistan. We agree with Prakash (1992) and Young (2003) that colonialism does not necessarily operate through a simple dichotomy of colonisers versus colonised but is subverted by ambivalence and is continually in need of reconstruction. This certainly holds true for the Northern Areas of Pakistan where the dichotomy has become blurred by intertwining histories of domination (Sökefeld, 2005). The colonial trajectories in turn became somewhat indistinct in the post-1947 period due to the fact that the latest colonial master of this area is the Sunni Muslim majority state of Pakistan.

Although we acknowledge Bell's (2003, p. 73) assertion that there is no singular, irreducible, national narrative, no essentialist “national identity”, an assertion which is indeed valid in the multi-ethnic state of Pakistan, we nonetheless consider the fact that because of its very *raison d'être*, Pakistan's (Sunni) Islamic identity tends to subsume all other forms of identity and sub-identity (Syed, 2008b). The following section offers an historical account of the ongoing cycle of colonisation and postcolonisation experienced by the people of Baltistan.

### **Colonisation of the Northern Areas in an historical context**

The value of a postcolonial perspective is in the way that it forces us to pay attention to the complex interwoven strands of durable and multiple colonialisms and their continuing presence in identity politics. Therefore, while acknowledging some cultural connections between the people of Baltistan and Tibet, one may not ignore Tibetan imperialism, i.e. the process through which at least some of the contemporary representations of Baltistan depict romanticist associations with a “Greater Tibet”.

Baltistan and neighbouring Ladakh constituted a West Tibetan province up until the tenth century AD; in time, the Tibetan/Buddhist influence gradually weakened in the area culminating in several small chiefdoms. Around 1400 AD, a charismatic Muslim preacher (possibly named Syed Ali Hamadani) introduced Islam into the area (Hasnain, 2003; Maraini, 1961; Srinivas, 1998). As a result, the Baltis adopted a blend of Islam that included aspects of Noorbakhshi Sufism (a Sufi-oriented order found only in Iran and Baltistan) and Buddhism, a form of Islam vastly different from an Iranian-dominated version of Islam currently visible in Baltistan today.

Prior to the Rajput Dogra incursion in 1840, the Baltis were relatively independent, with each valley having its own ruling Raja family. Shigar valley, located 32 kilometres from the major town of Skardu, was ruled by the Amachas, who may originally have come from Khotan via Nagar, a subdivision of Gilgit: Khapulu (103 kms from Skardu) and Keris were ruled by the Yabgos, originally from Chinese Turkistan; the Khapulu family's origins were in Takharistan, an area of Balkh, Afghanistan (which, they say, was under Chinese rule at the time); members of the Maqpon dynasty[3] held sway over the remaining valleys (Kharmang, Skardu and Rondu)[4].

In truth, the Baltis have not enjoyed a trouble-free existence in recent history. Around 1840, Baltistan and Ladakh were occupied by oppressive Jammu Dogra forces, who exercised harsh control throughout the century that followed, virtually enslaving the peoples of the Northern Areas (Macdonald, 1996). Limitations *vis-a-vis* the length of the paper allow for only scant reference to Gulab Singh's rule over the areas of Jammu, Poonch, Ladakh and Baltistan in the 1840s (Lamb, 1966; Sökefeld, 2005). Singh accepted

British supremacy and the British right to control his foreign relations and in return was permitted to purchase the former Sikh province of Kashmir from the British. Singh's acquisition of the Vale of Kashmir marks the foundation of the State of Jammu and Kashmir (Lamb, 1966).

In 1909, while under Dogra control, Baltistan was part of the Ladakh Wazarat and this had ramifications for how it was administered (Filippi, 1912, p. 76). In 1935, the British leased Gilgit in the west and its surrounding areas from Maharajah Hari Singh[5] for 60 years so that the activities of the (then) Soviet Union could be kept under surveillance. Prior to leaving India in August 1947, the British announced that they were handing these territories back to the Jammu and Kashmir State.

As is well documented, following the partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947, the Hindu Maharaja of Kashmir acceded to India irrespective of the fact that many Muslims of the area strongly opposed his decision. Maharaja Hari Singh appointed a governor of Gilgit in July 1947 but, under the direction of the Gilgit Scouts[6] (who would later become the Northern Light Infantry), the locals revolted. On 1 November 1947, Governor Brigadier Ghandara Singh surrendered: a provisional governor was appointed who duly raised the Pakistan flag in Gilgit (Afridi, 1988; Dani, 2001).

Focus in the following section is primarily upon issues of cultural identity of the Balti people, with particular emphasis on diacritical features such as the people's demeanour, their linguistic and cultural heritage. As well, we address the challenges they have faced in the post-1947 era.

### **Issues of cultural identity of the Balti people**

As an "historical reservoir", culture is an important factor in shaping identity (Pratt, 2005). For the purposes of this paper, we treat cultural identity as a shared culture, a sort of collective "one true self" which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common (Hall, 1990). As earlier discussed, we are aware of the contended nature of identity in the postcolonial literature and consider that both perspectives (i.e. Bhabha's (1996) notion of hybridity describing the shifting and fluid nature of cultural identity, and Spivak's (1988) notion of "strategic essentialism", speaking on behalf of a group while using a clear image of identity to fight opposition) are useful for the purposes of the present research. We elaborate on this later in this paper.

While the original identity of the Balti people is lost in antiquity, there is speculation that they came from Central Mongolia, with some scholars suggesting that they are of Tartar origin. In order to characterise the people of Baltistan, one must explore the history that has made them the unique ethnic group they are today.

While de Cortanze, according to Filippi (1912), describes the Baltis as "of the Caucasian or white race", Vigne refers to them as a "mixed race, combining Mongol characteristics with the nobler features of the Indian or Persian". "Cunningham states that they are a branch of the Mongol race with features modified by climatic conditions and by mixture with the Indo-Caucasians of India". Drew draws comparisons with the Ladakhis, Biddulph acknowledges a strong element of Aryan blood through mixture with the Dards, and Neve confirms the Tibetan origin of the Baltis (cited in Filippi, 1912, p. 87). Filippi states further:

They are a mild [...] people, quite incapable of any sort of violence [...] [with a] natural sense of modesty and respect [...] They seem to be naturally polite, respectful and orderly (pp. 120 and 137)[7].



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Durand (1899/1977) described the Baltis as “a quiet inoffensive race”, who resemble the Tibetans in appearance, though a mixture of Dogra and Kashmiri blood is often noticeable. The innately dignified Balti people are generally of short to medium stature, with broad shoulders, dark brown hair and brown eyes. Their mode of dress emulates that of contemporary Pakistanis, i.e. the shalwar qameez. Each family owns its own home and land, the latter being ancestral. The houses are clustered together, invariably two storeyed, and traditionally constructed out of oblong handmade bricks made from a mixture of soil, sand and straw and trodden by foot[8].

The impact of more restrictive interpretations of Islam on the area today stands out in stark contrast when one considers Filippi’s description of cultural life in Shigar valley around 1900. He writes: “The afternoon was spent pleasantly in watching a lively match of polo and in listening to the orchestra, which played for dancing” (Filippi, 1912, p. 137). He also comments on the freedom afforded the Shigar valley women, saying that he frequently met them in the market place. One rarely sees women in the bazaar in Skardu today. Nowadays, Balti music is heard only at the ever-popular polo matches.

In Baltistan today, approximately 65 per cent of the total population is Shia, 30 per cent is Noorbakhshi and the remaining 5 per cent is Sunni (as well there are small numbers of Ahl-i-Hadith/Wahhabi) (Hasnain, 2006).

The Balti language, along with the language spoken in the Kargil (Purig) area and in certain areas of Amdo, represents the most archaic of Tibetan dialects[9]. Language use varies from valley to valley; for example, Kharmang valley speakers use the term *hrkilla* (centre) as opposed to *skilla* used by Skardu, Khapulu and Shigar valley speakers. In the Kharmang valley, the Balti language shows a particularly marked Tibetan influence due to the valley’s close proximity to Ladakh[10]. However, today, with the government-directed influx of Pathans and Punjabis into Baltistan, Pashto and the Arabo-Persianised Urdu language[11] are now spoken alongside Balti. English is spoken by the few who are educated (mainly men).

Although Urdu is the preferred language of Pakistan, most Baltis continue to use their own Balti language. There is, however, a political economic dimension to language dynamics in the region. Urdu was making inroads in Baltistan long before the creation of Pakistan (Dryland, 1993), partially in relation to economic advantage that could be gained by acquiring the language. This was true long before partition: both an urban “elite” and satellite Balti communities across Northern India used Urdu as a language of engagement.

Today, in the interests of its own religio-political expansion, Pakistan is in the process of “Urdu-izing” the Northern Areas, in the way that it attempted (albeit unsuccessfully) to Urdu-ize East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) immediately post-partition (Syed, 2008a, b). In more recent times, educated Baltis are attempting a cultural renaissance, the reviving of their Balti language and Tibetan cultural heritage. But, Pakistan covertly discourages their attempt to develop the indigenous script *Yigay*, thus, there are concerns among some that the local language and culture will be suppressed, weakening the Baltis’ ties with their perceived “Buddhist” neighbour Ladakh and with their Buddhist linguistic and cultural heritage (MacDonald, 2006)[12].

It may be that already the loss of their traditional Tibetan dialect has been accepted by at least some Balti families, who nowadays speak to their children in Urdu. Besides other factors, this practice may also be attributed to the fact that the syllabi in most schools are in the Urdu language only. Also, there are concerns about the Sunni-Islamic inclination of some textbooks used in schools[13].

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The few Balti primers and workbooks available in the bazaar – produced by overseas organisations – are mainly used in Skardu’s private schools. Amongst the philanthropists working for education in Baltistan, Greg Mortenson’s (the Director of the Central Asia Institute) contribution is the most significant. In 1996, Mortenson built the first school in the remote mountains of Baltistan; by 2008, he had built over 80 schools (Mortenson and Relin, 2007; Welter, 2008). As well, the Kuwait-based Marafi Foundation has built several schools and funds medications for pharmacies and hospitals.

The earlier Tibetan influence is still in evidence in Baltistan today. A large rock carving known locally as *dre chad pai phong* (i.e. Buddha Rock) stands on the Sadpara road, approximately 2 kilometres southwest of Skardu in the Harghissa Nullah (smaller examples appear in the Gol area, south of Skardu). The “Buddha Rock”, which stands approximately 26 feet high, features a life-sized seated Buddha flanked by two standing Bodhisattvas, surrounded by a further 20 seated figures representing previous incarnations of Sakyamuni. The inscriptions are believed to be in the Kharoshthi language. Khanqahs (monasteries) in the region also reflect the influence of Buddhism. Further evidence of the Northern Areas’ Tibeto-Buddhist cultural heritage is visible in the thousands of rock carvings that mark the Chilas valley landscape southwest of Gilgit. There is, however, a perception that indigenous Balti culture has suffered due to the geographical partition of the area in 1947 and to Pakistani cultural influences.

Consistent with the hybrid notion of postcolonial identity, Baltistan is witnessing the gradual disappearance of its traditional handloom specialists, traditional cap makers and shoemakers, who are abandoning their professions because the indigenous cottage industry fails to receive government patronage (Hasnain, 2006). However, a woodcarving school has been established near the Raja’s palace in Shigar valley, its aim being to re-establish the skill and to emulate the magnificent carvings that are a part of the charm of the Rajas’ palaces in every valley.

Balti traditional sports, e.g. archery and polo, have lost patronage in many valleys (Hasnain, 2006). However, occasionally polo matches are still organised – particularly in the Skardu and Rondu valleys. The only time Balti music is heard nowadays is at polo matches, with instruments limited to the tabla (*Dangman*), the big drum (*Dolki*) and the flute (*Surna*). Music frequently accompanies sword dancing, a cultural form which has also been retained.

Another popular cultural activity is the *Musha’ira* (poetic symposium). Mature-aged and elderly male poets regularly recite their works at frequently convened symposia. When the FA attended a recital in 1999, most of the works were performed in the Urdu language; but, nowadays poets are writing and reciting in the Balti language. The Tibetan *Kesar of Ling* epic is another treasured cultural artefact. This lengthy story about warrior King Kesar – which is still performed by elderly Balti bards – is recited and sung in areas stretching from the upper reaches of the Volga to Mongolia, in all the valleys of Baltistan, in Hunza, India, Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan. China takes a particular interest in its preservation.

While cultural identity is generally seen as “social construction” with little basis of givenness in nature, anatomy, or some other anthropological essence (Benhabib, 1996), such social construction in the context of Baltistan may be best understood as a process of socio-cultural and political struggle between the Baltis and their Pakistani colonial masters as they vie with each other for the imposition of certain identity definitions



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over others. Issues of identity, as we know, become rather profound in situations of crisis and conflict (Mercer, 1990). Elements of hybridity and fluidity are however hard to ignore in the context of the Balti people.

Identity conflicts, e.g. in the form of linguistic, ethnic and religious identity, seem to be a salient feature of the Balti people's experience. As “adjuncts” to the nation state of Pakistan, Baltis today are faced with the dominant form of Pakistani national identity, which is the product of deliberate cultural construction and maintenance via both the regulatory and socialising institutions of the state. In the next section, we discuss how within post/neo-colonial socialising institutions there seems to be little consideration for respecting and accommodating the Balti identity.

### **Colonisation continued: politics of domination today**

The centrist politics of domination in today's Pakistan may be seen as what Billig (1995) terms “banal nationalism” – the everyday reinforcement, the routinised “flagging” of national belonging through military, laws and socio-economic infrastructures. Today, the Gilgit-Baltistan areas are under the direct administrative control of Pakistan, ostensibly the Northern Areas council headed by Pakistan's Minister for Kashmir Affairs based in Islamabad.

Soldiers of the Pakistan Army, carrying automatic weapons, occasionally patrol the streets of Skardu. The Pakistan Army is in control of the offices of infrastructure including telecommunications, the water board, and the Skardu Base Hospital. To present a balanced view, however, one must acknowledge that army-supervised agencies are conducted relatively honestly[14]; charges to the public comply with official estimates as opposed to the frequently inflated prices demanded of (particularly) visitors by locals. Again, one must concede that the harsh November to January winters experienced in the area, during which temperatures frequently drop to 30 or more degrees (below) resulting in all activity closing down, require locals to make as much profit as possible before the onset of winter.

In 1986, the Pakistan Army, with the cooperation of China, completed the Karakoram Highway, which connects Pakistan with China's Xinjiang Province through the Northern Areas. The highway has interesting dual implications for the Northern Areas. Besides being the area's economic lifeline, it is also a route through which Pakistani culture and state machinery are being imported into Baltistan.

General Pervez Musharraf (Pakistan's military ruler from 1999 to 2008) is believed to have played a major role in the military's suppression of the Shia movement in Gilgit in 1988[15]. It was around this time that he started to settle Punjabis and Pathans in Baltistan and Gilgit, a process that – as previously mentioned – has accelerated in recent times (Arya, 2002, p. 6). Although overtly kowtowing to a free world agenda against extremism in Afghanistan, Musharraf's policies in the Northern Areas have been somewhat less conspicuous. For example, his settling of the aforesaid Sunni Muslims (Pakistanis) in Skardu, which escalated between 1999 and 2003, aimed at making the Shia people of Baltistan a minority in their own ancestral land. The process has done little to alleviate the poverty of the locally estimated 65 per cent of Balti unemployed. It has forced many Balti males to travel outside in search of work, either to cities within Pakistan or frequently to the Arabian Gulf and Kuwait where they work as labourers and drivers.

Sunni/Shia sectarian enmity (dating back to the 1970s) poses an ongoing threat to the Shia of the Northern Areas including Baltistan. On 7 January 2005, the foremost Shia Leader of the Gilgit region, Agha Ziauddin Rizvi, a proponent of self-rule for Baltistan and Gilgit, was murdered by Pakistani sectarian militants. His assassination triggered a wave of violence: curfews were imposed in Gilgit and Baltistan for a period in excess of six months (Hasnain, 2006). Retaliating against Rizvi's murder, rogue elements roamed the streets of Skardu, smashing shop windows and burning buildings owned by people belonging to sects other than Shia. There is a general resentment in the Northern Areas about Pakistan's (perceived) patronage of *jihadi* and sectarian elements (Bhatt, 2003).

In October 2007, the Musharraf regime introduced a new Legal Framework Order for reforms in the Northern Areas, claiming that the reforms would enable the Northern Areas legislative council to make laws. The official announcement stated that the federal government would devolve its powers to district governments, to be set up through elections in the six districts of the Northern Areas. An editorial that appeared in the daily English language publication *Dawn* stressed that the basic issue was granting the Northern Areas a constitutional identity and the people their fundamental rights:

The draft package [...] does not seem to address the basic issue – giving the region's people fundamental rights and a constitutional identity [...]. Pakistan has denied the people of the region their fundamental rights and has chosen to rule them through a federal government nominee. Today [...] the people of the Northern Areas [...] stand virtually disenfranchised. They have representatives neither in the Azad Kashmir Assembly nor in Pakistan's parliament. [...] The people of the region do not enjoy fundamental rights, because it continues to be governed by the Legal Framework Order of 1994 [...] (Dawn, 2007).

Update: In August 2009, the Federal Government of the Pakistan Peoples Party issued the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order 2009, granting self-rule to the people of the Northern Areas (since renamed Gilgit-Baltistan)). The order created, among other things, an elected legislative assembly headed by a chief minister. While the move may be seen as an incremental step towards self-rule, there has been some criticism from within the region. For example, the Gilgit-Baltistan United Movement demanded that a fully independent and autonomous legislative assembly for Gilgit-Baltistan should be formed with the installation of local authoritative government as per the United Nations Commission for India and Pakistan resolutions, wherein the people of Gilgit-Baltistan will elect their President and the Prime Minister (UNPO, 2009).

### Discussion

Hall (1990) discusses two different ways of thinking about cultural identity:

- (1) shared culture; and
- (2) uniqueness or difference.

The first position defines cultural identity in terms of a shared culture, a collective “one true self”, which people with a shared history or ancestry hold in common. From this position, the Balti cultural identity may reflect some common historical experiences and shared cultural codes with the rest of Pakistan in terms of their Islamic or “national”

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identity, with relatively stable frames of reference and meaning beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of their actual history. In postcolonial societies, the rediscovery of this form of cultural identity is often the object of what Fanon (1963) once called “a passionate research”, directed by the secret hope of discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt and abjuration, some beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates people both in regard to themselves and in regard to others.

The second related but different view of cultural identity recognises that as well as some points of similarity there are also critical points of significant difference which constitute “what we really are” or rather – since history has intervened – “what we have become” (Hall, 1990). This view refers to the discontinuities which constitute the “uniqueness” of identity. Cultural identity, from this perspective, is a matter of “becoming” as well as of “being”. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, it is subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture and power (Bhabha, 1994, 1996). This view is also supported by Kretsedemas’s (2008) recent study of racial identity in North America, which suggests that it is important to appreciate the constantly changing and contested nature of race stratification models.

We argue that it is only from this second position that it is possible to adequately understand the complex and fluid character of the colonial experiences of the Balti identity in the nation state of Pakistan. The ways in which the Balti people and their experiences are positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation in Pakistan are the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalisation. While Pakistan claims to own them on the pretext of common Islamic heritage, the Baltis are at the same time constructed as different and “other” within the categories of knowledge of the colonial regime (Said, 1978) because of their unique ethnic and religious identity.

In the light of the present review, it is possible to think of the Balti identity in Pakistan as “framed” by two axes or vectors simultaneously operative: the vector of similarity and continuity and the vector of difference and rupture. The Balti identity may be described in terms of the dialogic relationship between these two axes. The one gives them some grounding in – some continuity with – the Islamic ideology of a Muslim nation state: the second is a reminder that what they share is precisely the experience of a profound discontinuity; a people dragged into subordination, colonisation and oppression, ruled by colonisers of various ethnicities and faiths. When one era of colonisation ended, it was replaced by new forms of oppression and subordination.

By virtue of their unique cultural identity in the nation state of Pakistan, we consider Spivak’s (1988) notion of strategic essentialism as useful to understand and highlight issues of the Balti people’s identity. At the same time, by virtue of their forced integration, continuous interaction and economic dependence on Pakistan, Bhabha’s (1996) notion of hybridity helps us to understand the evolving and fluid nature of the Balti people’s identity.

The situation of the Balti people in Pakistan echoes the complexities and tensions associated with the multi-ethnic constitution of societies, which is a chronic feature of modern nation states (Geertz, 2000; Smith, 1995). These complexities and tensions pose obvious problems for the cultural “binding” of nations into coherent identity positions. The problem has somewhat dramatic consequences for developing countries wherein multi-ethnic composition arising from the crude territorial divisions of colonial occupation combines with relatively weak state structures to produce a legacy often marked by interethnic tensions and political instability (Tomlinson, 1999). The case of Baltistan is one

such instance in which the state of Pakistan has asserted its control over the Balti population and region predominantly through military means. The critical issues of cultural pluralism, full constitutional citizenship, and the basic human rights of the Balti people have remained generally ignored throughout the 63 years since Partition.

### **Conclusion**

The paper has highlighted the postcolonial challenges of identity and human rights that the people of Baltistan face in the nation state of Pakistan. The review has suggested that the unique status of the Baltis (and other indigenous peoples of the Northern Areas) can better be understood by understanding their cultural identity and their historical connections with Ladakh and Tibet. These connections can be seen, for example, in the legal field, in the emphasis on their territorial sovereignty and possibly the commonalities of their experiences on both sides of the border, under colonial and postcolonial rule. The connections can equally be seen in the cultural field in their focus on protection of religious and ethnic identity and language revival.

By exploring issues of colonialism and identity of a region and community that not many may be aware of, the paper has demonstrated how an historical and socio-political context is intertwined with cultural identity in a multi-ethnic postcolonial nation. The paper has suggested that cultural identity, while conventionally analysed through exploration of language, music and other cultural forms may also be treated as hybrid and dynamic, as responding to colonial challenges and experiences and as transforming over time. It has highlighted the difficulties the Balti people face in trying to maintain their unique cultural identity while they continue to be denied political independence and economic well-being.

While the paper has shown the pros and cons of their loss of culture and acceptance of the postcolonial authority of Pakistan, it has also stressed the importance of understanding and linking the processes through which this has happened, i.e. the domination and selective incorporation of the Balti people and their land into the nation state of Pakistan. While acknowledging the heterogeneity of the Baltis' approach to preserving their culture and autonomy, the paper has highlighted the complex and fluid nature of identity in terms of its uniqueness and integration.

Life for the Balti people is difficult due to their relative isolation and to the fact that ever since its independence from the British Raj, Pakistan continues to deny the peoples of Gilgit and Baltistan their civil rights, i.e. their right to vote and to exercise their socio-political voice. Barth (1970) claims that different peoples will generally come together and accommodate themselves to each other in a colonial setting; but, "how well can a minority people 'accommodate themselves' to an administration that denies them both vote and voice" (p.17).

The two generations of Baltis who consider themselves to be "Pakistanis" notwithstanding have certain reservations; while they share maintenance of an ethnic boundary, at the same time they retain particular aspects of their Balti culture and language, reifying their exclusivity and ascription. As Barth (1970, p. 14) suggests:

When defined as an ascriptive and exclusive group, the nature of continuity of ethnic units is clear: it depends on the maintenance of a boundary. The cultural features that signal the boundary may change, and the cultural characteristics of the members may likewise change – yet the fact of continuing dichotomisation between members and outsiders allows [one] to specify the nature of continuity, and investigate the changing cultural form and content.

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A common theme in the literature is an ongoing concern with the relationships between the Balti people's cultural identity and strategies for effective political self-rule. They continue to struggle for an active place within the nation-state that administers them, at the same time retaining their own traditional cultural practices. Their situation differs little from Dean and Levi's (2003) description of the challenges and suffering that the majority of the world's indigenous peoples face, not in the midst of the often talked about first world but subsumed by second or third world nation states considered to be “postcolonial”.

This paper opens up possibilities of identifying a number of interesting questions for future research. For example, to what extent are the younger Baltis inclined towards accepting Pakistani hegemony and identity? What do they hope to gain by doing so? Scholars may also investigate how selective intervention by Pakistan, e.g. denying the Baltis full citizenship and its settling of Pakistanis of other ethnicities on their ancestral lands, is responsible for the disconnection between those wishing to assert their Balti identity and independence and those opting to be incorporated into Pakistan. Scholars may also consider how such socio-political constraints are contributing to the hybrid and fluid nature of the Balti people's identity.

There are clear implications of issues of cultural identity of the Balti people for equal opportunities (or lack thereof) in employment. Given the lack of economic development of the area by the Government of Pakistan, and the equal lack of interest expressed by private investors and banks, many Balti people are forced to migrate to Pakistan's urban areas of Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad or to the Arabian Gulf in search of employment (Shah, 2008). Will the poverty endured by the local population and the resulting need for men to migrate in search of work see them more willing to resign (some elements of) their Balti identity? The process has done little to alleviate the poverty of the locally estimated 65 per cent of Balti unemployed.

The review has highlighted the fact that the Gilgit-Baltistan region has historically experienced a confluence of Islam and Buddhism, subsequent to a period of Bon shamanistic beliefs and practices. The negotiations that have taken place between these elements within an overarching political context of Pakistan deserve further anthropological attention, e.g. the alleged subsuming of the Buddhist component of the Balti identity under an Iranian-influenced puritanical version of Islam, or the transformation and reshaping of the Baltis' cultural identity in the aftermath of the region's forced annexation to Pakistan.

Scholars may also wish to examine the class/cultural politics at work in the emerging renaissance movement in Baltistan. Given the way in which social stratification has been historically structured through colonial relations of power, this issue is an important component of cultural identity (re-)formation in Baltistan.

The Pakistan Government's administration of the Northern Areas is “colonial” in the orthodox conception, involving the external administration of a non-self-governing territory (Raman, 2004). The region enjoyed limited autonomy under Dogra rule; following independence, local institutions were taken over by Pakistan. The colonial framework persists to this day in the form of federal legal orders and non-transparent administration by Pakistan's Government. The paper has argued that the Northern Areas (including Baltistan), in relation to the nation state of Pakistan, remain marginalised. The peoples of the region are now threatened with forced assimilation. While some Baltis may prefer an alliance with their perceived Tibetan-speaking kin in what they term “Indian-occupied Ladakh”, there is also some evidence (e.g. in the form of the recently formed

Gilgit-Baltistan assembly) that increasingly Baltis are opting to remain with Pakistan. However, what is concrete is their resistance to any association with Kashmir, due to lingering feelings of resentment over their treatment by the Dogra.

We started our paper with a Balti proverb: wolf not hungry (should feel content with lesser gain), shepherd not miss (should feel content with minor loss). The proverb suggests that a settlement could make both parties happy, i.e. enough to satiate the wolf's hunger with minimum loss to the shepherd's flock. Perhaps, integration with Pakistan may be realistic for the peoples of the Northern Areas given that the Pakistan Army is already in firm control of the area and, because according to Van Beek (2000), their counterparts in Ladakh may not be totally content with their conditions in India. Some speak of an autonomous area comprising Pakistan-occupied Baltistan and Indian-occupied Ladakh. However, in the case of Gilgit-Baltistan, any integration must be on the basis of pluralistic and multicultural values in full recognition of the people's socio-cultural and political rights including their right to self-determination and self-administration.

### Notes

1. These areas include Gilgit, Baltistan and the frontier areas which in turn include Hunza, Nagir, Punial, Yasin, Kuh, Ghizar, Ishkoman and Chilas. Baltistan comprises two districts, Skardu in the west and Ghanche in the east. The Northern Areas are also known as "Balawaristan", i.e. Pakistan-occupied Gilgit and Baltistan. Gilgit Baltistan is also known as "Little Tibet" or *Suri-Bhutan* (Apricot Tibet), the latter due to the profusion of apricot trees in the area.
2. According to Hasnain (2003), the total area of Baltistan is approximately 10,118 square miles. The *International Journal of Educational Development*, 25:5 September 2005 gives the total area of 72,500 square kilometres with a density of 12 persons per square kilometre. The last census taken (1998) gives a population figure for the Northern Areas of 870,347. The Baltistan total was 303,214.
3. The Maqpons trace their ancestry back to Egyptian Ibrahim Shah, who travelled via Kashmir to Skardu where he married the daughter of the royal family. The term Maqpon means "Commander-in-Chief" (Personal communication, Raja family, Skardu 2007).
4. The first author (FA)'s personal communication in 2007 with the rajas and their family members.
5. For 100 years prior to these events, Baltistan had been ruled by the oppressive Jammu Rajput Dogras who kept the people of the area impoverished and enslaved.
6. Based on the model of the frontier guides and led by British officers.
7. It is interesting to notice certain orientalist ways of reporting in Filippi's description of the Balti people, e.g. their "incapability" to involve in violence.
8. The FA's personal observation, Mehdiabad, Baltistan.
9. The FA's personal communication in 2003 with Professor Nicolas Tournadre, Paris 8 University.
10. It may be noted that no two Balti scholars agree upon language use. This is because there is still no agreed upon Balti script. The examples of language use in this paper were personally provided by Shigar valley and Kharmang valley dwellers.
11. For a concise overview of the genesis of the Urdu language, see Dryland (1993).
12. The Tibetan epic "King Kesar of Ling", which in times past was recited during the long, dark and freezing Balti winter nights, is regaining popularity in Baltistan.



13. The Northern Areas faced a lot of trouble in 2003 and also in 2005 over the textbooks that the Pakistan Ministry of Education issued as part of the curriculum for schools in the region. The textbooks apparently promoted the Sunni school of thought; their introduction was vehemently protested by the majority Shia community in the Northern Areas.
14. Based on the FA's personal experience in the area.
15. For a detailed account of the Pakistan Army's role in sectarian conflicts in the country, see Nasr (2002).

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### Corresponding author

Jawad Syed can be contacted at: [j.syed@kent.ac.uk](mailto:j.syed@kent.ac.uk)