

Reading the Embroidery Motifs of Baluch Women's Clothing from the Perspective of Malinowski's Functionalism

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Introduction

Baluchistan is located in the southeast of Iran and divided into two main regions: Sarhad in the north and Makoran in the south; the cities of Iranshahr and Saravan are situated between these two expanses. Baluch embroidery reflects the traditions, beliefs, and worldview of this ethnic group, representing the artistic heritage of Baluch women and girls. From an anthropological perspective, embroidery in Baluch culture is not merely a decorative art; rather, it is a cultural mechanism for the continuation of a collective identity as well as a response to the psychological and social needs of the community. Malinowski's functionalist theory is precisely based on this foundation. It discusses how every cultural element within a social system has a specific role in maintaining balance, cohesion, and the reproduction of shared values. Embroidery can be seen as the tangible embodiment of Malinowski's cultural functions that extend from basic biological needs to the deepest layers of the Baluch community's spiritual cohesion. Beyond its decorative aspect, every motif is the concrete manifestation of the relationship between "institutions," "needs," and "functions." Accordingly, every component of society has an effective function relative to the whole society, and its purpose is to meet human needs. Furthermore, according to Malinowski, every cultural phenomenon has two functional dimensions: a positive function that arises when the cultural element helps maintain the cohesion, stability, and balance of the social system and a negative function that is carried out when the same element causes tension, fragmentation, or disorder in the cultural structure. Identifying these two aspects enables an understanding of the internal dynamics of the culture and the interaction of its components with human needs.

Materials and Methods

The present study adopted a descriptive-analytic approach, gathering documentary data using electronic sources and note-taking tools. The sampling method was purposive; therefore, out of all the motifs present in Baluch embroidery, 40 motifs were selected. These motifs in terms of semantics, of frequency of use, and structural diversity (geometric, floral, animal, human) represent the most important cultural and aesthetic codes of the Baluch people. This selection was made based on distribution, persistent presence in prominent regional works, capacity for symbolization within Malinowski's theoretical framework, and their role as a representative sample of the entire region and of the diverse Baluch embroidery styles. The objective of this research was to analyze the motifs of Baluch embroidery based on Malinowski's functionalist theoretical framework to answer this question: how could the meanings of Baluch embroidery motifs be analyzed from the perspective of Malinowski's functionalism at the three levels of primary, derivative, and spiritual-cohesive?

Results and Findings

Malinowski's functionalism is based on three elements: whole, part, and relationship, with its ultimate goal as the preservation of the stability and continuity of the social system. In his view,

humans are need-oriented beings and they create cultural mechanisms in order to meet their needs; these mechanisms are the institutions, each of which have a function in meeting biological, social, and psychological needs. In this context, Baluch embroidery was considered a cultural institution that could be analyzed at Malinowski's three levels of needs. Level of primary needs explored how artistic motifs were symbolic responses to biological needs, protection, sustenance, and survival. Motifs such as Mērchok (small pepper) with the function of "spice, food enhancement, and hospitality solidarity" demonstrated the direct link between culture and biological needs for nutrition. Another example, Bahār (Spring), symbolizes abundance, freshness, and the hope for food production; in Malinowski's functionalism, these motifs were instances of the cultural response to the biological needs for nutrition and reproduction. Level of derivative needs was concerned with social institutions and human relationships. For example, the Borok motif (unopened flower bud), which expressed distance, frustration, and unfulfilled desire, had a function of emotional warning; it mirrored a culture that spoke of failure or separation through the language of symbols so as to control emotions and replace social violence. The Katārok motif (dandelion flower) and Pād-e_Nonnok (baby's foot) were also symbolic responses to social needs; the former announced friendship and the latter signified hope for the future and birth. These motifs referred to the continuity of generations and the reconstruction of family relationships. Their function is also social, not merely aesthetic. Level of spiritual-cohesive needs revolves around meanings, beliefs, and identities. The third level in Malinowski's theory related to human psychological and spiritual needs; they mirrored how a culture in response to existential anxieties, fears, and questions created a system of symbols and beliefs. In Baluch embroidery, this level was manifested by motifs such as Bahār, Burrok, Hashās, Butteh, Penchpalang (Five Leopards), BālKabūtār (Pigeon Wing), Dentalū, Tā'ūs (Peacock), Cham Āhūg (Fawn's Eye), Kallasayahmar (Black Snake Head), Ādinak, Palivār, Rōch-Bar, and Delkash Dast Maras. The Penchpalang motif, implying power, unity, and cooperation, carries a function in maintaining the feeling of security and collective fortitude. In turn, it gives rise to moral and philosophical values. In the functional analysis of Baluch embroidery motifs, every motif not only carries meaning but also possesses a dual function: a positive function and a negative function. The positive function was carried out when the motif reinforced cultural cohesion and psychological and social stability, whereas the negative function expressed tension, anxiety, or cultural disharmony. For instance, the Mērchok motif, meaning small pepper, ultimately results in a positive function due to three principles of needs. In contrast, the Burrok motif (unripe blossom) reflects a failure to meet a biological need and is a sign of social tension; it, thus, has a negative function.

Conclusion

At the level of primary needs, the link between these motifs and biological and livelihood needs was evident. At the level of derivative needs, the motifs lent weight to ethical rules and collective cooperation; ultimately, at the level of spiritual cohesion, they provided collective tranquility. By highlighting three principles of need in the motifs and their positive functions, this analysis helps interpret the reality of how these symbols actively operate in the process of "cultural self-regulation." This research intelligently focuses on extracting and explaining the positive function of these motifs because its central goal is to identify the symbolic mechanisms that make Baluch's social system resilient against environmental fluctuations and internal tensions. Therefore, although the potential for negative or dual function exists, our analytical axis is to prove the constructive and stabilizing function of embroidery in the social structure of Baluch women. All findings are gathered in alignment with Malinowski's views, and it is acknowledged that motifs in any society have a specific function, and their goal is the exaltation of the society.

Keywords: Baluch embroidery, functionalism, motif, Malinowski, social institutions.