

The Material Culture of Iranian Identity: A Comparative Study of the Attitudes and Behaviors of Residents in Afjeh Village, Tehran, and Nobandian Village, Baluchestan Regarding National Identity, Ethnic Identity, and Symbolic Goods

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aims to compare the significance of ethnic identity, national identity, and symbolic goods among the residents of Afjeh village, influenced by Tehran's multicultural identity, and Nobandian village, home to indigenous Iranian ethnic groups in Baluchestan.

Methods and Materials: This research employed a quantitative survey approach to allow a more precise comparison of symbolic goods. From a practical perspective, it is applied research and falls under interdisciplinary studies. To test the relationships between identified indicators, an independent samples t-test was used.

Findings: The findings indicate that the residents of Nobandian demonstrate a stronger sense of attachment to their ethnic identity but place less importance on national identity compared to the residents of Afjeh. Additionally, the Nobandian residents are more engaged in the production, sale, education, and promotion of symbolic goods. Conversely, the emphasis on ethnicity and the use of symbolic goods are less pronounced among the residents of Afjeh.

Conclusion: The results highlight that the nature of attachment to ethnic and national identities and the importance of symbolic goods are subject to constant change due to their fluidity. Changes in social, cultural, and political factors in each region alter the level of importance attributed to ethnic identity, national identity, and symbolic goods. Thus, the more stable the cultural, social, and political foundations of a region, the more stable ethnic identity, national identity, and symbolic goods become.

Keywords: symbolic goods, national identity, ethnic identity, material culture, cultural communication

1. Introduction

Goods, through their pervasive presence, tangibly establish common ways of life and prevalent habits. Their physical presence in the world, at specific times and locations, along with communicative cultural elements such as methods, habits, and spaces surrounding these goods, sustains identity (Wong & Park, 2022). "Goods are often the subject of discussion or the center of action; they frequently mediate and facilitate exchanges by providing a form of interaction other than language" (Dant, 1999). The historical and geographical position of goods, the conventions surrounding their use, and their aesthetic evaluation imply that they can create specific values and promote particular activities.

Although goods are increasingly expanding globally, certain forms of object-centered expertise have remained resilient over time, despite changing methods, as though specific skills have sedimented in particular cultures. Examples include the everyday production of indigenous goods, especially food, clothing, handicrafts, and other household items. The close connection between people and the things they create serves as significant markers of identity, both for national communities and for tourists and consumers seeking to collect symbolic goods. The impact of various interactions between people and goods, recognized as patterns of conventions and shared forms of knowledge and practice in specific locations, can be considered an element of the complex and ongoing production of national identity (Hajizadeh & Razavi Dinani, 2016; Pourjabbeli & Khalili, 2011).

In fact, material culture constitutes all types of societies. Social interactions are partially mediated by the objects exchanged in daily life among individuals. "The objects we depend on have created a type of social relationship for us, formed through their design, production, prior use, communication via them, and their role in the current cultural system of goods" (Dant, 1999). Thus, goods are both the result and the intermediary of social relationships. Goods are explicitly associated with and circulate within specific nations. However, the abundance of familiar objects, the conventional ways in which objects relate to each other and their users, and the way they habituate individuals are all embedded in national everyday experiences. These experiences are divided based on region, class, and ethnicity (Schiffer & Miller, 1999).

The relationship between material culture and identity has been explored extensively in sociological and cultural

studies. Tang (2008), in their study, examines how state actors, artists, and collectors consciously or unconsciously integrate contemporary art into nationalist discourses and commodify it for private market growth, reflecting the broader role of state endorsement in transforming contemporary art into a valuable cultural industry (Tang, 2008). Similarly, Edinsor (2002) highlights the role of material culture in shaping national identity, emphasizing that objects—instrumental, decorative, religious, and symbolic—constitute the infrastructure of human societies, mediating social interactions through individuals' relationships with goods (Edinsor, 2002). Sahafzadeh (2010) contextualizes the interplay between art and politics in post-World War II America, illustrating how multicultural dynamics shape artistic expression and how societal issues are mirrored in art (Sahafzadeh, 2010). Together, these studies underscore the material and symbolic dimensions of culture as integral to identity formation.

From a theoretical standpoint, identity is inherently fluid and shaped by historical, social, and cultural contexts (Hanachi et al., 2023; Jahanshahi, Haghighatian, & Bahian, 2024; Jahanshahi, Haghighatian, & Behian, 2024; Lee et al., 2024; Mahdian et al., 2022). Nowzari (2006) categorizes identity into traditional, modern, and postmodern frameworks, demonstrating how shifts in temporal and spatial relations reshape collective and individual identity constructs (Nowzari, 2006). Kafi and Hajiani (2012) analyze the dynamics of ethnic and national identity in Iran's multi-ethnic society, finding that integrative identities predominate, albeit with variations across ethnic groups (Kafi & Hajiani, 2012). This aligns with Calhoun's (2010) argument that identity crises reflect broader uncertainties driven by rapid socio-cultural changes (Calhoun, 2010). Jenkins (2002) further observes that modern identity discourses arise from expanding cultural interactions facilitated by globalization and technological advancements (Jenkins, 2002). Azadarmaki (1999) elaborates on the dialectical relationship between material culture and identity, emphasizing the interplay of "self" and "other" in cultural expressions (AzadAramaki, 1999). In the Iranian context, material culture mediates between Iranian, Islamic, and Western identity sources (Molasalehi, 2004). These frameworks collectively highlight how identity is not only a cultural construct but also a reflection of dynamic power relations and socio-political transformations.

A key characteristic of national material culture is its compatibility with its cultural environment and its flow within the fabric of that society's culture, correlating with the

needs, behaviors, and habits of its inhabitants. The continuity of tradition fosters the continuity of regional identity, representing a culture that emerges and evolves within a living environment. The Baluchestan region, due to its cohesive identity, is a suitable area for identifying symbolic goods. On the other hand, Tehran is a city characterized by cultural and ethnic diversity. National identity and the convergence and divergence among ethnic groups are critical issues faced by cities with diverse ethnic populations. This study compares the significance of ethnic identity, national identity, and symbolic goods among the residents of Afjeh village, whose inhabitants are influenced by Tehran's multicultural identity, and Nobandian village, representing indigenous Iranian ethnic groups in Baluchestan. Given the importance of symbolic goods as part of material culture in shaping national identity, the objective of this research is to uncover the meanings and applications of symbolic goods, ultimately identifying shared and differing aspects of identity in each region.

The research questions include the following:

1. How can the material culture in the form of symbolic goods be used to compare the shared and differing aspects of identity between the two studied regions?
2. How can symbolic goods integrate into national identity and foster a stable identity in different environments?

2. Methods and Materials

In this study, a quantitative survey approach was employed to investigate and compare ethnic identity, national identity, and symbolic goods in the two studied villages. A quantitative approach is most effective when the research question involves identifying factors influencing an outcome, evaluating the effectiveness of an intervention, or predicting results. The research is classified as applied and interdisciplinary based on its results.

The reason for comparing Afjeh village in Tehran with Nobandian village in Baluchestan lies in the differences in the ethnic diversity of their populations. The predominant identity of Afjeh residents is influenced by the multicultural identity of Tehran, while Nobandian residents strictly adhere to the Baluchi identity and culture. The material culture and symbolic goods of these two regions reveal the extent to which the lack of ethnic integration affects the formation of national identity.

To collect quantitative data and evaluate the significance of ethnic identity, national identity, and symbolic goods in the two regions, questionnaires were used. Sampling in both villages followed the snowball sampling method, selecting 35 participants from Afjeh and 42 from Nobandian, aged between 18 and 65 years, including both men and women. The age range was chosen based on the assumption that significant identity changes are less likely to occur in individuals older than 65, who are generally less socially active.

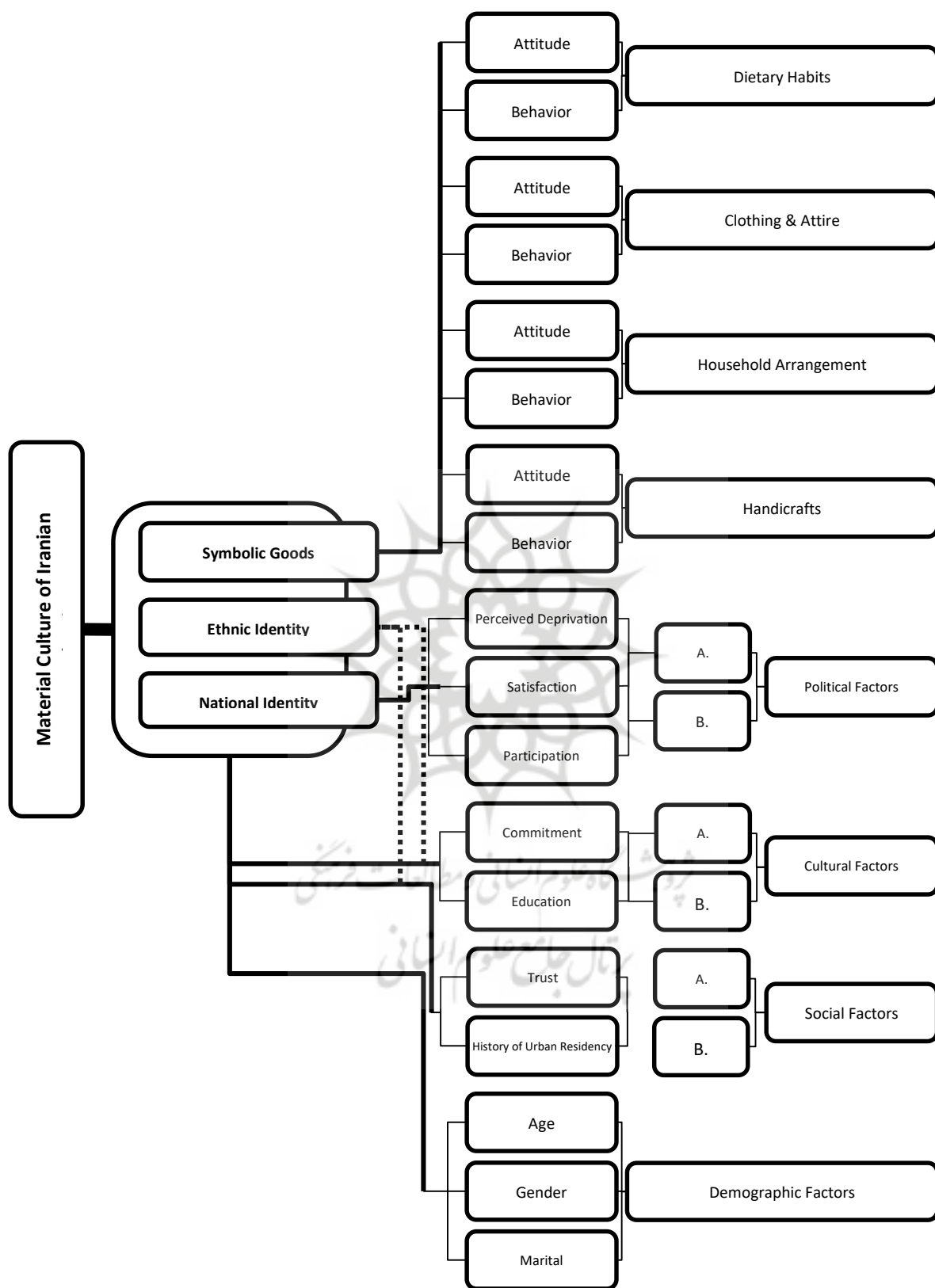
A minimum sample size of 30 individuals was determined based on the central limit theorem, ensuring sufficient accuracy for statistical tests. This sample size increased the confidence intervals of population data, reducing the likelihood of results contrary to the findings.

Data collection involved multiple visits to both villages. Due to the distance from Tehran, two extended stays in Nobandian were required: the first in March 2021 for two weeks and the second in February and March 2022 for one month (as a volunteer at the village's eco-tourism facility). During the second visit, quantitative data were collected. In Afjeh, no extended stays were necessary due to its proximity to Tehran, and six one-day visits were conducted in May 2022. Afjeh presented a closed social environment where most residents were reluctant to interact with unfamiliar individuals. Consequently, one local resident acted as a key informant to assist in collecting quantitative data.

The conceptual model, as detailed in the questionnaire statements, was designed to examine the material culture of Iranian identity.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model



The questionnaire consisted of 48 statements divided into three main sections (excluding background information): symbolic goods, ethnic identity, and national identity. Each section was further divided into subcategories, thoroughly elaborated upon.

To assess the importance and attachment of residents to symbolic goods in the two villages, specific indicators were selected, including handicrafts, clothing, dietary habits, and household arrangements. Each indicator was measured using six statements: three assessing attitudes and three evaluating behaviors related to the subject. The attitude-related statements focused on respondents' thoughts, while behavior-related statements explored their reactions.

Indicators for measuring the significance of ethnic identity included cultural and social factors, such as trust in one's ethnic group and adherence to ethnic norms. These factors directly influenced the ethnic identity index and affected the other two indices. Statements related to ethnic identity comprised six attitudinal and six behavioral items.

For evaluating national identity, political factors such as perceived political deprivation, satisfaction with the political

system, and political participation were considered. Additionally, social, cultural, and demographic factors were included in the assessment. The national identity index consisted of six attitudinal and six behavioral statements.

Quantitative data were measured using a four-point Likert scale: "strongly disagree," "disagree," "agree," and "strongly agree," corresponding to levels of agreement from lowest to highest. Some statements were reverse-coded for greater precision and reliability, with scores of 1 to 4 for standard statements and their inverse for reverse-coded items.

To analyze significant differences and compare mean interval data between the two villages, an independent t-test was applied. Individual behaviors and attitudes were considered, and mean scores were calculated for comparison with dichotomous nominal variables, such as village of residence and gender. Ensuring reliability and validity was essential. Face validity was achieved by consulting experts from both villages and conducting a pilot test with five residents from each village, resulting in the removal of five items from the questionnaire. Reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha and the split-half method.

Table 1

Reliability Assessment of the Questionnaire

Index	Before Removing 10% of Outliers	After Removing 10% of Outliers	Cronbach's Alpha	Split-Half Test
Ethnic Identity	0.30	0.43	0.23	0.32
National Identity	0.62	0.66	0.47	0.52
Symbolic Goods	0.58	0.63	0.61	0.51

When compared to the normative daily lives of Tehran's middle-class residents and their relationship with symbolic goods, it was evident that Nobandian differed more significantly than Afjeh. Nobandian's homogenous Baluchi ethnicity and geographic distance contributed to this difference, while Afjeh's proximity to Tehran and exposure to the capital's multicultural context reduced such distinctions. For instance, Afjeh residents' diet included foods from various ethnic groups, and local attire was absent among both men and women. Cultural and linguistic differences, as well as the distinct religious practices of Afjeh and Nobandian residents, necessitated the use of tailored questionnaire items for each village. For example, Nobandian residents consumed traditional Baluchi foods with unique spices, while Afjeh residents were unfamiliar with these culinary habits. Similarly, Nobandian homes followed a Baluchi style of interior arrangement, whereas Afjeh lacked a unified aesthetic. These differences influenced how residents interpreted statements regarding

symbolic goods, prompting customization of some questionnaire items for each village.

3. Findings and Results

Research Hypothesis: There are significant differences in the attitudes and behaviors of Afjeh and Nobandian respondents concerning national identity, ethnic identity, and the use of symbolic goods.

The highest frequency of respondents falls within the age range of 20–30 years, while the lowest frequency occurs in the 50–60 age range. The age distribution of respondents overall exhibits left skewness, indicating that the majority of ages are concentrated on the left side of the graph.

Table 2 below outlines the demographic characteristics of respondents from the two villages, including gender, marital status, education level, place of birth, place of residence, parental migration, and occupation. The data are presented separately for each village as well as combined.

Table 2

Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Respondents from Two Villages Based on Demographic Characteristics

Variable	Village	Afjeh (n=35, 45%)	Nobandian (n=42, 55%)	Total (n=77)
Gender	Male	12 (34%)	20 (47%)	32 (42%)
	Female	23 (65%)	22 (53%)	45 (58%)
Marital Status	Single	11 (31%)	23 (55%)	34 (44%)
	Married	22 (63%)	18 (43%)	40 (52%)
	Other	2 (6%)	1 (2%)	3 (4%)
Education	Illiterate	4 (12%)	2 (5%)	6 (8%)
	Middle School	10 (29%)	21 (50%)	31 (40%)
	High School	12 (34%)	15 (36%)	27 (35%)
	Higher Education	9 (26%)	4 (10%)	13 (17%)
Place of Birth	Village	28 (80%)	34 (81%)	62 (81%)
	City	7 (20%)	8 (19%)	15 (19%)
Place of Residence	Village	33 (94%)	41 (98%)	74 (96%)
	City	2 (6%)	1 (2%)	3 (4%)
Parental Migration	Yes	6 (17%)	26 (61%)	32 (42%)
	No	29 (82%)	16 (38%)	45 (58%)
Occupation	Self-Employed	7 (20%)	4 (10%)	11 (14%)
	Unemployed	1 (3%)	1 (3%)	2 (3%)
	Student	5 (14%)	6 (14%)	11 (14%)
	Worker	4 (11%)	8 (19%)	12 (16%)
	Employee	8 (23%)	3 (7%)	11 (14%)
	Homemaker	10 (29%)	9 (21%)	19 (25%)
	Handicraft Producer	0 (0%)	11 (26%)	11 (14%)

Table 3 summarizes the main questionnaire indicators, including national identity, ethnic identity, and subcategories of symbolic goods (household arrangement, dietary habits, clothing and attire, and handicrafts), both overall and for each village separately.

Table 3

Mean, Standard Deviation, Median, and T-Test Results for National Identity, Ethnic Identity, and Symbolic Goods Indicators by Village

Indicator	Overall & by Village	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median	T-Test Results
Household Arrangement	Overall	2.59	0.36	2.50	t = -4.42*** df = 74.26
	Afjeh	2.42	0.27	2.50	
	Nobandian	2.73	0.36	2.75	
Dietary Habits	Overall	2.54	0.36	2.50	t = 0.19* df = 74.48
	Afjeh	2.53	0.34	2.50	
	Nobandian	2.55	0.38	2.50	
Clothing & Attire	Overall	2.86	0.47	2.83	t = -5.36*** df = 63.50
	Afjeh	2.58	0.46	2.50	
	Nobandian	3.08	0.36	3.17	
Handicrafts	Overall	2.80	0.34	2.83	t = -5.21*** df = 57.98
	Afjeh	2.60	0.35	2.67	
	Nobandian	3.00	0.24	3.00	
Ethnic Identity	Overall	2.80	0.28	2.75	t = -7.71*** df = 74.97
	Afjeh	2.60	0.19	2.58	
	Nobandian	3.00	0.23	2.92	
National Identity	Overall	2.04	0.35	2.08	t = -2.10* df = 51.82
	Afjeh	1.94	0.43	2.00	
	Nobandian	2.12	0.25	2.17	
Symbolic Goods	Overall	2.70	0.25	2.71	t = -6.2851*** df = 68.556
	Afjeh	2.83	0.19	2.81	
	Nobandian	-	-	-	

P-Values: * >0.05, ** >0.01, *** >0.001

The average responses of Afjeh residents to questions related to household arrangement were 2.42, while those of Nobandian residents averaged 2.73. A higher average on this scale indicates a greater importance placed on traditional household arrangements. Independent samples t-test results show that the difference between the two villages regarding household arrangements is statistically significant. Nobandian residents feel more comfortable in Baluchi-style homes and believe that even if they migrate outside Baluchestan, their homes should retain traditional Baluchi arrangements. In contrast, Afjeh residents are more at ease with modern arrangements and exhibit less attachment to traditional elements in their homes.

For the index of dietary habits, the average response for Afjeh residents was 2.53, compared to 2.55 for Nobandian residents. A higher average on this scale reflects greater importance placed on ethnic dietary habits. The independent samples t-test indicates a low level of statistical significance between the two villages. Nobandian residents are slightly more committed to their ethnic dietary traditions and prefer Baluchi cuisine as a major part of their diet. They also consider preparing Baluchi food for guests a key factor in preserving Baluchi identity. Conversely, Afjeh residents show less attachment to ethnic dietary habits.

Regarding clothing and attire, the average response for Afjeh residents was 2.58, compared to 3.08 for Nobandian residents. A higher average on this scale indicates greater importance placed on traditional and ethnic clothing. The independent samples t-test shows a highly significant difference between the two villages. Nobandian residents place substantial value on wearing traditional Baluchi clothing and prefer to wear it even when traveling outside Baluchestan. In contrast, Afjeh residents display significantly less attachment to traditional or ethnic clothing.

For the handicrafts index, the average response for Afjeh residents was 2.60, compared to 3.00 for Nobandian residents. A higher average reflects greater importance attributed to handicrafts (e.g., needlework in Nobandian and sock weaving in Afjeh). The independent samples t-test indicates a statistically significant difference between the villages. Nobandian residents place much higher value on handicrafts, emphasizing their production, sale, education, and promotion. Conversely, Afjeh residents attach significantly less importance to local and ethnic handicrafts.

In terms of ethnic identity, the average response for Afjeh residents was 1.94, compared to 3.00 for Nobandian residents. A higher average on this scale indicates greater importance placed on ethnic identity. The independent samples t-test shows a highly significant difference between the two villages. Nobandian residents demonstrate a strong attachment to their ethnic identity, valuing speaking the Baluchi language and prioritizing Baluchi traditions over those of other ethnic groups. Conversely, Afjeh residents show significantly less attachment to their ethnic identity and prefer not to adhere to their village's customs and traditions.

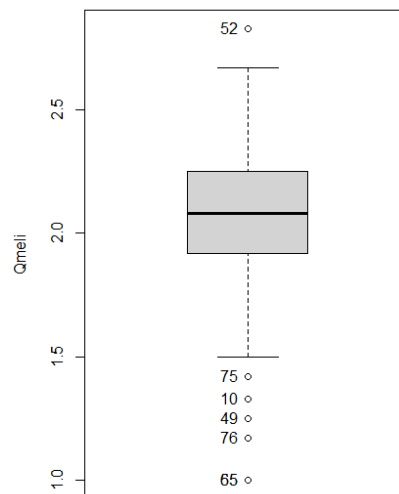
For national identity, the average response for Afjeh residents was 1.94, compared to 2.12 for Nobandian residents. A lower average on this scale reflects greater importance placed on national identity. The independent samples t-test indicates a low level of statistical significance between the two villages. Afjeh residents exhibit slightly stronger adherence to national identity, perceiving themselves as part of a unified Iranian culture and valuing equality among Iranian ethnic groups. In contrast, Nobandian residents, though valuing national identity to some extent, prioritize their ethnic identity over national identity.

The box plot for national identity shows the average responses of participants to the twelve statements on this subject. Responses range from below 2 (disagreement with national identity) to below 2.5 (agreement with national identity). On average, 50% of respondents showed a moderate level of agreement with statements about national identity. However, the plot contains six outliers, with five participants showing strong disagreement with national identity, and one participant showing a much stronger agreement than the average.

For the symbolic goods index, the average response for Afjeh residents was 2.54, compared to 2.83 for Nobandian residents. A higher average indicates greater importance attributed to symbolic goods (as a composite of their subcategories). The independent samples t-test shows a highly significant difference between the two villages. Nobandian residents place much greater value on symbolic goods, actively engaging in their sale, education, and promotion. In contrast, Afjeh residents exhibit significantly less attachment to symbolic goods.

Figure 2

Box Plot of National Identity Statements



4. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the independent samples t-test indicate that the differences between the two villages regarding symbolic goods are statistically significant. Specifically, the sale, education, and promotion of symbolic goods are more significant in Nobandian than in Afjeh, where residents exhibit less attachment to symbolic goods. The results are consistent with prior studies (AzadAramaki, 1999; Gudarzi, 2004; Kafi & Hajiani, 2012; Mollasalehi, 2004; Nowzari, 2006; Sahafzadeh, 2010).

When the subcategories of symbolic goods are considered separately, the attitudes and behaviors of respondents toward different aspects vary by village. For example, regarding dietary habits, the differences are statistically significant but at a low level. Nobandian residents are more committed to their ethnic dietary traditions, preferring Baluchi cuisine as part of their regular meals and seeing the preparation of Baluchi food for guests as a means of preserving their cultural identity. In contrast, Afjeh residents show less attachment to ethnic dietary habits. While quantitative data suggest some importance placed on local and ethnic dietary habits in Afjeh, observations indicate little evidence of this in practice. It appears that a nostalgic longing for past ethnic dietary traditions has fostered an interest among Afjeh residents in reviving these practices.

The attitudes and behaviors of respondents regarding other subcategories of symbolic goods, such as household arrangement, clothing, and handicrafts, show statistically significant differences. For household arrangements,

Nobandian residents feel comfortable in Baluchi-style homes and believe such arrangements should be maintained even if they migrate outside Baluchestan. In contrast, Afjeh residents are more comfortable with modern arrangements and display little attachment to traditional elements in their homes. Regarding clothing and attire, Nobandian residents place significantly greater value on traditional Baluchi clothing and prefer wearing it even when traveling outside Baluchestan, whereas Afjeh residents show much less attachment to traditional clothing. Similarly, Nobandian residents emphasize the production, sale, education, and promotion of handicrafts significantly more than Afjeh residents.

The independent samples t-test results also show statistically significant differences in attitudes and behaviors related to ethnic identity. Nobandian residents place far greater importance on their ethnic identity, valuing the Baluchi language and prioritizing Baluchi values and traditions over those of other ethnic groups. Conversely, Afjeh residents exhibit less attachment to their ethnic identity and prefer not to engage with their village's customs and traditions.

Afjeh residents, however, are slightly more committed to national identity than Nobandian residents. They identify themselves more strongly with Iranian culture, language, and traditions, believing in the equality of all Iranian ethnic groups and rejecting the superiority of one ethnic culture over another. In contrast, Nobandian residents, while acknowledging national identity, prioritize their ethnic identity over national identity.

The nature of symbolic goods in the two villages varies based on social, geographical, cultural, economic, and political factors. In Afjeh, attachment to ethnic identity and symbolic goods is declining due to the influence of Tehran's multicultural identity. Conversely, in Nobandian, the production, sale, education, and promotion of symbolic goods and the significance of ethnic identity are sustained by the social, cultural, geographical, and political factors reinforcing Baluchi identity.

Despite the lower attachment to ethnic identity among Afjeh residents, they exhibit a stronger commitment to national identity compared to Nobandian residents. Nobandian residents primarily identify as Baluchi, while Afjeh residents, due to the diminished prominence of ethnic identity, tend to identify primarily as Iranian.

The differences between the two villages regarding symbolic goods and ethnic identity demonstrate that Nobandian residents place greater emphasis on the production, sale, education, and promotion of symbolic goods and on ethnic identity. However, the difference in dietary habits is relatively smaller. The nostalgic attachment to past ethnic and local foods among Afjeh residents highlights an interest in reviving such traditions.

In summary, Nobandian residents exhibit stronger attachment and commitment to their ethnic identity but place less importance on national identity compared to Afjeh residents. They also engage significantly more in the production, sale, education, and promotion of symbolic goods. In contrast, Afjeh residents place greater emphasis on national identity and less importance on tribal identity and symbolic goods.

As both quantitative findings and qualitative observations suggest, contemporary material culture in Iran is shaped by networks formed through interactions with symbolic goods, as the significance of social responsibilities and traditional values declines. Symbolic goods integrate into contemporary cultural processes and Iranian identity, adapting to and being used in different national environments. They expand within social interactions that harmonize beliefs about Iranian symbolic material culture.

The fluidity of attachment to ethnic identity, national identity, and the significance of symbolic goods means these elements are continually evolving. Changes in social, cultural, economic, and political factors in each region affect the level of importance attributed to ethnic identity and symbolic goods. Thus, the more stable a region's cultural, social, economic, and political foundations, the more stable

ethnic identity, national identity, and symbolic goods become.

Based on the analysis and findings of this study, future research is recommended to focus on ethnic groups in Iran that balance ethnic identity, national identity, and symbolic goods. Such groups would value Iranian identity, ethnic identity, and symbolic goods equally, without conflict between their attachment to ethnic identity and their sense of national identity.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were under the ethical standards of the institutional and, or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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