Cultural Extinction of Iraqi Minorities: An Analytical Study

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Sections Info	ABSTRACT
	*Objective: Cultural diversity in Iraq faces profound existential challenges that threaten the survival of religious and ethnic minority identities. This research analyses the manifestations of cultural extinction through the decline of mother tongues, the erosion of communal rituals, displacement and spatial uprooting, and the weakening of institutional presence among minority groups. **Method:** The study is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework that incorporates the concepts of cultural hegemony, symbolic violence, forced assimilation, and symbolic annihilation to understand the dynamics of this phenomenon. **Results:** The findings reveal that cultural extinction is not merely a gradual process of losing symbols but rather a reflection of structural power relations that reproduce symbolic inequalities through institutions such as education, media, the labour market, and religion. These transformations have direct implications for society at large, most notably the erosion of social capital, the fragility of cultural citizenship, the deepening of mistrust between the state and citizens, and the weakening of Iraq's soft power in international arenas. **Novelty:** The study concludes that protecting cultural diversity is not only a humanitarian obligation but also a strategic necessity, as the sustainability of national stability requires genuine recognition of minorities, empowerment in decision-making, and safeguarding of their heritage and collective memory within a unifying national framework.*

INTRODUCTION

Cultural diversity in Iraq constitutes a fundamental pillar of its national identity, shaped over centuries through the accumulation of multiple civilizational, ethnic, and religious components. This has produced a rich mosaic of languages, rituals, traditions, and social practices. However, the political, social, and economic transformations witnessed in Iraq during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have posed serious challenges to the continuity of this diversity, the most prominent of which can be described as the "cultural extinction" of minorities.

Cultural extinction here refers to the decline or disappearance of the practices, symbols, and traditional knowledge of a given community as a result of intertwined factors, including political pressures, social exclusion, globalization, and forced or voluntary migration. This phenomenon is not unique to Iraq but represents a global challenge. Nevertheless, the Iraqi context gives it particular significance due to its interconnection with armed conflicts, demographic restructuring, and shifting value systems.

Although numerous studies have addressed the conditions of Iraqi minorities—particularly forced displacement and sectarian violence—there has been relatively limited attention to the cultural threat facing these communities compared to the emphasis on security and political dimensions [1]. The real dilemma lies not only in physical violence or direct political discrimination, but also in the slow erosion of cultural

identities and the disintegration of symbolic and social systems. This process is often invisible yet exerts a more profound long-term impact [2].

Religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq, such as the Yazidis, Mandaeans, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Shabak, and Armenians, have faced the risk of cultural disappearance for decades, particularly after 2003. Sectarian conflicts, repeated waves of displacement, and the state's retreat from safeguarding cultural diversity have together created an unfavourable environment for these communities' survival as independent cultural entities [3]. Furthermore, the absence of transitional justice and the lack of accountability for perpetrators of violations have weakened minorities' ability to reconstruct their symbolic lives.

Cultural extinction manifests in the loss of symbolic survival mechanisms, such as mother tongues, religious rituals, folklore, and social institutions that preserve collective memory. This process, which Bourdieu describes as "symbolic violence" [4], does not require physical force but rather the restructuring of the public sphere in such a way that the dominant majority culture becomes the sole acceptable standard, gradually pushing minorities toward assimilation.

While most studies have focused on physical violations, the cultural dimension has remained marginalized, despite being the cornerstone of collective identity survival [5]. The situation is further complicated by the fact that some media and educational policies have, consciously or unconsciously, reinforced negative stereotypes of minorities, portraying them as marginal or lagging behind the dominant "national project." This has deepened the generational rupture with their cultural heritage.

The significance of this research emerges from several interrelated dimensions:

1. Novelty of the Topic: Although there is existing research on Iraqi minorities, cultural extinction as an independent subject remains underexplored in Arab scholarship. This study seeks to fill this gap by analysing the phenomenon through a multidimensional sociological lens.

2. Interdisciplinary Analytical Framework: The research integrates cultural sociology, international legal studies, and cultural critique, thereby providing a comprehensive approach to understanding the mechanisms of symbolic marginalization [2], [6].

3. Applied Relevance: The study offers practical recommendations that policymakers, civil society organizations, and educational institutions can employ in designing effective strategies for protecting minority cultural identity, strengthening social cohesion, and mitigating the risks of future conflicts.

4. Comparative Value: By drawing on similar international cases such as the Tibetans in China, Armenians in the diaspora, and Indigenous peoples in Canada, the research provides a comparative perspective that sheds light on the shared dynamics of cultural extinction [7].

Objectives

This study aims to achieve the following:

1. Diagnose the manifestations of cultural extinction affecting Iraqi minorities, distinguishing between linguistic, religious, social, and symbolic dimensions.

2. Analyse the structural and political roots of the phenomenon, including both official and unofficial policies that contribute to minority marginalization.

3. Employ sociological theoretical frameworks such as symbolic domination [4], cultural hegemony [6], and the social construction of identity [5] to understand the mechanisms of cultural extinction through comparative analyses with global cases, in order to extract lessons and assess the applicability of cultural protection strategies.

4. Develop practical proposals to safeguard cultural diversity in Iraq through education, media, and legislative policies.

RESEARCH METHOD

Given the theoretical and analytical nature of this study, the descriptive-analytical method has been adopted. This method is among the core approaches in sociology, aiming to examine social phenomena as they exist in reality, and subsequently analyse their components and internal as well as external relations to uncover their deeper dimensions. Accordingly, this approach is based on describing the phenomenon under study—cultural extinction among Iraqi minorities—by gathering information and data from credible theoretical sources, followed by critical analysis that connects the findings with sociological concepts and theories. The method also allows for situating the phenomenon within its historical, social, and political contexts, thus providing a comprehensive reading of its dynamics.

The descriptive-analytical approach is one of the most widely employed in sociological research, as it collects empirical and theoretical data about a specific phenomenon as it exists in reality, then subjects it to analysis to reveal its dimensions and interrelationships. It proceeds in two main phases: description, which entails presenting the phenomenon objectively and accurately; and analysis, which involves interpreting the data and linking it to theoretical frameworks and explanatory models. This approach is particularly suitable for theoretical and analytical studies due to its capacity to integrate empirical observation with an understanding of historical and social contexts, Abdul Hamid.

Questions

The study seeks to address the following questions:

1. What are the main manifestations of cultural extinction among Iraqi minorities?
2. What structural and political factors accelerate this phenomenon?
3. How can sociological theories be applied to gain deeper insights into the phenomenon?
4. What is the impact of cultural extinction on national identity and Iraq's social fabric?
5. What strategies can be devised to protect non-dominant cultural heritage in Iraq?

Hypotheses

1. There is a causal relationship between weak official cultural policies in Iraq and the intensification of cultural extinction among minorities.

2. The symbolic domination of majority groups contributes to the erosion of minority cultural identities, accelerating their disappearance.

3. The absence of legal recognition of cultural rights undermines minorities' ability to preserve their languages and symbolic heritage.

4. Unregulated media openness and digital globalization increase the rate of forced cultural assimilation of minorities, thereby marginalizing their cultural particularities.

5. Sectarian and political conflicts after 2003 have weakened the social bonds of minorities, expediting their cultural contraction.

Conceptual Framework and Previous Studies

Introduction

Constructing a precise sociological analysis of the cultural extinction of Iraqi minorities requires clarifying the key concepts related to the phenomenon, as these serve as the theoretical tools for interpreting and understanding its structural and symbolic dimensions, Zhang & Mace. Additionally, it is essential to review previous studies, both local and international, that have examined symbolic marginalization and cultural genocide, as these provide a basis for comparative analysis and critical reflection.

Section One: Concepts and Terminology

 A. Cultural Extinction

This concept refers to the disappearance of a community's cultural identity due to the interaction of political, social, and economic factors, most notably the symbolic domination of the majority, institutional marginalization, exclusionary policies, and forced displacement [4]. In the Iraqi context, cultural extinction manifests in the loss of minority languages such as Syriac and Mandaic, as well as the disappearance of rituals that once formed part of the social fabric in places such as Mosul, Sinjar, and Amarah. This process of erosion often occurs without direct violence, what Zhang & Mace describe as "slow erosion mechanisms" that gradually erase the targeted culture.

Operational Definition: Cultural extinction is a condition in which a community's ability to live out its identity daily (language, rituals, connection to place) declines, as the majority's norms become the "natural" standard in schools, media, and workplaces.

 B. Cultural Genocide

Cultural genocide is defined as a form of non-physical violence aimed at destroying the symbolic identity of a community through the erasure of its language, institutions, and beliefs. Raphael Lemkin introduced the concept in 1944 as part of his broader definition of genocide, though it was excluded from the 1948 UN Convention due to political pressures [8].

In Iraq, this has been evident in the destruction of Yazidi shrines, the burning of Chaldean manuscripts, and the erasure of Armenian symbols during the occupation of Mosul by the Islamic State (ISIS). Novic argues that cultural genocide constitutes a form

of symbolic killing, targeting cultural systems without directly harming individuals.

Operational Definition: Systematic measures that erase symbols and language from the public sphere without direct physical harm, such as banning celebrations, restricting minority language education and broadcasting, or erasing cultural markers by renaming places without consulting the minority community.

C. Minorities

The United Nations defines minorities as groups that are ethnically, religiously, or linguistically distinct from the majority population and often subjected to social and political marginalizatio. In Iraq, minorities include Yazidis, Mandaeans, Shabaks, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Armenians, Turkmens, and Jews. These groups have resided in Iraq for centuries but have repeatedly faced both symbolic and material exclusion.

Operational definition: A politically non-dominant group with distinct ethnic, religious, and linguistic characteristics that actively seeks the preservation of its identity.

D. Cultural Identity

Cultural identity constitutes the symbolic framework that provides individuals with a sense of belonging to a particular group. It is shaped by language, symbols, rituals, and shared history [5]. Cultural identity acts as a defensive barrier against assimilation and coercive integration. In Iraq, the marginalization of minority cultural identities has weakened their internal cohesion and deprived younger generations of the ability to reproduce these identities in daily life.

Operational definition: The extent of people's connection to their community through three interlinked stages: (1) practicing their language and rituals publicly, (2) gaining institutional recognition through curricula and media, and (3) embedding these practices within their personal convictions and daily behaviours, thus ensuring intergenerational transmission.

Previous Studies

1. Iraqi Studies

The study by [9] examined the conditions of religious minorities in Iraq during the Ottoman era, revealing that while minorities were not subject to systematic extermination, they suffered from symbolic and material marginalization in everyday life. Another study by Mohammed Ashour Mahdi (2022) on ethnic pluralism attributes the problem to the Iraqi state's failure to manage ethnic diversity after 2003, which led either to forced cultural assimilation or to symbolic resistance movements.

2. Foreign Studies

[1] conducted a political analysis entitled Minorities, Displacement and Iraq's Future, which focused on the link between forced displacement and the disintegration of minority identity. They demonstrated that Mandaeans and Yazidis experienced accelerated cultural extinction due to the loss of their cultural geography.

[2]highlighted the legal gap caused by the non-recognition of cultural genocide as an independent crime and called for new legal frameworks to protect groups at risk of symbolic eradication. In a similar vein, [7] argued that the destruction of cultural landmarks constitutes an assault on the symbolic existence of communities rather than

merely a material violation.

3. Discussion of Previous Studies

Comparative analysis of previous research indicates that Iraqi minorities have endured challenges similar to those faced by Indigenous peoples in Canada [10], where formal education was employed as a tool to enforce majority culture by prohibiting native languages and traditional rituals. Likewise, the Tibetan experience in China illustrates institutionalized cultural hegemony that contributes to identity erosion.

4. Socio-Historical Overview of Selected Iraqi Minorities

Cultural and ethnic diversity constitutes one of Iraq's most significant historical and social characteristics. For millennia, its territory has been home to a wide spectrum of religious, linguistic, and ethnic groups. While this diversity was once a source of civilizational enrichment, in recent decades it has come under escalating threats, particularly in the wake of political upheavals, wars, and sectarian conflicts [1].

Understanding the cultural extinction of Iraqi minorities requires first a thorough reading of their historical background, followed by an analysis of the phenomenon through theoretical frameworks that uncover the mechanisms of hegemony and symbolic exclusion.

Historical Background of Iraqi Minorities

1. Ancient and Medieval Periods

Since the Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian, and Chaldean eras, Iraq has been characterized by broad ethnic and religious pluralism. Its major cities—Babylon, Nineveh, and Ur—were hubs of cultural and linguistic exchange. This pluralism continued into the Islamic eras, particularly during the Abbasid period, which was relatively tolerant and allowed minorities to practice their religious rituals and preserve their languages [11].

2. Ottoman Period (1534–1917)

Although the Ottoman Empire applied the millet system that granted minorities autonomy in managing their religious affairs, minorities remained politically and economically marginalized and excluded from high-ranking positions. Research indicates that minorities lived in segregated quarters or villages, which reinforced their social isolation [11].

3. British Occupation and Monarchy (1917–1958)

With the establishment of the modern Iraqi state in 1921, authorities failed to formulate a social contract that integrated all components on equal terms, Mahdi. The state emphasized Arab and Islamic identity as the essence of national identity, resulting in the exclusion of minorities from decision-making processes and the marginalization of their cultures.

4. Republican Period and Coups (1958–2003)

This stage was characterized by strong centralization policies, often accompanied by forced assimilation. The Arabization policy, for instance, targeted Kurdish, Turkmen, and Assyrian minority regions, leading to large-scale demographic changes [7]. Religious minorities such as Mandaeans and Jews also faced exclusionary measures that

pushed many to emigrate.

5. Post-2003 Era

The fall of Saddam Hussein's regime created a major security vacuum and enabled the rise of extremist religious militias, which led to unprecedented waves of displacement and forced migration of minorities. The Yazidis suffered genocide at the hands of the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014, the Christian population declined to less than one-third of its pre-2003 size, and most Mandaeans emigrated abroad [3].

Selected Religious and Ethnolinguistic Minorities Facing Cultural Extinction

Iraq is one of the most diverse societies in the Middle East, hosting a mosaic of religious and ethnolinguistic minorities that have played a crucial role in shaping its historical and cultural identity. While this diversity has at times been a source of civilizational enrichment, it has also generated conflict arising from marginalization, exclusion, and persecution [12].

This section provides a socio-historical overview of selected Iraqi minorities, divided into two groups—religious minorities and ethnolinguistic minorities—analysing their historical roots, cultural features, and the challenges they face.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First: Religious Minorities

This group includes Christians, Mandaeans (Ṣābi'a), Yazidis, and Jews. These minorities have roots that extend deep into the history of Iraq and represent distinct layers of the country's religious and civilizational heritage.

1. Iraqi Christians

The presence of Christians in Iraq dates back to the early centuries of Christianity. They established the Church of the East and played a central role in transmitting Greek sciences into Arabic. Their communities are concentrated in Nineveh, Baghdad, and Basra, and include Chaldean Catholics, Syriacs, Assyrians, and Armenians. They contributed significantly to education, healthcare, and culture, but after 2003, they faced waves of violence and forced displacement, reducing their numbers from about 1.5 million to fewer than 300,000, Salloum, MRG.

2. The Mandaeans (Ṣābi'a al-Mandā'iyyūn)

An ancient monotheistic community that traces its origins to the prophet John the Baptist (Yahya ibn Zakariya), Mandaeans consider flowing water sacred and central to their baptismal rituals. Historically, they concentrated in southern Iraq (Amarah, Nasiriyah, Basra) and specialized in gold- and silversmithing. However, their numbers declined drastically—from around 70,000 before 2003 to fewer than 10,000 today—due to displacement and sectarian persecution, Pisovy, MRG.

3. The Yazidis

An ethno-religious community influenced by Zoroastrianism and ancient Mesopotamian traditions, Yazidi belief centres on the worship of one God, with His will manifested through Tawusi Melek ("Peacock Angel"). They are concentrated in Sinjar, Ba'shiqa, and Bahzani. Throughout history, they have suffered repeated massacres

known as "firmans," the most recent being the ISIS genocide in 2014, which led to the killing of thousands, the abduction of women, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands [13].

4. Iraqi Jews

The oldest minority in Iraq, their presence dates back to the Babylonian exile in 586 BCE. They played an important economic and cultural role and contributed to the compilation of the Babylonian Talmud. Concentrated in Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul, they suffered the Farhud massacre in 1941, followed by mass expulsion between 1950–1951 (Operation Ezra and Nehemiah), during which over 120,000 Jews emigrated to Israel. Today, only a few dozen remain, Steele.

These religious minorities in Iraq face the risk of cultural and demographic extinction due to displacement, persecution, and demographic decline. This threatens the religious pluralism that has historically constituted a cornerstone of Iraqi identity.

Second: Ethno-Linguistic Minorities

This group includes Feyli Kurds and Turkmens. They represent national minorities with distinct languages and histories, playing a role in Iraq's political and economic life, but they have faced significant challenges related to identity and belonging.

1. The Feyli Kurds

A Shi'a Kurdish community speaking a southern Kurdish dialect, Feylis historically concentrated in Baghdad, Diyala, and Wasit. Under the Ba'ath regime, they were subjected to forced displacement and denaturalization under Resolution 666 (1980), which resulted in the deportation of more than 300,000 to Iran. Although their citizenship was partially restored after 2003, they continue to suffer from "legal nihilism" and weak political representation [14].

2. The Turkmens

A Turkic-speaking community settled in Iraq for centuries, especially in Kirkuk, Tal Afar, and Tuz Khurmatu. Their language (Turkmani) is closely related to Azerbaijani Turkish, and they are divided between Sunnis and Shi'as. Under the Ba'ath regime, they faced Arabization policies, while after 2003, they were subjected to Kurdish assimilation efforts, placing them at the centre of identity conflicts over Kirkuk. Despite these challenges, they contributed to trade and politics and continue to demand fair representation proportionate to their demographic and historical presence [14].

In general, ethno-linguistic minorities in Iraq are less prone to total extinction than religious minorities, but they suffer from acute identity crises and political struggles concerning recognition of their cultural and linguistic rights and their representation within the state.

Theoretical Explanations of Cultural Extinction

The study of cultural extinction among minorities cannot be complete without returning to the theoretical frameworks that explain the mechanisms of domination, hegemony, and cultural interaction in multi-ethnic societies. Sociological and anthropological theories provide analytical tools that reveal how power is exercised not only through direct material coercion but also through symbolic hegemony, the

reproduction of identities, and the shaping of pathways of integration or marginalization.

This chapter is significant because it seeks to explain the structural and symbolic factors leading to the erosion of minority cultures in Iraq, through a review of major theories that have addressed this problem. Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony [6] shows how majority worldviews are imposed as "natural" through institutions, while Berger and [5] argue that identity is not fixed but socially constructed through daily interaction. [4] highlights how symbolic violence normalizes majority dominance by making it invisible. [10] provides a framework for understanding forms of cultural interaction that may lead to forced assimilation, while [2] sheds light on cultural genocide as the erasure of symbols and meanings without necessarily resorting to physical violence.

Thus, reviewing these theories is not merely an abstract academic exercise, but an analytical tool for understanding the Iraqi context, where symbolic hegemony, structural violence, and assimilation policies intersect to produce complex trajectories of cultural and linguistic erosion among minorities. This chapter aims to present a comparative reading of these theories and apply them to the Iraqi case, thereby contributing to a clearer understanding of the mechanisms of cultural extinction and possible remedies.

Section One: Theories of Hegemony and Identity Construction

These theories explain cultural extinction primarily through mechanisms of symbolic domination and identity formation, operating indirectly via education, media, and institutions.

1. Cultural Hegemony – Antonio Gramsci

Gramsci argues that domination is not achieved solely through material force, but also through cultural hegemony, which renders the worldview of the dominant group "natural" and self-evident through institutions such as education, media, religion, and civil society. In this way, the acceptance of dominant value systems is continuously reproduced and legitimized [6].

In Iraq, this is evident when one central language and identity are given priority in schools, administration, and media, while the languages and folklore of minorities decline. Historically, Arabic remained the sole official state language for decades until the Iraqi Constitution (2005) recognized both Arabic and Kurdish as official languages, with provisions for minority languages in education. Nevertheless, field reports after 2014 have documented the continued fragility of minority representation in curricula, media, and public life, reinforcing hegemonic patterns that weaken the symbolic capital of smaller groups.

2. The Social Construction of Identity – Berger and Luckmann

This theory explains identity formation through the notion that identity is not something fixed at birth, but the result of ongoing social interaction. Berger and Luckmann argue that this process unfolds in three sequential stages:

　　a. Externalization: In this stage, individuals express their ideas and values in reality through speech and action.

　　b. Objectivation: These ideas and actions gradually transform into socially

recognized facts, becoming embedded within laws, curricula, and media.

c. Internalization: At this stage, individuals adopt these "objectivized" facts and consider them a natural part of their identity, ensuring their continuity across generations.

This sequence illustrates that identity is constructed and renewed daily through social interactions [5].

When applying this theory to the Iraqi context, the limited presence of minority groups in schools, media, and official institutions diminishes their opportunities to express their identities (such as using their languages, symbols, and customs). Over time, the values and norms of the majority come to be perceived as the "natural" and "correct" standard. This compels minority groups, in their pursuit of adaptation and social acceptance, to adopt these norms, while elements of their original identity recede in daily life.

This is precisely what Berger and Luckmann meant by arguing that what is practiced externally (the expression of identity) is transformed into an "institutional reality," which is then internalized as something natural and self-evident. Reports following 2003 demonstrated that the weak representation of minorities, along with the erosion of their languages and customs in public spaces, has accelerated this process [5], [15].

The theory of symbolic violence – pierre bourdieu

Bourdieu argues that symbolic violence is a subtle and invisible force employed by the dominant group in society. This form of power does not rely on direct coercion but instead operates through language, symbols, and everyday practices. It is based on the fundamental idea that the dominant majority imposes its culture and values as "natural" and "neutral," leading weaker groups (minorities) to accept these values without realizing they are subjected to domination.

Bourdieu explains this mechanism by stating that victims accept this violence because, through their upbringing and socialization, they participate in recognizing it as natural and correct. This acceptance becomes part of their daily consciousness, ensuring the continuity of this form of domination [4].

In the case of minorities in Iraq, the effects of symbolic violence are evident when schools, government institutions, and media designate the language and norms of the majority as the "natural" and "superior" standard. Minority languages and symbols are marginalized, while majority norms become the universal benchmark. To secure social acceptance and opportunities, minorities often adapt to this situation, even at the expense of their language and identity.

Thus, symbolic violence operates silently: it does not employ direct force but renders the dominance of the majority socially acceptable and even desirable. For instance, when mastering the majority's language (Standard Arabic) is perceived as a prerequisite for social mobility and prestige, abandoning one's mother tongue appears "natural"—and this constitutes the essence of symbolic violence [4].

The researcher concludes that these three theories converge on the idea that cultural

extinction is not merely the result of direct violence, but rather a long-term process produced through the reproduction of hegemonic patterns within education, media, and institutions—ultimately weakening the symbolic capital of minority groups.

Section Two: Theories of Assimilation and Symbolic Erasure

These theories focus on explaining cultural extinction through processes of enforced assimilation or the erasure of minority cultural symbols.

1. The Theory of Cultural Assimilation and Forced Integration – John Berry

John Berry, in his theory, explains how the culture and identity of individuals change when they live for extended periods within groups different from their own. The theory rests on two key questions that define four types of interaction:

- The first question: Does the individual or group retain their original culture?
- The second question: Does the individual or group participate in the broader society?

Berry's answers to these questions yielded four outcomes:

1) Integration: The individual retains their culture while actively participating in the new society.

2) Assimilation (Fusion): The individual abandons their original culture entirely to become part of the new culture.

3) Separation: The individual insists on preserving their culture while refusing participation in the new society.

4) Marginalization: The individual loses their original culture and does not participate in the new society [10].

In the Iraqi case, minority groups—due to factors such as sectarian violence displacement, policies that do not support linguistic diversity, and weak media representation—are often compelled into forced assimilation. This entails abandoning their languages, customs, and traditions in exchange for security or social acceptance. Human rights and humanitarian reports have confirmed this pattern after 2003 [3], [15].

As a practical solution to mitigate forced assimilation, Iraqi institutions must abandon the "melting pot" approach (which requires uniformity) and instead embrace cultural pluralism. Such pluralism enables minorities to achieve integration—that is, preserving their culture while fully participating in society—in line with international conventions that call for the protection of cultural diversity [16]. The ultimate aim is to safeguard the cultural and linguistic diversity of minorities rather than forcing them to abandon their identity for the sake of social acceptance.

2. The Theory of Symbolic Genocide – Elisa Novic

Novic argues that the destruction of a group can occur through the erasure of its symbols and meanings from the public sphere (such as language, rituals, symbols, and sites of memory), without the need for direct physical violence. This process unfolds by restricting the minority group's ability to express its culture or by undermining the conditions for such expression legally, administratively, and in the media [2]. Novic also examines the conceptual boundaries of this idea, possibilities for protection under international law, and practical proposals for preventing this type of symbolic erasure

[2].

In Iraq, symbolic genocide of minority cultures manifests through restrictions on their public celebrations and rituals, confining them to single spaces (temples, shrines), marginalizing their languages in schools, administration, and media, and erasing memory markers from the public sphere. Post-2003 reports documented a mixture of violence, displacement, and institutional voids that accelerated this erosion [3], [15].

To prevent this, a clear normative framework must be established to guarantee cultural diversity and the right to visibility in the public sphere, in line with the 2005 UNESCO Convention [16].

Analytical Conclusion (Comparative Perspective on Theories)

The researcher concludes that all theories converge in highlighting the structural role of institutions and symbolic power, though they differ in their levels of analysis. Gramsci, Berger–Luckmann, and Bourdieu emphasize symbolic hegemony and the reproduction of identity, while Berry and Novic focus on forced assimilation and the erasure of cultural symbols.

When applied to the Iraqi context, cultural extinction emerges as the outcome of two intertwined trajectories:

1. Symbolic hegemony and identity construction: where majority values are normalized and unconsciously internalized.

2. Assimilation and symbolic genocide: where minorities are either forced to abandon their identities or see their cultural symbols erased from the public sphere.

Causes of Cultural Extinction of Iraqi Minorities, its Societal Implications, and Strategies for Protection

Cultural extinction cannot be reduced merely to the decline of specific rituals or languages; rather, it is the product of a series of structural social mechanisms operating within institutional fields (such as education, media, law, the labour market, and religion) that reproduce symbolic domination. This domination renders the culture of the dominant group the "natural norm," pushing minority cultures toward silence and assimilation (Bourdieu). In this context, the post-2003 shocks—including sectarian conflict, forced displacement, and institutional fragmentation—interacted with a long history of cultural centralization, producing cumulative waves of symbolic erosion (Ferris & Stoltz, UNHCR). The researcher argues that understanding cultural extinction requires moving beyond superficial factors to analysing the institutional mechanisms that reproduce symbolic inequality and entrench the notion that majority culture is the sole and dominant standard. Such analysis shifts the focus from merely describing the phenomenon to uncovering its deeper causes.

Section One: Causes and Manifestations of Cultural Extinction of Iraqi Minorities

First: Manifestations of Cultural Extinction

1. Decline of Mother Tongues and Breakdown of Transmission Chains

Linguistic loss represents a key indicator of the contraction of a community's symbolic capital (Bourdieu). This is evident in the shrinking domestic use of minority languages, their absence from formal education, and the scarcity of available digital

content. These dynamics sever the "intergenerational transmission chain," transforming the language into ritual knowledge without functional value (Minority Rights Group, 2017). The researcher emphasizes that linguistic decline is not an individual failure, but the outcome of a "linguistic market" that devalues minority linguistic capital. Within this market, abandoning the mother tongue becomes a rational strategy to avoid stigma or gain economic opportunities, thereby reinforcing linguistic hegemony without direct coercion.

2. Erosion of Communal Rituals and Public Celebrations

When minority rituals are confined to closed spaces and public festivities are reduced to sporadic commemorations—often cancelled if coinciding with a majority group's mourning event—what emerges is "ritual silence." This signifies the withdrawal of symbolic minority presence from the public sphere and the fading of place-based memory (Novic). Over time, "lived heritage" (dress, songs, crafts) erodes under the pressure of dominant aesthetic standards and commercialized media. Minority symbols are often reduced to stereotypes or used in comedic entertainment, stripping them of social functions (Gramsci). Ritual silence thus reflects the contraction of public space and constitutes a form of "symbolic exclusion." The absence of minorities from visible national narratives diminishes not only the value of their rituals but also their presence within collective memory.

3. Spatial Displacement and Memory Loss

Forced migration and displacement undermine the "right to live in one's homeland" (Ferris & Stoltz, UNHCR). Through this dynamic, the disappearance of public rituals, combined with migration and marginalization, accelerates the erosion of language, symbols, and collective memory. Displacement is more than a demographic shift: it severs the link between community and place-memory, essential for constructing social identity. The loss of sacred or historic sites equates to the loss of living memory, expediting cultural dissolution.

4. Institutional Invisibility

This is manifested in weak minority representation in cultural councils, curriculum committees, and public media, producing a gap between constitutional recognition and the practical implementation of daily policies (UNESCO). The researcher highlights that this invisibility is central to the problem. While official discourse adopts pluralism, the absence of minorities from decision-making structures in cultural, educational, and media institutions reduces constitutional recognition to a merely symbolic slogan, unaccompanied by enforceable policies that enable genuine empowerment.

Second: Deeper Causes of Cultural Extinction

Here we examine the structural causes of the problem, operating at multiple levels: state and public policy, societal institutions, and the sphere of families and individuals.

A. Macro-Level: The State and Public Policies

    1. Gaps in Legal and Executive Recognition

        Despite constitutional acknowledgment of pluralism (Iraqi Constitution,

2005), this recognition lacks binding legislation to protect languages, rituals, and intangible heritage (UNESCO). The researcher argues that legislative reform alone is insufficient without strong enforcement mechanisms. In the absence of detailed laws, constitutional texts risk becoming non-binding declarations, exposing minorities to political and social volatility.

2. Historical Cultural Centralization

National narratives have historically been constructed around a dominant linguistic-religious identity (Arab-Islamic), marginalizing the "cultural citizenship" of minorities (Gramsci). This centralization fostered "cultural hegemony," producing a univocal national story. Within this framework, minority cultures are not considered intrinsic to national identity but treated as peripheral appendages, weakening their sense of equal belonging.

3. Securitization of Identity

In times of conflict, cultural identity is often framed as a "security issue" rather than a resource for social cohesion. Cultural expressions (language, dress, rituals) are perceived as markers of loyalty or potential threats, subjecting them to suspicion and surveillance. This dynamic produces self-censorship, fear, and contraction of public space (Ferris & Stoltz). The researcher contends that securitization is among the most dangerous mechanisms: it transforms diversity from a source of strength into a source of risk, legitimizing repressive policies, fuelling polarization, and justifying violence, thereby compelling minorities to suppress their identities for fear of security repercussions.

B. Meso-Level: The Role of Social Institutions

1. Education

When minority languages and narratives appear only marginally in curricula, assimilation accelerates, as shown in Berry's acculturation framework (Berry). Education thus functions as a mechanism of cultural domination. The absence of cultural representation signals to minority youth that their heritage is "unimportant" or "non-belonging" to the national project, indirectly encouraging its abandonment.

2. Media and Culture

Low quotas of minority representation and the dominance of editorial "gatekeeping" that defines what is "national" or "appropriate" restrict symbolic diversity in the public sphere (Luck). Media here is not simply informational but a symbolic field shaping identity perceptions. Under a majority-dominated standard, minorities struggle to see themselves positively represented, reinforcing their sense of invisibility.

3. Labor Market

Instrumental incentives for integration (jobs, promotions) drive individuals toward "cultural concealment" for acceptance, embedding symbolic violence by naturalizing majority norms (Bourdieu). Thus, the labour market functions as a site of hidden discrimination: professional success becomes contingent on

cultural conformity, institutionalizing structural exclusion.

4. Religious Field

Exclusionary discourses by influential extremist clerics undermine the symbolic legitimacy of minority rituals and narrow their public scope, aligning with the literature on "cultural genocide" (Lemkin, Novic). Extremist rhetoric legitimizes marginalization, demonizes difference, and normalizes exclusion. Criminalizing or suppressing minority rituals marks a step toward "symbolic genocide," often preceding or accompanying physical annihilation.

C. Micro-Level: Families, Individuals, and Everyday Life

1. Child-Rearing Preferences

Some minority families reduce teaching of the mother tongue or displaying religious symbols to avoid stigma at school or in the neighbourhood—an adaptive response to the dominance of majority norms (Bourdieu). Such behaviour is pragmatic: when social institutions (schools, labour markets) value only majority culture, abandoning minority symbols appears as protective strategy against discrimination.

2. Intermarriage

Often results in "symbolic compromise" that marginalizes minority traditions within the household. In the absence of institutional support, these compromises typically favour majority culture, accelerating cultural assimilation at the family level.

3. Digital Space

Iraq suffers from scarce organized digital content in minority languages, limiting accessibility and transmission (Minority Rights Group). Rather than providing a space for language revitalization, the digital sphere reflects majority dominance found in the offline world. This lack of minority-language content severs young generations from their linguistic heritage, exposing them to "digital assimilation."

Section Two: Societal Implications of Cultural Extinction

Cultural extinction is not an issue confined to minorities; it reverberates across Iraqi society as a whole, producing negative effects on social cohesion, political legitimacy, symbolic capital, and developmental trajectories. These implications manifest across several key dimensions:

1) Erosion of Social Capital

The decline in cultural diversity leads to the contraction of bridging social capital, which connects different components of society, while bonding ties grow stronger within closed groups (Berry). Over time, these ties transform into walls separating communities, weakening the society's resilience against division and polarization. This dynamic has rendered national identity in Iraq fragile, as partial affiliations (sectarian or ethnic) have increasingly served as substitutes for comprehensive national belonging, thus preparing the ground for recurring conflicts.

2)   Fragility of Cultural Citizenship

When nationalism is defined in a unilateral manner that excludes minorities, the symbolic legitimacy of the state declines in the eyes of these groups. A state that does not culturally embody the diversity of its citizens cannot demand their full loyalty (UNESCO). In Iraq, cultural citizenship has often remained at the level of rhetoric without institutional translation, leading minorities to perceive the state as a "majoritarian authority" rather than a unifying framework for all.

3)   Recurrence of Identity Conflicts

The marginalization of minority cultures fosters alienation, pushing some individuals toward social withdrawal or even violence to defend their identities. Consequently, cultural disagreements escalate from being a social issue to becoming a direct threat to security and stability (Ferris & Stoltz). The post-2003 rise of sectarian and ethnic identities in Iraq, alongside the weakening of national identity, is a clear example of how cultural marginalization transforms diversity from a source of richness into a source of conflict.

4)   Weakening of National Symbolic Capital

Iraq has lost much of its soft power — defined as the state's ability to influence others through culture, values, and civilizational heritage rather than military force. Iraq's cultural and religious diversity once represented a vital source of this attraction, yet the decline of minorities has eroded part of this symbolic capital, weakening its image in international forums. What was once celebrated as evidence of Iraq's ancient civilizational mosaic has now shifted toward the near absence of minorities from the national scene (Bourdieu). Thus, Iraq's soft power was not merely a reflection of its deep history, but rather the product of its cultural and religious plurality. Today, the marginalization of minorities has emptied this symbolic capital of substance, reducing Iraq's regional and international appeal. Protecting cultural diversity should therefore not be seen solely as a moral or humanitarian obligation, but as a strategic choice to rebuild Iraq's soft power and strengthen its global standing.

5)   Obstruction of Human and Social Development

The Human Development Report (UNDP) highlights that societies lacking diversity suffer from weak creativity and innovation. Diversity is not merely heritage but also a social and economic resource that fuels the economy, culture, and the arts. In Iraq, the reduced presence of minorities in the cultural sphere represents a loss of knowledge and artistic variety that could otherwise have contributed to a renewed creative economy.

6)   Deepening the Trust Gap between State and Citizen

Excluding minorities from decision-making institutions and public space fosters political and social alienation, producing a form of institutional symbolic violence (Bourdieu). This widens the trust gap between the state and its marginalized citizens. The researcher argues that this gap threatens not only minorities but also the very legitimacy of the state, since a state that excludes part of its citizenry forfeits the moral foundation of its authority.

Conclusion of the Section

Cultural extinction generates a chain of repercussions that extend beyond minorities to affect society and the state as a whole. It erodes social capital, undermines citizenship, produces identity conflicts, depletes Iraq's symbolic capital, obstructs human development, and deepens social mistrust. These consequences are not incidental but constitute a structural cost paid over the long term, threatening Iraq's unity and stability. Addressing this phenomenon is therefore not an academic luxury, but a national and security necessity.

Presentation, Analysis, and Interpretation of Research Results, Recommendations, and Conclusion

First: Presentation of General Findings

1) Disintegration of the "Identity-Preserving Structure" through Loss of Place, Language, and Ritual

The results indicate that mass displacement and uprooting from historical centres of minority presence (e.g., Sinjar, the Nineveh Plains, Old Baghdad) weakened the collective right to place and its associated memory and meaning (Ferris & Stoltz, UNHCR). Parallel to this, the everyday use of Syriac, Mandaic, and Armenian languages declined outside religious contexts, and formal learning opportunities became scarce, disrupting intergenerational transmission [15]. Rituals such as Çarşema Sor (the Yazidi New Year) and Creation Day (celebrated by the Mandaeans) have been reduced to localized or diasporic practices, resembling ritual silence that diminishes communal presence in the public sphere [2].

Within the framework of the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann), identity is built and reproduced through interaction with institutions and everyday practices in specific places. Thus, loss of place is not merely a demographic event but a rupture in the cycle of identity construction, impeding the embodiment and internalization of identity. Likewise, the decline in language and ritual signifies the erosion of the group's symbolic capital [4], which is crucial for recognition and self-affirmation. The researcher therefore concludes that the simultaneous disintegration of place, language, and ritual constitutes an existential threat to collective memory and accelerates the cultural assimilation of minorities into the majority culture.

2) Transition from "Tokenistic Pluralism" to "Symbolic Silence"

The study found that textual recognition of pluralism (in discourse and constitutional documents) was not translated into binding policies in education, media, and culture, resulting in low and ineffective minority representation [17]. The outcome is thus declared diversity versus actual homogenization in practice and institutions.

This can be explained through the lens of cultural hegemony [6], whereby the majority's definition of nationhood, modernity, and beauty is legitimized by formal institutions. The researcher argues that tokenistic pluralism is not merely a failure of implementation but a deliberate strategy of hegemony. Minorities are granted limited symbolic space that does not challenge the status quo, thereby sustaining actual marginalization. The resulting "symbolic silence" demonstrates institutional failure to

embrace and enable diversity, transforming difference from a source of richness into a basis for exclusion.

3) Utilitarian–Coercive Assimilation Leading to Cultural Concealment

The study revealed that minorities in Iraq adopt the dominant majority's dialect, clothing, and public symbols, while also participating in majority religious occasions. At the same time, they avoid displaying cultural and religious distinctiveness in schools, workplaces, and neighbourhoods in order to secure social acceptance and job opportunities. This indicates a state of coercive assimilation [10] and symbolic violence [4].

From the perspective of symbolic violence [4], majority norms become "naturalized" and expected, while deviation is indirectly penalized (e.g., through denial of employment or social acceptance). This mechanism compels minorities to practice cultural concealment as a survival strategy. The result aligns with [10] acculturation framework, where non-inclusive policies and market incentives for conformity drive patterns of forced assimilation.

4) Fragility of Cultural Citizenship among Minorities and Erosion of Intergroup Trust

Institutional neglect of minorities weakens their sense of full belonging, which reduces bridging trust between minority groups and the dominant majority. Consequently, bonding ties within each minority group strengthen, rendering society more divided and vulnerable to recurring conflict [18]. The researcher argues that declining trust reflects the absence of cultural citizenship, where constitutional rights fail to translate into genuine feelings of belonging and equality. The erosion of bridging trust is therefore a key indicator of declining social capital, making cross-community cooperation more difficult and entrenching sectarian and ethnic fragmentation.

5) Archival–Digital Gap Threatening Collective Memory

The study highlights the weakness of documentation and digitization initiatives, which leaves the oral traditions, ritual texts, and crafts of Iraqi minorities at risk of extinction. While civil initiatives exist, they remain fragmented and underfunded [15], [17].

The researcher contends that documentation and digitization are not merely technical processes, but political acts aimed at safeguarding memory and existence. The absence of official archives and digital platforms constitutes a form of symbolic erasure [2], whereby cultural memory is obliterated through neglect rather than coercion. This neglect sends future generations the message that their heritage is unworthy of preservation, thereby accelerating collective forgetting.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: The findings demonstrate that cultural extinction is not a contingent phenomenon but rather the outcome of a structural network of power relations reproduced by institutions and reinforced by social and economic incentives. Reversing this trajectory requires simultaneous policies at the legislative, educational, media, and spatial levels. The transition from tokenistic pluralism to effective pluralism

depends on recognition, empowerment, and the creation of platforms for the reproduction of minority cultures—not as exceptions, but as an integral component of the Iraqi national project. **Implication :** The researcher concludes that Iraq's cultural diversity is not a decorative element or a secondary addition to society, but rather a foundational part of its structure. Protecting this diversity must therefore be considered not only a humanitarian or moral responsibility but also a strategic necessity for safeguarding the stability and unity of society in all its dimensions. Confronting cultural extinction requires a transformation in the Iraqi collective consciousness, shifting from perceiving minorities as a "problem" to recognizing them as an "asset" that must be protected and invested in. **Limitation :** Establishing legislative and institutional mechanisms through the enactment of a national law or the creation of a National Council for Cultural Diversity aimed at protecting cultural minorities may face political and bureaucratic resistance, thereby limiting the speed and effectiveness of implementation. Developing official school curricula on Iraqi diversity to be taught from the primary level through university education, alongside training programs to prepare teachers from within minority communities to deliver such curricula, may also be constrained by resource availability and institutional readiness. **Future Research :** Allocating broadcasting quotas to minority groups to independently represent themselves, thereby countering the dominance of commercial media over minority cultural content, opens avenues for future research on media pluralism and its societal impacts. Designing a program to strengthen communication with members of minority communities in the diaspora in order to mobilize their human capital, enabling them to contribute to the preservation of their heritage and reinforcing ties between minorities inside and outside Iraq, highlights the need for further studies on transnational networks. Promoting a legal culture that safeguards the rights of minorities and ethnic groups within Iraqi governmental institutions and universities also suggests future inquiry into the long-term effectiveness of legal reforms in protecting cultural diversity.

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