Beyond Ethnicity?

Some recent theoretical trends in the study of ethnicity and nationalism

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It has been remarked — I think by Stanley Tambiah — that the classic Barthian perspective on ethnic groups and boundary-maintenance, which was developed during the sixties, seems all but too benign if we wish to come to terms with the contemporary world. Today's world is one torn by violent conflicts, which frequently have an important ethnic element.

This dark observation, together with the fact that our informants and societies under investigation are nowadays busy fashioning their own theories of ethnicity and nationhood, has in recent years led to a re-phrasing, and in some cases a deconstruction, of the very concept of ethnicity. Borrowing from Ardener (1989), one could say that ethnicity, which has been an important *defining* concept, may be about to collapse into the *defined* space. It no longer seems to contribute to an explanation of the social world; it has itself become a phenomenon to be explained.

Due to these and other developments, there has been a clear shift in emphasis in studies of ethnicity and nationalism over the past few years. The trend has moved the focus away from studies of inter-group dynamics to attempts, some of them constructivist (cf. most of the contributions to Tonkin et al., 1989), to conceptualise the processes of identification themselves. There has also been an increased concern to understand ethnicity as a product of modernity. Perhaps surprisingly, only very few recent studies have tried to refine our theoretical understanding of ethnic conflicts (a major exception is Kapferer, 1988). On the other hand, it could hopefully be argued that much of the recent work may be relevant not only for an understanding of these conflicts, but also for the prevention of new ethnic conflicts. In this paper,[1] I shall trace out some of the main recent perspectives on ethnicity and nationalism.

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[1] The bulk of the paper is remarkably similar to Chapter 8 in my book *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (Eriksen, 1993).

Homogenisation and fragmentation

It is a feature of the contemporary world that groups and individuals seem to become more similar *and* more different at the same time. In Ernest Gellner's words, "modern society is *both* more homogeneous *and* more diversified than those which preceded it" (Gellner, 1978:141). Anthropological perspectives on ethnicity, stressing its relational and processual nature, enable us to see this contradiction as a fundamental duality between similarity and difference, between inclusion and exclusion, between homogenisation and fragmentation. A wide range of studies of ethnic relations have demonstrated that although people in a certain sense become more similar because of modernisation, they simultaneously become more distinctive, and ethnicity is one main expression of this diversification. Ethnicity entails making cultural differences comparable, and thereby implies homogenisation as well as differentiation. Ethnic differentiation, moreover, draws upon social, cultural and political resources which presuppose a prior institutionalisation of the contacts between the groups and their integration into a single system in certain respects. This, at least, is a rather off-hand way of stating the orthodox anthropological position on ethnicity in the early-to-mid 1990s. In what follows, I would like to move a few steps further in light of recent research and theorising on social identification.

Changes in social theory

Most research on ethnicity implicitly presupposes that the nation-state is the "pre-eminent power-container in our era", to use Giddens' (1985) formulation. This is generally true of minority studies whether aboriginal or urban, studies of secessionist movements or "proto-nations", and studies of power struggles or identity processes in "plural societies". Many social scientists have questioned this assumption in recent years, and argue that the world has changed in such a way that the nation-state is no longer an appropriate synonym for "greater society". Perhaps Eric Hobsbawm is correct when he attributes the currently great academic interest in nationalism to the Hegelian notion that "the owl of Minerva flies at dusk" (Hobsbawm, 1990) — in other words, that the age of the nation-state is nearly over. And perhaps Ulf Hannerz (1992), Arjun Appadurai (1990) and other anthropologists are correct in suggesting that many contemporary men and women

tend to seek their identifications and social alignments along different axes than what was formerly the case — largely because capitalism and modern communication technology, from the satellite dish to the jet plane, have relativised the *spatial* dimension in human life. In Roland Robertson's somewhat hyperbolic phrase, the world has become a single place (Robertson, 1990).

Even more radical conclusions are arrived at by Anthony Giddens (1990; 1991) and Immanuel Wallerstein (1991), who both argue the need for a profound re-thinking of the categories of social science. In Wallerstein's view, the very concept of *society* has become obsolete — it may have been a useful nineteenth-century metaphor, but in his view, it is a misleading one in the seamless world-system of the late twentieth century.

Starting from an opposite direction, several theorists have questioned the category of the *individual*. A common notion here is that individuals in the present world are less "integrated" and somehow more transient and free-floating — situationally shifting, really — than what was formerly the case. In particular, I have theory of post modernism or post-modernity in mind (cf. Lash & Friedman, 1991; Turner, 1990). An interesting interpretation of this "condition" is provided by the social anthropologist Marilyn Strathern, who has argued that it is *our cultural fiction* of the integrated and bounded individual, who is presumably a member of "a culture" and who lives his or her life as a continuous, directed person, which is about to lose its credibility (Strathern, 1992).

Much of this theorising seems to concern only a small, rich part of the world's population — bored urban secularised Western intellectuals and heavy consumers — however, the globalisation of culture and the relativisation of boundaries has a very widespread, if uneven, effect. At the time of the nuclear disaster in Chernobyl in 1986, I was on fieldwork in Mauritius and found that rural Indo-Mauritian cane-cutters discussed its consequences in the rum shop. Similarly, knowledge about possibilities for emigration to particular countries is widespread in many rural areas in poor countries — and "everybody" listens to American pop music. Unlike the globalisation of earlier times (from plantation economies onwards), this form of globalisation stimulates the emergence of a reflexive consciousness about the global system. In brief, many of the local communities of the world seem to become increasingly integrated into the global system on a political, economic and cultural level. It is doubtless true that "[r]ecent decades have seen intensified flows

of people, commodities, money, ideas, information and images on a global level" (Featherstone, 1990). Surely, such processes must have consequences at the level of social identity?

Changes in the social world

Another important feature of our day and age is the fact that social identities in many parts of the world now seem to be more open to negotiation than they were in the decades following the Second World War. All over Europe, from Ireland and Norway to the Caucasus and Andalusia, a lively public discourse concerns which collective identities to attach oneself to. New nation-states have been formed after the symbolic demolition of the Berlin Wall, and new minority problems arise. Simultaneously, old nation-states transfer some of their power to a new supra-national unit, the European Union. New regionalist and ethnic movements emerge on both sides of the EU/EC boundary, and people are torn between what they see as the old and the new. Elsewhere in the world, there are also powerful ideological movements competing for people's adherence — politicised Islam in the Middle East, separatism and casteism in India, indigenous and "ethnic minority" movements in North America, and so on. Very many of these movements share the crucial feature of appealing to people's sense of primordial bonds and cultural authenticity, although not all of them could be defined as "ethnic" or "nationalist". *Politicisation of culture* seems to be a more useful tag for these processes, whereby cultural identity is being exploited for political purposes.

On the one hand, then, we witness powerful centripetal waves of cultural homogenisation, tighter economic integration (*viz.* the role of the World Bank and the IMF in the poor countries), increasing participation in wage work and the monetary economy, increasing consumption of global cultural merchandise (from soap operas to Coca-Cola) and an increased flow of people to and from various destinations. The coming of satellite television creates conditions for *simultaneity* on a global scale: events may be witnessed anywhere no matter where they take place. "Foreign is elsewhere!" exclaimed a nostalgic correspondent for *The Times* (UK) in April, 1992, after having crossed the European continent without once encountering what he conceived of as cultural Otherness.

On the other hand, new "localisms" — usually of an ethnic, religious or regional nature — continue to emerge and to assert their demands vis-a-vis the centres. As several analysts have argued,

processes of modernisation or homogenisation are necessary conditions for these movements to develop and to articulate their demands effectively. Regarding nationalism, the very idea of nationalism is a globalised one, which was initially developed in Europe and European Diaspora, but which is by no means confined to these areas today. Besides, social integration into wider systems is a condition for their identities to become relevant at all, since it is contact and not isolation that engenders social identification. This is obvious enough — studies of ethnogenesis have indicated the importance of social change and contact with others for the emergence of new social identities. The question, nevertheless, remains — and it is relevant for our concept of ethnicity: What will such identities look like in the future?

Globalisation and localisation

Students of ethnic and national identities and ideologies are, if anything, at the centre of the theoretical and historical upheavals which I have alluded to. In a series of interrelated articles, Jonathan Friedman (1987; 1990; 1991) has proposed a research programme for a social anthropology which takes the challenge from post-modernity seriously. Friedman starts from the assumption that globalisation and localisation are two mutually dependent, interrelated processes. As Hannerz has argued in a similar theoretical framework (Hannerz, 1990), cosmopolitans depend on locals in order to be able to conceive themselves, and to be regarded as, cosmopolitan. We may also add that perhaps it is true that the world is a single place — but if so, it is locally constructed! Notwithstanding migration and other globalising tendencies, people still live in *places*.

Friedman stresses that different inhabitants and groups of inhabitants in the world are in highly different structural and cultural positions, and that these differences must be elucidated. Sensing the imminence of a dramatic transformation, he describes the current situation like this:

> It might seem difficult, if not wrong, to attempt to find unity in a world that is increasingly described in terms of fragmentation, disintegration, meaninglessness and cultural mix. I have tried, nevertheless, to locate the strands of what appears to be a single complex process of global transformation. This is not to say, of course, that there are no local structures, no autonomous cultural schemes, but that their orchestration occurs via a score whose principal theme is the decline of Western hegemony, which takes different forms in

> different parts of the global arena. Modernity moves east, leaving post-modernity in its wake; religious revival, ethnic renaissance, roots and nationalism are resurgent as modernist identity becomes increasingly futile in the West. In the structural confusion that characterises the period, the periphery and margins of the system also react, in ... a complex combination of Third and Fourth World strategies. (Friedman, 1991:360)

Friedman then outlines five major strategies, what he calls "life-strategies, models for satisfying the structures of desire that emerge in the different niches of the global system" (*idem.*).

The first is *modernist*. According to this view, society can be governed effectively on moral and sensible principles, and self, society and the world can develop according to presently conventional criteria.

The four remaining strategies build on the assumption that this kind of social and political identity is untenable because it has not delivered the goods. The first of these is plainly *post-modern*, and can assume two, complementary shapes: a cynical distancing from all identification, but an acute awareness of the lack of identity; and a narcissistic dependence on consumption as a means for the presentation of self. A great number of critical analyses of modern society accuse capitalism and large-scale society of encouraging this fragmented, unpolitical and nihilistic kind of social identity — from philosophers like Marcuse (1964) via social analysts such as Berger (1977), Lasch (1980) and Sennett (1977) to historians of ideas such as Bloom (1987) and Finkielkraut (1987).

The second strategy is *traditionalist*. It can be religious and/or ethnic, and it includes many if not most ethnic and nationalist movements. According to Friedman, this kind of project is caused by an experienced need with individuals in modern societies to "engage himself in a larger project in which identity is concrete and fixed despite mobility, success and other external changes in social conditions" (1991:361). Eco-political movements are related to these strategies (cf. Giddens, 1990, on "green" traditionalism). Many ethnic movements may thus, within this analytic framework, be lumped with "deep ecologists" and religious fundamentalists as *traditionalists*. Although they frequently appear as anti-modern, modernity is a condition for their emergence.

The third strategy is labelled *Third World*, and is developed in order to attract wealth and power through clientship. Patron–client chains operate both domestically and internationally. Consumption

is deemed important by the adherents of this strategy; the development of national infrastructure is abandoned.

The final strategy is called "Fourth World", and is described as the strategy of "exit from the system" — the formation of politically autonomous communities which aim at re-establishing a formerly repressed identity and life-style.

These five "life-strategies" are not mutually exclusive, but they do suggest (i) great qualitative variations within the global system, and (ii) that there *is* a global system which one has to relate to. It could be stated that virtually every inhabitant of the world is, today, forced to be a citizen (cf. Maybury-Lewis, 1984). In line with globalisation theory, one might add that virtually everybody is forced to be a consumer in some way or other. Combinations of "Third" and "Fourth World" strategies seem to be widespread among indigenous peoples, who simultaneously strive for self-determination and for a higher material standard of living. Immigrant groups in Europe may combine "traditionalist/ethnic/religious" and "post-modern" strategies. Similarly, combinations of "modernist" and "post-modernist" strategies may be common in Western Europe, where people are simultaneously strongly concerned with their own lifestyle and the condition of their society.

What is remarkable about Friedman's (and others') contributions is the conviction that the world has indeed changed in such a way as to allow for other kinds of social alignments than those which were formerly viable. Some of these alignments will have an ethnic tag, whereas others will not. The Islamic movement of the Middle East and North Africa can scarcely be considered an ethnic one. It aims at including a great number of peoples who are acknowledged to be culturally diverse. However, it has features which are similar to ethnic movements: it is anti-modernist and traditionalist, it draws on politicised culture, and it aims at a symbolic reconstitution of seemingly vanishing aspects of society, culture and identity.

Identities and loyalties

On the subject of segmentary identities, I. M. Lewis writes: "A committed internationalist condemns parochial nationalism (little Englanderism) just as unequivocally as a nationalist condemns tribalism, a tribalist clannishness, and a clansman familism" (Lewis, 1985:359). Since Evans-Pritchard's (1940) depiction of the segmentary lineage among the Nuer, this way of thinking has been with us in social anthropology. This perspective on identity and groups can

be very illuminating in ethnicity studies. We shall nevertheless move one step further. For Evans-Pritchard, in his seminal study, did not merely deal with the segmentary character of identities — political identities as concentric circles, so to speak — but he also indicated that *conflicting loyalties* may reduce tensions and prevent conflicts between lineage's.

The Nuer are patrilineal. If a sufficient number of Nuer men in lineage X have affines in lineage Y — either because they are married to a woman from lineage Y, or because their sister is married to a man from that lineage — this is a strong incentive not to start a feud with that lineage. If only a few men are so aligned, and the feud is a fact, the minority may experience conflicting loyalties — they may feel ill at ease whether they take part in the fighting or stay at home. Multiple or conflicting loyalties, moreover, do not only operate on the basis of kinship; enduring bonds between men are also formed on the basis of age-group fellowship, trade and personal friendship. According to Evans-Pritchard's own analysis, and particularly in Gluckman's (1982) re-analysis of his material, this criss-crossing web of conflicting loyalties seems to create a relatively stable social system of the acephalous and potentially perennially warlike Nuer groupings.

In terms of ethnicity, multiple loyalties may be a problem for minorities, whose members may often be loyal to — and indeed members of — two ethnic groups or nations, or one ethnic group and one nation. But why ought this to be a problem? Clearly because the ideology of the nation-state remains hegemonic and the relationship between states is seen as one of potential conflict. Here, we should perhaps remember that the United *Nations* (*sic*) is an organisation of states which is generally not entitled to meddle in internal affairs. When Saddam Hussein entered Kuwait in August 1991, he broke the international rules; but when he tried out new chemical weapons on Iraqi Kurds, he did not.

Many people in the contemporary world are structurally placed so as to have multiple loyalties in ethnic terms. Apart from labour migrants, refugees and expatriates, transnational families are an obvious, increasingly common example. However, multiple loyalties need not follow ethnic lines. Kenneth Little (1978) has shown how gender loyalty (between women) can cut across ethnic lines in African societies, mitigate potential conflict and create problems for attempts ethnic group formation. If women perceive that they have shared interests against the men, across ethnic boundaries, then

their gender identity will situationally overrule the ethnic identity. Another basis for loyalty and identity can be social class membership. Even in the poly-ethnic society of Mauritius, where there is general agreement that the ethnic divisions are the most important ones, solidarity along class lines occasionally form: in 1970 and in 1979, there were major strikes uniting Creoles, Hindus and Muslims against their employers (Eriksen, 1988). In this case, class solidarity evidently overruled the ethnic solidarity, since several of the employers belonged to the same ethnic categories as the strikers.

In the contemporary world, social identities may form along several other lines as well. Employees of transnational companies are trained to be loyal to their company rather than their country, and many thousands may be assigned to appointments in foreign countries. Networks of professional solidarity are also transnational and cut across ethnic lines. An English anthropologist would definitely have something in common with an Indian anthropologist which he did not have in common with his neighbour. Rock enthusiasts from all over Western Europe gather at Reading, Glastonbury, Roskilde (Denmark) and other major festivals during the summer. This kind of collective event obviously provides opportunities for the expression of shared identity. And we could go on. The question which must be asked, pertains to whether or not ethnic identities are by default more "basic" than others. Some would say yes, others would say no — and that is the state of the art.

We should stress here that multiple identities are not the same as segmentary identities. Multiple identities cannot be arranged in concentric circles in orderly ways; they can scarcely be represented graphically at all. They cut across each other: one has a shared identity with different people at different times. In this kind of social setting, the status sets of individuals are not clustered about multiplex relationships to a limited number of people; they are diverse and flexible.

Gender and ethnicity

In other words, non-ethnic identities and principles of social differentiation can be highly important. The relationship between class and ethnicity has been mentioned briefly, and has also been dealt with in some of the professional literature, particularly in the 1970s. *Gender* identity is arguably also of great social importance in every human society, although gender-based political organisations are comparatively rare. Just as research on ethnicity, at least from Barth

(1969) onwards, has indicated that ethnicity should be divorced from culture, recent research on gender has argued that gender should not be seen as primarily biological, but rather as cultural constructions whose legitimacy is justified through references to biology (cf. Strathern, 1988: Chaps. 1–2). According to these perspectives, gender is also most fruitfully seen a *social relation* and not as an essence consisting of "properties" or "personality traits" — again, there are striking parallels to theorising on ethnicity.

The relationship between gender and ethnicity varies to such an extent, and can be so complex, that it would require a monograph to do justice to the subject. I shall therefore only give a bare outline of some central issues.

Sexual stereotyping is in many societies related to ethnicity in the sense that some ethnic categories of men (e.g. blacks in the United States) may have a reputation for sexual prowess and some categories of women similarly may have reputations as prudish or wanton. Gender imagery is often used to describe ethnic groups as a whole ("the X'es are effeminate"; "the Y's are crude brutes with no manners", etc.).

In some societies in the Caribbean, there is a strong symbolic interrelationship between class, ethnicity and gender in social classification. In Trinidad, the (emic) classificatory poles are African—Indian, Male—Female and Working Class—Middle Class. In general, women, Indians and members of the middle class are held to share certain characteristics — they are considered more "respectable" than men, Africans and members of the working class, who are considered to be strong individualists with little sense of responsibility. If somebody does not, for example, turn up at an appointment, this may be explained through referring to the fact that he is a man, an African and/or a member of the working class.

Regarding the structural position in society, there are interesting similarities between women in some societies and some indigenous groups to the extent that they are "muted" categories (Ardener's, 1989, expression) with little formal power. Both oppressed women and oppressed indigenous are compelled to use the language of the dominators in order to be able to express their interests; neither has the power to define the terms of discourse. Both groups are taught that their specific social identity is immutable and (at least in the case of women) biological, and as a consequence that their subordination is "natural". Both groups may be told that their contribution

to society is inestimable and that they should therefore remain subordinated.

There is nevertheless a fundamental difference between gender systems and other systems of differentiation, including ethnicity: In every human society, there is an ideology to the effect that men and women need each other; that they are complementary. Ethnic minorities may be expelled, exterminated or ignored — women cannot be treated in the same way if the political leaders plan for societal continuity in time. Physical segregation along gender lines is also much more difficult to achieve than segregation along ethnic lines. In every society where it makes sense to talk of domestic and public fields of interaction, both genders will be represented in the domestic fields.

Some interesting perspectives on gender imagery in ethnic and nationalist ideology are discussed in Anthias & Yuval-Davies (1989), one of the few books which discuss the relationship between nationalism and gender (cf. also Parker et al., 1992). The contributors show that insofar as gender relations are made symbolically relevant in nationalist ideology, they tend to reproduce a patriarchal view on the family. If the nation is regarded as a metaphoric kin group, then the mother's metaphorical role must be to reproduce — to raise children and to provide domestic services. In war imagery, this passive role of women is particularly evident. "The fathers have fought/and the mothers have wept" goes a famous line in the Norwegian national anthem. If the nation-state is symbolically depicted as a family writ large, then it makes sense to investigate actual family relations in the society in question to find the sources of nationalist imagery. Here we may find that nationalism tends to reproduce and strengthen the gender relations already prevalent in a society, albeit placing them at a more abstract level.

It can be about as difficult for a man to join a militant feminist group as it would be for him to change his ethnic membership in absolute terms. The point is not, therefore, that all notions of gender differences or cultural differences are pure inventions, but that every distinction — no matter how "objective" or "natural" it may seem to us — needs to be codified culturally in order to be recognised.

Beyond ethnicity?

Studies of ethnicity have tended to accentuate the enactment of boundary mechanisms and the use of overt markers of distinctive-

ness in the reproduction of ethnic identities. However, as we have seen, the social world can rarely be neatly divided into fixed groups with clear boundaries, unambiguous criteria for membership and an all-encompassing social relevance. Therefore, a one-sided focus on ethnicity may prevent a researcher from seeing social systems in other ways which may also be relevant.

First of all, the existence of *ethnic anomalies* or liminal categories should serve as a reminder that group boundaries are not unproblematic. These are groups or individuals who are "betwixt and between", who are neither X nor Y and yet a bit of both. Their actual group membership may be open to situational negotiation, it may be ascribed by a dominant group, or they may form a separate ethnic category.

Secondly, non-ethnic criteria for group membership are situationally relevant in every society, and in complex modern societies they proliferate and can be identified as multiple identities. Different forms of group loyalty and membership may be largely congruent with ethnic membership, or they may cut across it.

Is it still analytically fruitful to think about the social world in terms of ethnicity? Perhaps a wider term, such as "social identification", would be more true to the flux and complexity of ongoing social processes, and would allow us to study group formation and alignments along a greater variety of axes than a single-minded focus on "ethnicity" would. As Hannerz has stressed, cultural complexity combined with group differentiation is not necessarily linked with ethnicity. "Complex societies have other kinds of interfaces between varieties of common sense, other kinds of marginality [as well as ethnicity]" (Hannerz, 1992:133; cf. Eriksen, 1992: Chap. 9).

A problem concerning the concept of ethnicity is that it seems to imply that there exists *an ethnic phenomenon* (van den Berghe, 1981) in the world which requires a single explanation — which has biological or other shared and objective origins. We should be cautious of reifying the concept of ethnicity in this way. Rather, we would be well advised to follow Comaroff & Comaroff (1992:54), who state that ethnicity "describes both a set of relations and a mode of consciousness". As a mode of consciousness, however, "it is one among many (...) each of which is produced as particular historical structures impinge themselves on human experience and condition social action" (*idem.*).

A related question concerns the ways in which we think about ethnic boundaries. Such boundaries are frequently ambiguous. In this regard, the classic theory of the plural society (Smith, 1965) seems to be flawed in that it assumes, in a rather axiomatic way, that ethnic alignments are the most basic ones in poly-ethnic societies. It is not always obvious who is a member of a group and who is not, and it is not always obvious which kinds of groups count and which do not. We cannot assume *a priori* that ethnic alignments are more important than others.

Research on group formation and social identities has tended to regard groups as mutually exclusive in a *digital* way: either one is a member of X or one is not. However, people can often be *somewhat* X. The digital way of thinking about groups and identities may have been influenced by nationalist ideology and practice, according to which one cannot simultaneously be and not be a citizen in a state/a member of a nation. However, in real life, people do normally not classify each other just by referring to their citizenship. Many other status's are relevant. Therefore, it may, perhaps, be more appropriate to think of identity in general as an *analogic* phenomenon than as a *digital* one. Conceptualised in this way, *degrees* of sameness and difference, of inclusion and exclusion may be identified. People may be a bit of this and a bit of that.

Let us sum up, in order to conclude this part of the essay: Social identities may be conceptualised as fluid, negotiable, situational, analogic and segmentary. It is an empirical question whether different identities are mutually exclusive, and whether ethnic communities can be invented. Identification is elastic and negotiable, although it is not infinitely flexible. Finally, it is a universal fact that not everybody can take part in a given community. All categorisations of group membership must have boundaries; they depend on the creation of *others* in order to make sense.

In the following empirical example, I shall outline a contemporary, ongoing social process where it may seem as if ethnicity is losing its relevance.

The end of ethnicity?

Whether or not ethnic identities become politically relevant depends on the wider social context. Ethnicity can assume different forms and may arise from different historical circumstances. Moreover, ethnic "revitalisation" may be an inherent feature of modernity, and many modernisation theorists who held that ethnic alignments were

becoming obsolete, were wrong. However, we should also remember that when all is said and done, ethnicity does not *necessarily* arise from modernity, and it is not necessarily an end-product.

The labour market in the Indian Ocean island-state of Mauritius was traditionally strongly ethnically segregated.[2] Because of industrialisation (during and after the 1980s) and democratisation of the political system (from 1947 onwards), this segregation is in many areas giving way to a labour market recruiting its employees on the basis of individual merit rather than ethnic membership. A great number of the new factories and hotels are owned by foreigners with no ethnic commitments. Merit rather than connections becomes a criterion for recruitment.

Simultaneously, the democratisation of education is deepening. A growing number of Mauritians receive higher education abroad and later return to the island. Before independence, higher education was generally reserved for a handful of wealthy families. In the towns, people increasingly live in neighbourhoods appropriate to their class instead of ethnic neighbourhoods. Also, new venues for informal social life appear: snack bars, new sports clubs, parties organised by the larger employers, and so on. Most of these new arenas are not constituted on an ethnic basis.

From the individual Mauritian's point of view, his or her opportunities appear very different from what they would thirty years ago. Individual achievement is highly praised in official rhetoric. One can no longer rely on one's family. One competes as an individual on an equal footing with members of every "community", including one's own. At school and at work, one encounters people from other ethnic categories and has important shared experiences with them.

From the societal perspective, industrial Mauritius is compelled to compete in the world market in unprecedented ways. Employees are thus being taught that their country's welfare depends on their achievement. The other groups relevant for one's own social identity thus tend to become foreign states rather than domestic ethnic groups. Such a shift in identity focus, if it is successful, can be seen as an indication of an integration at a higher systemic level, where new sets of relationship are created. A good illustration of this was the spontaneous upsurge of nationalist sentiment in Mauritius following the international sports tournament *Les Jeux des Iles de*

[2] The following ethnographic sketch draws on as yet unpublished material collected in Mauritius in 1986 and, chiefly, in 1991-2. Cf. also Eriksen (1988: Chap. 5; 1992).

l'Océan Indien in 1985. Suddenly, dichotomisations between Mauritians and foreigners were becoming more relevant than those distinguishing Mauritians from each other (Eriksen, 1988: Chap. 5).

There has been a noticeable growth in inter-ethnic marriages (Oodiah, 1992). When the family has little to offer by way of material security, "love marriages" become more viable than they were. What will be the identity of the children of such alliances? In many cases, the children are classified as "some kind of Creoles", since the Creoles are regarded as a "mixed" ethnic category. For many of these children, it would be a hopeless project to trace their genealogies and thereby establish their ancestry. There are individuals like the journalist who can count no less than nine different "peoples" among his ancestors — from Brittany to Canton!

If the trend of inter-ethnic marriages continues, an ultimate effect may be the end of ethnicity as we know it today. There will be too many "anomalous" individuals around to maintain clear-cut distinctions. Loyalties may, as a consequence, increasingly be related to local history, culture and identities rather than to "ancestral cultures". Maybe the majority of Mauritians will regard their "ancestral culture" as being that mixture of influences which has shaped Mauritius. And perhaps a majority of the population will regard Kreol — the only language which grew out of the inter-ethnic encounters in Mauritius — as their ancestral language. A woman of Tamil origin explains that her ancestral language was Kreol since her parents as well as her grandparents spoke it, "and as far as I'm concerned, they are ancestral enough". (How many generations must one go back in time in order to establish one's "ancestry"? This, of course, is socially defined.)

This kind of scenario is possible but not inevitable. Calls for religious purity are common and new traditionalist movements are being formed, particularly in the countryside. The leaders of these movements rail against what they see as the decadence associated with urbanism, modernity and cultural homogenisation or "creolisation". The potential appeal of such movements depends on what they have to offer. If they can convince a sufficiently large number of people that they offer economic security and/or personal integrity, they may be successful. However, such a "new wave of ethnicity" may divide the Mauritian population along unfamiliar lines, since its main base will probably be the countryside. The rural/urban, or industrial/agricultural opposition may become more salient than the Creole/Hindu dichotomy.

There are two main factors militating against the fusion of ethnic categories. First, the family is still important in Mauritius, and parents are not likely to encourage mixed marriages. Secondly, religion is a strong factor in boundary-maintenance. If the parties to an inter-ethnic marriage practice different religions, the chances for the marriage to endure are relatively slim. The majority of stable mixed marriages involve couples who either belong to the same religion (by birth or by conversion) or where religion does not play an important part in their lives.

In addition, many Mauritians dislike the idea of the disappearance of distinctive "cultures". "Keep the colours of the Mauritian rainbow distinct, and it will remain beautiful," was the advice of the Catholic Archbishop of Mauritius at a meeting in 1991.

If it is easy to discern the end of ethnicity in persons, social contexts and important aspects of the social structure of Mauritius, it is almost as easy to discover ethnic revitalisation. That, in fact, is what many anthropologists studying social change have done in various societies. Movements of ethnic revitalisation are much more spectacular than the quiet daily movement towards mutual accommodation in complex societies, and they are perhaps therefore more attractive as objects of study. This does not, however, necessarily mean that such movements are more representative than moves towards the end of ethnicity in particular societies. After all, seen through the perspective of *la longue durée*, the eventual disappearance of ethnic groups is no less certain than their appearance.

The eye of the beholder

During the heyday of Marxist social science in the 1970s, numerous well researched studies were published on classic "plural societies" such as the USA, Mauritius, Trinidad and Malaysia. Many of these studies seemed to show unequivocally that ethnic conflict and ethnic identity were surface phenomena which were, allegedly, ultimately determined by domestic class relations or by international imperialism. Few would argue in the same manner twenty years later, although the societies themselves may not have changed profoundly. This should serve as a reminder that the choice of an analytical perspective or "research hypotheses" is not an innocent act. If one goes out to look for ethnicity, one will "find" it and thereby contribute to constructing it. For this reason, a concern with the non-ethnic dimensions of poly-ethnic societies can be a healthy corrective and supplement to analyses of ethnicity.

The anthropological interest in ethnicity is not universal. In French anthropology, the concept of *ethnicité* has never caught on in the same way as the word ethnicity has in British and American anthropology (Taylor, 1991). The connotations of *ethnie* ("ethnic group") in French are sometimes uncomfortably close to obsolete notions of race or reifying notions of "cultures". This does not merely concern a difference in the choice of words; differences in terminology may (as we have seen in the case of ethnic labels) indicate differences in epistemology. When mainstream French anthropologists study what we would speak of as political ethnicity, they may subsume it under the study of politics in general; when concerned with ethnic identity processes and ideology, they may connect these issues with studies of identity and ideology in general (e.g. Lévi-Strauss, 1977), rather than assuming that there is such a thing as an "ethnic phenomenon" which merits to be elevated to the status of a comparative concept. Thus, in Pierre Bonté's and Michel Izard's massive *Dictionnaire de l'ethnologie et de l'anthropologie* (Bonté & Izard, 1991), there is no entry on *ethnicité*, but the subject is briefly treated under keywords such as *ethnie* and *ethnies minoritaires*. This difference should remind us that when all is said and done, ethnicity is a social and cultural product *which anthropologists contribute to creating*. If we go to Mauritius, the Copper belt or to the Peruvian highlands in search of gender, we shall no doubt find gender; the same holds good for, say, class, ideology and kinship systems. What is now called for is, in my view, a focus on interrelationships between systems of social classification and power structures as they coexist in societies — in other words, to move complexity itself to the forefront.

* * *

More than two decades of intensive research on ethnicity have indicated how a focus on ethnic processes may enable us to investigate issues which are of crucial importance in social anthropology: the relationship between culture, identity and social organisation; the relationship between meaning and politics; the multivocality of symbols; social processes of classification; the relationships between action and structure, structure and process, and continuity and change. The focus on ethnicity has opened up exciting new fields in social anthropology, and it still has a lot to recommend it. Nonetheless, we ought to be critical enough to abandon the concept of

ethnicity the moment it becomes a straitjacket rather than a tool for generating new understanding.

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