

# Ethnogenesis in Anthropology

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## Abstract

Ethnogenesis is a process by which a distinct ethnic group emerges with a common sociocultural consciousness of belonging. The concept, coming on the anthropological studies in the 1960s, has been regenerated during the 1990s with new implications. It is used to focus on the interaction between global and local histories, especially on local initiatives to deal with the impact of globalization. Ethnogenesis therefore refers to cultural and political struggles by indigenous and enslaved populations to create enduring identities at times of often violently imposed radical change resulting from European domination. In the contemporary world system, they have begun to assert their sociocultural and politico-economic rights by reclaiming 'natural' sentiment of ethnicity. Ethnogenesis is thus becoming a key concept to diagnose and understand society in the twenty-first century.

Ethnogenesis is a process by which a distinct ethnic group emerges with a common sociocultural consciousness of belonging. In the 1960s Singer (1962) analyzed the process among African-Americans and Sturtevant (1971) subsequently introduced this term into the anthropological study of native Americans. Since then it has been widely utilized for examining the consciousness of belonging among various populations.

Although Sturtevant did no more than point out how ethnogenesis could be used to analyze the historical establishment of group distinctiveness, the concept has been regenerated during the 1990s with new implications. It is used to focus on the interaction between global and local histories, especially on local initiatives to deal with the impact of globalization. Ethnogenesis therefore refers to cultural and political struggles by indigenous and enslaved populations to create enduring identities at times of often violently imposed radical change resulting from European domination – such as demographic collapse, forced relocation, or enslavement. The idea of ethnogenesis refutes the established view of societies in the Third World as isolated, static, and ahistorical. Instead it pays attention to their creativity and ways of making history.

## Theoretical Background

Currently the focus on issues of ethnicity has shifted from study of particular ethnic groups to looking at the dynamic process of ethnogenesis. This was made possible by the continued development of new theoretical understandings of ethnicity. Following Barth's contribution (1969), the subjective and interactive aspects of ethnicity began to gain attention. Despite the pre-eminence accorded the objective and primordial aspects of ethnicity by earlier perspectives, Barth did not regard ethnic identity as constituting an *a priori* reality, but as being an interactive process of self-definition and classification by others.

Actors categorize themselves and others in relation to how they interact with one another. It is when they use an ethnic identity to categorize themselves that Barth sees an ethnic group emerging. He rejected the prevailing idea that

geographical and cultural isolation or separation is essential to the preservation of ethnic groups and the maintenance of cultural diversity. Instead he insisted that ethnic differentiation forms an overall social system; what is to be studied, consequently, is not the internal relations of the individual ethnic group, but the way the different ethnic groups establish boundaries. This perspective led to the view that ethnicity involved a formative process.

Another shift in the 1980s was the emergence of new perspectives that sought to deconstruct ethnicity as an essential entity. Deconstructionism in the social sciences exercised its influence to show how seemingly essential categories such as sex, generation, and race are far from being natural and *a priori*, but are an invention of modern society. Hobsbawm and Ranger showed that what had been taken to be traditional elements in symbols, customs, myths, and identity were actually invented as part of a dynamic process in the course of modern nation-building. According to this view, ethnic identity is also a modern invention that has been shaped in a political and historical way within the frame of the nation-state. This deconstructionist perspective, together with a subjective active view of ethnicity, provided a basis for the social sciences to theorize the phenomenon of ethnogenesis.

## Ethnogenesis and Ethnocide

The concept of ethnogenesis has developed from studies of societies in the New World. Here the indigenous population was conquered and oppressed in the centuries after 1492. In addition, an enormous number of people with different cultural-linguistic backgrounds were transported from Africa and set to work as slaves. This is a process of ethnocide.

Ethnocide means the extermination of a culture. It involves the systematic destruction of cultural identities, ecosystems, political authorities, and religious rituals and belief systems. Common forms of ethnocide included the forced conversion to the religion of the colonizers, the banning of the use of native languages and cultural practices, and the forced relocation from the homeland to reservations.

Although it differs from genocide, which means the physical destruction of a whole people, the distinction is not always clear, and the two phenomena may occur together. Following the arrival of Columbus in the New World in 1492, the Arawak and Carib peoples he encountered, whose population is estimated to have numbered around 10 million, were almost entirely wiped out within 100 years. Virtually no indigenous people now remain in the Caribbean, although some were able to flee to the American continent where they merged with other survivors to generate new cultures.

In the century after the discovery, the indigenous population of South America, estimated to have been around 40 million, declined to about 440 000. In Australia in the nineteenth century the situation was much the same, although there were not as many people to be killed. The people of Tasmania, with an estimated population of 23 000 in 1803, were exterminated before the end of the century. Other people, on the verge of cultural extinction, have attempted to establish distinct cultural identities in order to reorganize their societies and secure their existence. This is a process of ethnogenesis. There is therefore a direct relationship between ethnocide and ethnogenesis. Where ethnocide takes place, one will usually also find ethnogenesis.

In the present day, peoples who were enslaved or marginalized under colonial domination are able to revive their cultural identities and reclaim their right to existence. This has gained momentum with the setting-up of statutory and voluntary organisations in the international context.

### **Mechanisms of Ethnogenesis**

Minority populations which were marginalized in the world politico-economic system needed a shared consciousness of belonging. This required definitions of group boundaries, and processes of cultural creation, revitalization, and appropriation.

The creation of a religious ideology and practice was one means of integrating different groups into one unit. The enslaved African populations of the Caribbean, for instance, had originally come from a variety of sociocultural backgrounds with different languages, religions, value systems, and social structures. Despite these differences, they invented rituals, oaths, and a common set of religious values. This bricolage of different African elements became marked with the emergence of a Maroon identity in Jamaica in the middle of the seventeenth century.

In 1655, Britain took Jamaica from Spain by force. African slaves took advantage of the resulting turmoil to escape from the plantations into the forests and mountains. These deserters comprised a medley of ethnic origins, from Senegambia and the Gold Coast to the Congo and Angola, and even to the east coast of Africa. They were able to establish their own political authority and military alliances in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Such polities created and mobilized common religious ideologies and practices based on rituals of spirit possession, which produced a shared consciousness and generated a common identity.

Ethnic identity may also be developed through a revitalization of precolonial symbols and ritual practices, as was the case

with the Seminoles of Northern Florida. In the eighteenth century, when British, French, and Spanish forces were competing in the region, a distinct Seminole ethnicity emerged from the variety of Muskogean and other peoples with different cultural-linguistic backgrounds, who had colonized this region. They established new chiefdoms which closely followed the traditional Muskogean patterns. Among Muskogean peoples, who had previously been only loosely related with each other, there was the powerful division of Kawita, which overpowered the others and standardized and transformed a variety of politico-religious cultures under its hegemony. The early Seminole settlements still acknowledged Kawita's suzerainty. This meant giving a central role to rituals of the mythical creation of sacred fire, originally controlled by Kawita's traditional chiefs whose authority was thereby revitalized in the newly created Seminole societies.

Ethnogenesis may also take place through appropriation. From the late fifteenth century, indigenous peoples in the Third World were in most cases conquered by overwhelmingly superior European powers and forced to accept the religion, language, and way of living of the colonizers. In doing so, however, they often created a new ethnic identity by the way they transformed and adapted the ritual symbols of the Europeans. For instance, the Kapon and Makushi of Venezuela and Guyana emerged when the Christian saints and deities brought by the European colonizers were reinterpreted according to the traditional cosmology of indigenous peoples who used these ritual symbols to forge new cultural identities.

### **Ethnogenesis in the Twentieth Century**

Although the process of ethnogenesis can be clearly seen in small-scale societies in the Third World following colonization, it has also developed in the process of modern nation-building. The ideology of the nation-state expressly aims to transform different ethnies into one nation with a single national culture. The principle is often different from the practice. The ruling group, in most cases the majority group but sometimes a numerical minority having dominant power, has generally monopolized the political-economic interests and imposed its culture on the others in the name of the national culture. In response, marginalized peoples have attempted to generate a new ethnic identity in order to claim their sociocultural and politico-economic rights within the frame of the nation-state. Modern ethnogenesis may be classified in three main ways.

The first type is integration. Those peoples who originally had formed separate and independent polities without any consciousness of belonging together were given the same name and treated as one group by European explorers, missionaries, anthropologists, and administrators. They accepted this name and formed a new identity in accordance with the imposed boundary, in order to resist or negotiate with the colonial regime, especially in modern nationalist movements that sought political independence. In the process, a new ethnicity emerged. This type of ethnogenesis can be seen among the Aborigines in Australia, the Inuit in the Arctic regions and the San in the Kalahari, where the central government has adopted policies of multiculturalism to secure minority group

rights – the government needs fixed sociocultural units in order to assist political autonomy and cultural preservation.

The second type is amalgamation, which occurred frequently in African societies at the time of independence. In Kenya after World War II, for example, an active African nationalism was organized by two major ethnic groups, the Kikuyu and the Luo. Political elites from smaller ethnic groups united under the hegemony of these two groups and gradually formed new cultural identities. Thus the Luyia emerged in the 1940s to bring together 17 Bantu-speaking peoples, among them the Maragoli, Bukusu, and the Wanga, who lived in what was then the North Kavirondo district of western Kenya. The word Luyia, meaning the communal space in which people sit around the fire, was appropriated for the idea of mobilizing a consciousness of brotherhood among those from western Kenya who studied at Makerere University in Kampala.

The same sort of amalgamation took place among the 10 or so Eastern Cushitic-speaking ethnic groups in the Rift Valley. This ethnogenesis was promoted by those who studied at the prestigious Alliance high school in Nairobi in the 1940s. They invented the name of a new ethnic group, the Kalenjin – literal meaning 'I'm telling you' (in the plural sense) – and it started to spread among influential members of the home communities in the 1950s. Aidan Southall has termed this type of ethnogenesis 'supertribalization.'

The third type is separation. During the period of colonial domination, some small indigenous ethnic groups were subsumed into bigger neighboring groups or were put together in one large unit, either voluntarily or forcibly. Later they have attempted to revive their former cultural identity and secede from the constituted group, to create an independent ethnic group for themselves. The Suba, mainly living in the small islands of Lake Victoria, had been Luo-ized for a century, and

their language was beginning to become extinct. But after the multiparty system was reintroduced into the Kenyan political scene in 1991, which caused the nation-state to become more ethnicized, the Suba political elite began to differentiate Suba from Luo and promoted the Suba culture and language. In so doing they are again forming themselves into a distinct ethnic group.

In the contemporary world system indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities who were once colonized and marginalized have begun to assert their socio-cultural and politico-economic rights. Because refashioned ethnic identities play a large part in such assertions, ethnogenesis is becoming a key concept in understanding society in the twenty-first century.

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