

4

Ethnic Identification and Ideology

[I]f we are to understand ... 'the persisting facts of ethnicity', then I believe that we need to supplement conventional sociological perspectives by paying greater attention to the nature of ethnic identity.

A.L. Epstein (1978: 5)

The North African mule talks always of his mother's brother, the horse, but never of his father, the donkey, in favor of others supposedly more reputable.

Clifford Geertz (1988: 8)

In the two previous chapters, we have considered aspects of ethnicity from a largely behaviourist point of view. Processes of social inclusion and exclusion, and forms of ethnic incorporation have been described in relation to interaction and social integration. Such a perspective does allow for an investigation of the symbolic aspect of ethnicity – the ethnic identity – yet this dimension is generally seen as a concomitant, or even an effect, of social process, individual utility or social functionality. This chapter will discuss how ethnic identification may assume fundamental importance for the individual; how attachment and loyalty to ethnic categories or groups is created and maintained. In order to deal with this topic, we need to understand how individuals perceive and classify their social surroundings, and also how the past is used to make sense of the present. Notions of shared origins are usually crucial for ethnic identity, and interpretations of history are therefore important to ideologies seeking to justify, strengthen and maintain particular ethnic identities.

Approaches focusing on the identity aspect of ethnicity were for a long time met with scepticism in social anthropology (but not to the same extent in American cultural anthropology; cf. Romanucci-Ross and DeVos, 1995). Since social anthropology deals with processes taking place *between* people, and since identity has conventionally been held to exist *inside* each individual, the study of personal identity was for a long time neglected by anthropologists. Nonetheless, in recent years there have been considerable advances

in the social anthropological study of identity or identification, which is strictly speaking the more accurate term, since 'identity' gives an impression of being a fixed thing. For now, I use the two terms interchangeably.

It has been shown that aspects of the person which have conventionally been held to be unchangeable, inner and private, may fruitfully be studied as symbolic aspects of social processes. In other words, what was formerly considered private and fixed is now increasingly held to be public and negotiable. In cross-cultural studies of emotions, it has been argued that emotions, far from being innate, are socially created (Howell and Willis, 1989; Rosaldo, 1984). Similarly, studies of ethnicity have demonstrated that there is a close, but variable relationship between social processes and personal identities (for example A.P. Cohen, 1994; Epstein, 1978, 1992; Jenkins, 2008). At the same time, it has also been argued convincingly that the act of classification is in fact based on an innate capacity (just as human beings doubtless have inborn capacities for a variety of emotions), but that the actual form of classification into, say, 'kinds of human beings', varies with the circumstances (Hirschfeld, 1998). Distinctions between us and them exist everywhere, but they can take on a number of forms and be based on a variety of criteria.

In anthropological discourse, identity means *being the same as oneself* as well as *being different*. In Jean-Marie Benoist's words, the study of identity must 'oscillate between the poles of disconnected singularity and globalising unity' (1977: 15). When we talk of identity in social anthropology, we refer to social identity, not the depths of the individual mind – although A.P. Cohen, in a challenging and complex book on self-consciousness (A.P. Cohen, 1994), has argued the need to understand just that.¹ It would nonetheless be prudent to begin by looking at social relations and social organisation.

If we want to understand ethnic identity, we cannot a priori assume that ethnic categories exist by virtue of certain 'functions'. This implies that in order to come to grips with ethnic identity, we must try to understand what it is about ethnic classification and categorical belonging that makes sense to the people involved.

1. For example, A.P. Cohen states (1994: 71): 'Societies do *not* determine the selves of their members. They may construct models of personhood; they may ... *attempt* to reconcile selfhood to personhood. But they have no absolute powers in this regard.'

ORDER IN THE SOCIAL UNIVERSE

Since the publication of Durkheim and Mauss's *Primitive Classification* (1964 [1903]), the study of classification has been a central concern in anthropology. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962), Mary Douglas (1966, 1970), Gregory Bateson (1972b), Scott Atran (1990) and many others have demonstrated that humans are classifying beings who create order at the symbolic and social levels by distinguishing between kinds or classes of phenomena. Classification is a kind of native theory whereby the infinite complexity of the experienced world is reduced to a finite number of categories. Social classification usually expresses power asymmetries.

The kinds of classification developed in any society are necessarily related to that society's organisation and way of life. Thus the Nuer have more than 15 words for different colour patterns of cattle (Evans-Pritchard, 1940), and some Inuit groups have 25 words for different kinds of snow. The classifications of plants and animals are not objective, but rather social constructions. Thus, while Europeans classify the cassowary as a bird, the Karam of New Guinea do not. For them, it cannot be a bird since birds fly and the cassowary does not. However, bats are classified together with birds (Bulmer, 1967).

Ethnic classifications are also social and cultural products related to the requirements of the classifiers. They serve to order the social world and to create standardised cognitive maps over categories of relevant others.

Taking as his point of departure the Copperbelt studies undertaken by himself and his colleagues in the 1950s, Epstein (1978) asks how it could be that the hundreds of ethnic categories present in the larger towns on the Copperbelt could be reduced to a handful of groups in actual, ongoing social classification. People who belonged to different 'tribes' were lumped together in general categories. The reason is that ethnic taxonomies tend to become less detailed with increasing perceived social distance from oneself. In Europe it is therefore common to think of 'Africans' or 'North American Indians' as ethnic categories, although each of these 'groups' comprises hundreds of mutually exclusive ethnic categories. Clearly, it would have been impractical (and in most cases impossible) to make hundreds of fine distinctions between categories of people: usually, one will limit oneself to making those distinctions which are socially relevant (see chapter 2).

Ethnic classification can thus be seen as a practical way of creating order in the social universe. Racial theory, which was a respectable

branch of physical anthropology in the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, endeavoured to divide humanity into four mutually exclusive 'races', and it can retrospectively be seen as a typical attempt to classify the bewildering variety of humans into a few unambiguous categories. In a similar way (but with much less devastating effects), the townspeople of the Copperbelt divided their neighbours into a few standardised categories.

In Britain, the ethnic category 'West Indians' has been applied for decades to immigrants from dozens of different islands and territories: Guyanese, Trinidadians, Jamaicans, Barbadians and 'small-islanders' are considered members of the same ethnic group, although they regard themselves as members of different groups. Eventually, the British ascriptive category 'West Indian' may become an integral part of their own self-identification: they may start to regard themselves as West Indians, even if such a label was scarcely relevant in their country of origin. Eventually, they may even classify themselves with descendants of Africans as Black British (cf. Gilroy, 1987, 2000). In extreme cases, even a categorical ascription like 'immigrant' may be applied to people belonging to a dominant group – and it may include people with highly different cultural backgrounds, say, from Chile to Vietnam.

The creation of loyalty to nations follows a similar logic. With the emergence of nationalist ideology and nation-states, people are being taught that they are not primarily from Paris, Savoie, Languedoc or wherever, but that they should instead define themselves as French (E. Weber, 1976). If such an ideological pressure is successful, the compass of one's community thereby increases many times.

Apart from illustrating the general point that social identities are relational, these examples suggest that there is a close relationship between identities and external circumstances, including pressure and often coercion from powerful groups which are socially dominant. Identities may change as society changes, and they are certainly not as 'inner', as private and immutable, as common sense may sometimes take for granted. Systems of social classification and principles of inclusion and exclusion always create order, but the kind of order created is related to aspects of the wider social system, including relations of power and possibilities of social mobility.

ANOMALIES

Every social community or identity is exclusive in the sense that not everybody can take part. Groups and collectivities are always

constituted in relation to *others*. A shared European identity, for example, would have to define itself in contrast to Muslim, Middle Eastern or Arab identity, possibly also in relation to African, East Asian and North American identities – depending on the social situation.

The boundaries of ethnic groups, we have seen in chapters 2 and 3, are relative and vary situationally in significance. There are situations where ethnicity is relatively unimportant, and there are situations where it provides a decisive mechanism for exclusion and inclusion, as well as clear guidelines for behaviour. However, there are also contexts where it may be difficult to ascribe a definite ethnic identity to an individual. If your father is a Cree Indian and your mother a Francophone Canadian, or vice versa, what about yourself? What is likely to be the religion of the children of an Indian Muslim and a Hindu? In what ways is the answer influenced by class and gender? People who are 'betwixt and between', to use Victor Turner's (1967) famous phrase, can be numerous and tend to mess up any neat system of contrasts in ethnic classification. I shall propose, inspired by Mary Douglas (1966), to call them *ethnic anomalies*. They can be considered as 'neither-nor' or 'both-and', depending on the situation and/or the wider context.

A typical 'anomalous' ethnic category is that made up by second- and third-generation immigrants in Europe, or rather, the children and children's children of immigrants. They may consider themselves, and may be considered by others, as members of the same ethnic group as their parents; yet they may also consider themselves as having 'adapted' to the majority culture. They are often bilingual in their mother-tongue and the national language of the host country. Some of them have double citizenship, and many experience conflicting loyalties. In some situations, they are expected to be individualistic and independent-minded; in others, they are expected to be obedient and loyal. Typically, children of Pakistani immigrants to Norway may claim that they do not properly feel at home either in Norway or in Pakistan (see Barth, 1994), although recent studies show that they increasingly identify with Norway. Provided that these groups are permanent minorities, there are two likely outcomes of this situation: assimilation to the dominant group or ethnic incorporation. The former option presupposes that the dominant group allows new members (which is not always the case). The latter option has two varieties: the anomalous group may branch off and declare itself an ethnic category; or its members may continue to be loyal to their grandparents' ethnic category,

although they are conscious of being culturally different. A third option would entail a solution where 'hybridity' and ambiguous identities were allowed; this will be looked at in some detail in chapters 7 and 8.

An illustration of the first alternative could be the development of 'Black British' as an ethnic category. Black British are neither African nor Caribbean, although their ancestors were either African or Caribbean. They have no country other than Britain and no vernacular other than that classified by linguists as English, possibly with the qualifier 'Black British English'. They have clubs, informal associations and frequently a sense of solidarity, and may in effect be considered an ethnic category native to Britain.

The other alternative consists of insisting that one is still an X, even if one has taken on some of the habits of the Ys. In this way, the considerable population of Indian origin in Britain has managed to develop and maintain Indo-British identities, although there is great cultural variation within the category and considerable change. Some British citizens of subcontinental origin have adapted to British ways of life in important respects, whereas others try to stick to tradition, and new, flexible, intermediate or innovative forms of identification develop (Baumann, 1996; Rushdie, 1991: chapter 1; Werbner, 1997).² This does not have to be more difficult than maintaining English identity, which is normally unproblematic, despite great cultural variation within the category of people whose members define themselves, and are defined by others, as English (see also chapter 7).

For the kind of ethnic anomaly described here, problems arise chiefly in relation to *gatekeeping*. If one is simultaneously a member of two groups which are partly defined through mutual contrasting, difficult situations are inevitable. Drawing on earlier discussions of culture and identity, we may argue that this is not necessarily because the 'cultures' are incompatible, but because the ethnic ideologies hold that they are, and because certain resources flow within groups, but not across boundaries. In a social environment where one is expected to have a well-defined ethnic identity, it may be psychologically and socially difficult to 'bet on two horses'.

2. Consider author and Nobel laureate V.S. Naipaul's situation for an extreme case. He is an 'East Indian from the West Indies' (Naipaul, 1973), a Trinidadian descendant of indentured labourers from India in a region where 'Indian' usually means 'native American'. Imagine his attempts to explain his ethnic identity to foreigners! But then again, Naipaul all but abandoned ethnic identity relatively early in his life.

The offspring of 'mixed' couples are a different kind of ethnic anomaly, although their identity problems may be similar to those of the children or grandchildren of immigrants. In colonial Haiti, an extremely detailed taxonomic system was developed in order to distinguish between people with varying 'racial' origins. An individual with 127 parts 'white' and one part 'black' was actually defined as a *sang-mêlé* (of mixed blood)! In other societies, people are less scientifically inclined and distinctions tend to be less meticulous.

In some societies, 'mixed' people are very numerous. Sometimes, separate labels are invented for them, such as 'Eurasian' in some South-East Asian societies, or *gens de couleur* in the former French sugar colonies. In some cases, they become distinctive ethnic categories with tendencies towards ethnic incorporation. In Mauritius, the 'Mulattoes' or *gens de couleur* have traditionally occupied a distinct place in the division of labour (white-collar and middle-managerial jobs); they have their own clubs and informal associations, and may be considered an ethnic category. Some of them might even argue that they are the only true Mauritians, since they are the only group that grew out of Mauritian soil – the only people who are not descendants of immigrants. Stable 'mixed' ethnic categories have also developed elsewhere. In certain societies in South and Central America, for example, people considered as 'racially mixed', notably Mestizos, have gradually become permanent ethnic categories with more or less clear boundaries, external symbols communicating their cultural distinctiveness, and rules of endogamy. In other societies, such as urban Brazil, skin colour represents a continuum with no clear boundaries or corporate groupings; it does not express ethnicity, but denotes racial distinctions which are correlated with rank (Wade, 1997).

Ethnic anomalies are often lumped with one of the groups, usually the lowest-ranking one. This has happened to North American 'Mulattoes', who are defined as blacks following the 'one-drop principle'. Others may find themselves in uncomfortable 'betwixt-and-between' situations, such as the Trinidadian *douglas*. *Douglas* is a somewhat pejorative Bhojpuri word meaning 'bastard', and the *douglas* are Trinidadians with one Indian and one African parent. It almost goes without saying that their identity problem can be severe in a society where the main classificatory principle contrasts Africans and Indians.

In modern state societies, it may be socially necessary to develop unambiguous delineations of ethnic identity. Particularly in situations where certain ethnic groups are granted special rights, 'objective'

definitions of ethnicity have been created. In Norway, one has the right to consider oneself Sami, and has political rights as a Sami, if at least one grandparent used Sami as his or her first language; the criterion is in other words linguistic, not racial or genetic. According to Jewish ideology, anybody with a Jewish mother has the right to consider him- or herself a Jew. In Canadian legislation, Roosens (1989) explains, the criteria for Indian identity have changed at several points in modern history. With the relatively recent introduction of special rights for Indians and the rise of powerful Indian interest groups, it has become important to decide on clear criteria for inclusion and exclusion. Whereas the Norwegian state decided on a linguistic criterion for Sami identity, the Canadian state decided, in a law passed in 1951, on a pseudo-biological criterion. If one's father was an Indian, one had the right to be considered an Indian. In terms of genetics, this is an arbitrary distinction (given the extent of mixing in the past); in terms of culture, it is probably even more so, and the example is interesting in indicating how biology and 'race' are culturally constructed. In other words, although contrasting ethnic classifications and bounded identities may seem tidy on paper (and in native theory, including national statistics!), they are more complicated and knotty in actual societies.

ENTREPRENEURS

Do people, when all is said and done, create their identities, or do they inadvertently express aspects of their society through their social selves? To put it differently: should anthropology stress the voluntary, chosen and strategic aspects of agency and social identity, or should it rather concentrate on showing the ways in which humans are products of culture and society? There is no definite answer to these questions, but the choice of perspective can make for important differences in the resulting analyses. In describing *douglas*, second-generation immigrants and Indian 'half-castes' as anomalies, I have essentially viewed them as creations of society. They become anomalies by virtue of pre-existing classificatory categories which they can do little to change. In this way, the Barthian view of ethnicity as a system of mutually exclusive self-ascriptions must be slightly modified: the ascriptions attributed by *others* also contribute to creating ethnicity, and may be of paramount importance. A common criticism of multicultural ideology is that it virtually forces people to take on an ethnic identity, even if they would have preferred not to have this aspect of their personal identity highlighted (see Lock,

1990); in its least benign form, this kind of practice may become extremely rigid and alienating, especially in societies which are ethnically stratified (see Eriksen, 2001c; see also chapter 8).

An actor-centred perspective on 'anomalous' ethnic categories might lead to a different conclusion. For just as it can be shown that individuals who fall between acknowledged categories are defined 'by the system' as anomalous, sometimes morally suspect outsiders, they may also exploit this ambiguity to their own advantage. Instead of seeing these individuals as anomalies, one may regard them as entrepreneurs or cultural brokers who turn the classificatory ambiguities to their own advantage. A Mauritian friend, who is of partly Tamil, partly mixed (*personne de couleur*) origin and who has a Catholic first name and a Tamil surname, sometimes exploits this ambiguity in such a way. When dealing with Tamils or Hindus he stresses his Tamil aspect, but if he does business with Catholics he overcommunicates his Creole aspect.

Whether one regards this kind of fuzzy ethnic category as anomalous or as an entrepreneurial category is partly a matter of theoretical perspective, but it also depends on the empirical context. In some societies, for some individuals and in some situations, it may be more or less difficult or profitable to be a 'between and betwixt' person. And we should not a priori assume that having an ambiguous ethnic identity implies having no roots and no culture and is therefore unbearable. An assumption to this effect is perhaps neither more nor less than an expression of English native theory; and before assuming that ethnic anomalies are by default unhappy, we ought to look into their actual lives.

There is no doubt that societies differ strongly on this score. In some societies, identities are to a greater extent chosen than in others. In this context, Ernest Gellner (1991) once introduced what he calls 'the potato principle', referring to the strongly territorial identity and feeling of 'rootedness' which he assumes to be prevalent among peasants. In such societies, there is little social mobility, and people are tied to a place and rank through webs of kinship and patron-client relationships. Gellner contrasts this kind of identity with the more fluid identities typical of industrial societies, where social mobility is considerable and individual choice is a major value. The contrast may be simplistic. We should nevertheless keep in mind that ethnic identities are flexible to a highly varying degree. The fact that they are socially constructed does not imply that they are not real and can thus easily be done away with. Money is a social construction too, as is language.

ANALOG AND DIGITAL; WE AND US

Ethnic categorisations can be analysed as attempts to create order in, and make sense of, a bewildering chaos of different 'kinds' of people. And, as we have just seen, this kind of map creates its own problems because the territory it describes is more complex than itself. Both natives and anthropologists therefore quickly run into paradoxes and contradictions when they try to apply a stylised ethnic taxonomy consistently.

In the discussions of ethnicity in the Copperbelt and Mauritius in chapter 2, I pointed out that people classify others not only along the axis of identity versus difference (the basic Us-Them mechanism), but also according to perceived *degrees* of difference. For a Kamba in Kenya, the Kikuyu and other Bantu-speaking peoples are perceived as closer than Luo and others who speak Nilotic languages. To a Swede, a Dane is considered closer than a German, who is in turn considered closer than a Hungarian. Bogardus-type scales of perceived social distance can be helpful here in mapping out such differences, although we should keep in mind that actual behaviour does not necessarily correspond to expectations which may arise from interviews.

In a complex multi-ethnic environment, people will thus develop different standardised forms of behaviour vis-à-vis different categories of others. Some are perceived as 'almost like ourselves'; others are perceived as 'extremely different from us'. When such principles of exclusion and inclusion allow for differences of degree, we may call them *analog*. They do not encourage the formation of unambiguous, clear-cut boundaries. The children of Polish immigrants to a Scandinavian country, for example, are rarely thought of as immigrants, while their parents are. When, on the contrary, systems of classification operate on an unambiguous inclusion/exclusion basis, where boundaries are fixed and all outsiders of certain kinds are regarded as 'more or less the same', they may be spoken of as *digital*.

Further, the communities whose existence is postulated by ethnic ideologies may be seen as expressions of different aspects of community. Here we can distinguish between two modalities of group solidarity, which we may, following the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1943), call *we-hood* and *us-hood*, respectively.³ Being *us*,

3. French has no word for 'us', and Sartre therefore distinguishes between 'we-as-subject' and 'we-as-object'.

people are loyal and socially integrated chiefly in relation to *the other*; through competition, enmity, symbiosis or the contrastive use of stereotypes and boundary symbols. Being *we*, on the other hand, entails being integrated because of shared activities within the collectivity.

Although ethnicity, being relational, is by definition a phenomenon of us-hood, the ethnic category or group must additionally have an element of we-hood in order to be viable – a shared language or religion, a division of labour which creates interdependence, or a notion of shared origins.

It is often remarked that assumed cultural differences tend to be magnified and distorted in stereotyping, in intergroup competition and during ethnic conflicts, through contrasting and dichotomisation. However, intergroup similarities may also be perceived as threatening. Simon Harrison (1999) has argued that, in fact, the cultural practices and notions associated with a group may be regarded as scarce resources – indeed as *inalienable possessions* (Weiner, 1992) which cannot be bartered with, traded or exchanged. Harrison's point is that all symbolic practices 'are capable of being copied, either with or without the consent and cooperation of their possessors' (1999: 241). He gives several examples of this – from the perceived piracy of Australian Aboriginal art by commercial agents, to a more subtle and less obvious case from New Zealand (Aotearoa in Maori), where white farmers have developed notions of spiritual relatedness to the land. These notions are reminiscent of Maori notions, and seem to give an ideological justification for their claims to land. Advocates for Maori rights have protested against this 'cultural borrowing', arguing that it is a form of cultural piracy. Harrison thus concludes that communities may see themselves as under threat not only from those who differ from them, but also from those 'ethnic Others who resemble them, or who seem to identify with them too closely' (1999: 250).

Let us now turn to an exploration of some ways in which ethnic ideologies use notions of shared culture to define and delimit ethnic identity.

THE EMERGENCE OF ETHNIC IDENTITIES

Epstein (1978) noted more than thirty years ago that many of the societies traditionally studied by anthropologists were undergoing rapid processes of social and cultural change, yet ethnicity – contrary to many expectations – did not vanish as a result, but

instead emerged in new, often more powerful and more clearly articulated form. Epstein states:

[S]ince ethnicity arises so often in circumstances of social upheaval and transformation, which are frequently accompanied by severe cultural erosion and the disappearance of many customs that might serve as marks of distinctiveness, a critical issue is *how that identity is to be maintained* over a number of generations. (1978: xiii, my emphasis)

Ethnic symbolism referring to the ancient language, religion, kinship system or way of life is crucial for the maintenance of ethnic identity through periods of change. Generally speaking, social identity becomes most important the moment it seems threatened. Several factors may constitute such a perceived threat, but they are always related to some kind of change – migration, change in the demographic situation, industrialisation or other economic change, or integration into or encapsulation by a larger political system (see chapter 5).

Conspicuous forms of boundary maintenance become important when the boundaries are under pressure. Ethnic identities, which embody a perceived continuity with the past, may in this way function in a psychologically reassuring way for the individual in times of upheaval; they seem to tell people that although 'all that is solid melts into air' (Marx and Engels; cf. Berman, 1982), there is an unchanging, stable core of ethnic belongingness which assures the individual of a continuity with the past, which can be an important source of self-respect and personal authenticity in the modern world, which is often perceived as a world of flux and make-believe. If one can claim to 'have a culture', it proves that one is faithful to one's ancestors and to the past. Religion may or may not play an important part here. Many ethnic movements are religious in character and stress the importance of religious conformity to their members, but other movements may be just as efficient, with respect to both politics and identity, without such a component.

Ethnic identities can be seen as expressions of metaphoric kinship. Some notion of shared descent may be a universal element in ethnic ideologies (Nash, 1988; Yelvington, 1991). Notions of 'race' are sometimes, but not always, part of such ideologies. Sometimes ethnic ideologies, like kin genealogies, trace common descent back to a known ancestor, although the actual linkages are unknown.

The formation of new ethnic categories, which presupposes the formation of new identities, generally follows one of two possible paths. First, it may come about through an extension of existing identifications; it may thus be argued that all Aymara (a category of Andes Indians) are descendants of a particular pre-Columbian people, and that all Aymara should therefore be loyal to the Aymara group as a whole and not just to their extended lineage, clan or village. Similarly, in the creation of a Norwegian ethnic identity in the nineteenth century, an imputed genealogical continuity with early medieval Viking chieftains was stressed as an argument for the uniqueness of Norwegians in relation to Swedes and Danes, who were culturally and linguistically close.

The second possibility is the reverse: it consists in reducing the size of the group with presumed shared ancestry. A common sociological term for this kind of process is 'fission'. At the levels of ideology and personal identity, it can be expressed through a shallowing of genealogies. Instead of tracing one's group origins back to, say, Adam or Noah, one may thus trace it back to one of their respective sons (or to a more recent ancestor, as in the case of the 'twelve tribes of Israel') and thereby argue the validity of present ethnic boundaries.

Both of these possibilities for the delineation of ethnic identities require creative reinterpretations of the past. The notion of ancestry is itself ambiguous. For if a shared ethnic identity presupposes a notion of shared ancestry, how many generations should one feel compelled to go back in order to find a starting point for one's present ethnic identity? And how many of one's ancestors does one need to take into account? There is no objective answer to that question: the answer is conditional on the social context. When the African-American author Alex Haley wrote his fictionalised autobiography *Roots* (1998 [1976]), he traced his ancestry back to the Gambian coast. However, had he followed his father's lineage rather than that of his mother, he would have ended up in Scotland.

This aspect of ethnic identity also indicates that there is no simple one-to-one relationship between ideology and social practices. For although Jews justify their ethnic identity by referring to shared ancestry, it is evident that all Jews do not have the same ancestry. Jews from Eastern Europe tend to look like East Europeans, and Jews from North Africa tend to look like North Africans. Despite an ideology of endogamy, there has been considerable *de facto* mixing with the surrounding populations.

Finally, the criterion of imputed shared origins seriously reduces the possible number of ethnic categories in any society. It is true that ethnicity is a social creation and not a fact of nature, and ethnic variation does not correspond to cultural variation. But ethnic identities must seem convincing to their members in order to function – and they must also be acknowledged as legitimate by non-members of the group. If a group of London punks insist that they have a unique culture with origins in a mythical and misty past, their potential for becoming an ethnic category depends on the recognition of others. Similarly, if someone claims that Indians and Africans have the same origins and should therefore be considered an ethnic group, he or she will probably not be successful, since most Africans and Indians would disagree.

In recent years, anthropologists have been concerned with the ways in which history and cultural symbols are manipulated in the creation of ethnic identities and organisations. Such a focus implies an interest in the ways in which ethnic identities are being constructed, and we will now consider a few examples indicating how this may take place.

THE CREATION OF AN ANCESTRAL IDENTITY

The Huron Indians of Québec (Wyandots) are today a respected Canadian tribe (Roosens, 1989). Unlike many other indigenous peoples, they have succeeded in presenting themselves to society at large as an oppressed people with a unique, if vanishing, culture, who have for centuries been harassed, massacred and deprived of civil and territorial rights by the colonialists and the Canadian authorities. A comparison between the ethnic leaders' presentation of their case and other, historical sources shows that it is possible to go very far in the reinterpretation of history in order to create collective identity and political cohesion.

Historical monographs dealing with the Hurons indicate that their contacts with the colonisers were for centuries both voluntary and profitable. They were sedentary and acted as intermediaries between French fur traders and the nomadic hunters who provided the furs in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Later, they were in regular contact with Jesuit missionaries, who were nevertheless unsuccessful in their attempts to convert them.

The Hurons' main enemies were the Iroquois. In the mid-seventeenth century the Iroquois began to attack Huron villages with unprecedented intensity, and the survivors were dispersed. Most

of them were assimilated into Iroquois groups, and some fled to Québec. It was during this period that traditional Huron culture, as well as their language, vanished. Later, they collaborated with the French and were for this reason granted a hunting area to which they had no aboriginal claim.

An influential Huron version of their history differs from this version on a number of points. It is presented in a book by their Chief Max Gros-Louis, *Le Premier des Hurons* (1981; reference in Roosens, 1989). The book does not acknowledge that there were traditional enmities between Indian tribes in general and between the Hurons and neighbouring Iroquois in particular. It is also suggested that such enmities, if ever they occurred, were incited by the colonialists. According to Roosens, the book also depicts 'a kind of pan-Indian culture', which 'unites all Indians against all outsiders and primarily against the whites'. This 'culture', as described and reified in Gros-Louis' book, is composed of elements which conform to widespread positive stereotypes of Indians in Euro-Canadian society. The Indians are depicted as being close to nature and respectful of plants and animals; they are spontaneously hospitable, patently honest, incorruptible and have great personal integrity; they are tolerant and mild-mannered, and are open-minded in respect to foreign cultures. In brief, 'Indian culture' is depicted as superior to the 'white' one in a number of ways.

Roosens' rather uncharitable conclusion is that this 'Indian culture' is an invention which may be politically efficient but which is one-sided, 'to put it mildly'. That the Hurons have achieved their present position is, he argues, through the deliberate creation of an *ethnic counterculture*, including a rendering of their history and presentation of their ancestral culture which may be described as very inventive. Roosens concludes:

When I compared the characteristics of this neo-Huron culture with the culture depicted in the historical records, most of the modern traits, virtually everything, were 'counterfeit': the folklore articles, the hair style, the mocassins, the 'Indian' parade costumes, the canoes, the pottery, the language, the music. (1989: 47)

HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

Selective renderings of history are not confined to ethnic minorities such as the Hurons. Historians working in modern European nation-states have taken great pains to demonstrate that their

nations are really very old, although they were usually created in the nineteenth century (Anderson, 1991 [1983]). This may be a feature of modernity. In his book about the Hurons, Chief Gros-Louis effectively turned 'Indian culture' into *an object*, regarding it from the outside, as something existing independently of whatever activities the actual Hurons might be involved in. When culture is reified in this way, it can be manipulated. Thus, several Hurons have in recent years taken Indian names and have begun to wear Indian clothing, as self-conscious ways of communicating that they 'have a culture'. In the years following the publication of Roosens' book, Hurons/Wyandots have also begun to learn the Wyandot language. This kind of personal identity politics is characteristic of modern societies.

Imputed aboriginality and continuity with the past can be sources of political legitimacy. Simultaneously, knowledge of one's own history (whether fabricated or not) can be highly important in the fashioning of ethnic identity. Genealogies, both personal and cultural ones, are always written in selective ways – both for political and other reasons. Thus many white North Americans who have traced their origins have found English nobility among their ancestors. The fact that their family trees probably contain prostitutes and manual workers as well, is undercommunicated. Similarly, Hurons and other Indian groups in North America would today undercommunicate the fact that many of their ancestors were in fact Europeans; that mixed marriages have been common for a very long time.

At this juncture, many anthropologists would part company with professional historians in the study of ethnogenesis. While many historians tend to try to find out what *really* happened – some even distinguish between 'invented' traditions and 'real' traditions (Hobsbawm, 1983; cf. chapter 5) – most anthropologists would rather concentrate on showing the ways in which particular historical accounts are used as tools in the *contemporary* creation of identities and in politics. Anthropologists would stress that history is not a product of the past but a response to requirements of the present. For that reason, this discussion of history relates not to the past but to the present. In the next chapter, I shall look into the past itself and as such.

An example of a reconstructed history which has been only partly successful concerns the Muslims in Mauritius (Eriksen, 1988, 1998). Comprising 16–17 per cent of the Mauritian population, all Mauritian Muslims are descendants of merchants and indentured labourers who came from British India in the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries. Their languages were Bhojpuri, Sindhi and Gujarati; a few were literate in Urdu. At the 1972 population census, virtually all of the Muslims stated that their ancestral language was an Indian language. (Urdu, being a prestige language, was over-represented.) By the next census ten years later, however, more than half of the Muslims stated that their ancestral language was Arabic. During the 1970s a powerful pan-Arabic movement had emerged, and with the oil crisis culminating in 1973 it became evident that the Arabs represented a considerable force in world politics. It became more interesting to be a part of this movement than to trace one's roots back towards Pakistan or India. Thus, Mauritian Muslims redefined their ancestral culture. In the capital, Port-Louis, Muslim women began to wear hijabs and the men started to wear long white robes and to grow beards. They tried, effectively, to become descendants of Arabs instead of being descendants of Indian labourers. However, this turn towards the Arab world was generally not acknowledged by other Mauritians, and many pointed out that, really, the Muslims were just as Indian as the Hindus. The new identity was, in other words, a contested one. During the 1980s the orientation towards the Arab world was lessened somewhat, but it should be noted that many Mauritian Muslims supported Iraq during the Gulf War, although both Mauritius and Pakistan were on the Allied side; and that the subsequent 'war on terror', beginning with the terrorist attacks on the USA in 2001 has led to political repercussions in Mauritius as in other countries with substantial Muslim populations.

These two examples, the Hurons and the Mauritian Muslims, may appear almost as parodies of ethnic groups, but they are more typical than they may seem. Interpretations of the past are important to every ethnic identity, and the relationship between such interpretations and 'objective history' is necessarily contestable. As Lévi-Strauss has argued in a comparison between myth and history (1962: chapter 8), historical accounts include only a minute fraction of all the events that have taken place in a certain time-span, and they necessarily involve interpretation and selection. There is always an element of creativity in history writing (Lowenthal, 1985), and identity always has an important element of subjective *identification*.

Since it is not 'objective culture' that shapes ethnicity, it makes sense to state that ethnic identities can be maintained despite cultural change. However, such an identity maintenance may seem paradoxical, since ethnic ideologies stress the continuity of that

very cultural content as a justification for the continued existence and cohesion of the group. An important point in Leach's (1954) study of Kachin politics is that there is never a perfect fit between ideology and social practices. Leach shows that the same Kachin myths and cosmology can be used to justify two highly different ideal social orders, *gumlao* and *gumsa*, which are egalitarian and hierarchical, respectively (Leach, 1954: chapter 3). This ambiguity or 'multivocality' of symbols (V. Turner, 1967) makes it possible to manipulate them politically. Thus, in Sri Lanka Tamils and Sinhalese have slightly different versions of the same myths: both of them have created versions tailored to fit their respective political projects (Kapferer, 1988). Just as individuals can romanticise their childhoods, it seems, ethnic groups can acquire a tragic and heroic history. And, as the Comaroffs state, 'while ethnicity is the product of specific historical processes, it tends to take on the "natural" appearance of an autonomous force, a "principle" capable of determining the course of social life' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992: 60). What we are looking at here is thus not the past, but present-day *constructions* of the past.

GENETICS, KINSHIP AND ETHNICITY

Increasingly, the middle classes of the world are becoming aware of the ambiguous, multifaceted character of their own origins. Since ethnicity is related to kinship as a form of metaphorical or even literal, extended kinship, research into family origins can have important implications for ethnicity. With the development of sophisticated techniques for mapping the DNA of individuals towards the end of the twentieth century, it has become possible – increasingly so for anyone willing to pay – to ascertain one's exact genetic origins. Private companies have been set up to accommodate and stimulate demand to this effect, and anthropologists have begun to do research on this and related practices reflecting, simultaneously, the mixed heritage of most living humans and the ongoing discourses about 'real' identities. In Ben Campbell's words: 'DNA is seen as offering added narrative value in relation to stories of race, ethnicity and nation' (2007: 169). Yet which stories one tells depends on circumstances. A Jamaican-British man featured in British news in 2003 discovered 'to his delight' that in addition to having genes from 15 different ethnic groups in Africa, he had white male ancestry. (To anyone who has worked with the history of slavery, this is anything but surprising.) This man saw the results

as evidence that Afro-Caribbeans had 'the right to claim a heritage in [the UK]' (Campbell, 2007: 171). Another newspaper article referred to by Campbell describes another Jamaican-British person, a woman this time, as being 'really a Nubian princess'.

The use of the term 'really' is highly significant in this context. DNA tests tend to reveal mixed origins, and can thus be interpreted in a number of ways. A third newspaper story discussed by Campbell describes the ancient Britons (that is, those who inhabited the islands before the Celts, the Romans and the Anglo-Saxons) as 'a very civilized lot' since parts of their DNA has survived up to the present (albeit mixed with Celtic, Roman, etc. DNA). In this way, a story of genetic and territorial continuity is being told by using available material selectively.

It may not seem obvious at the outset, but it is clear that research into DNA testing, as well as new reproductive technologies and new forms of kinship, may shed new light on ethnicity. Since ethnic identity always contains an element of imputed ancestry, the facts of mixed origins may both reflect and affect popular thought on the matter. In a study from Norway, Howell and Melhuus (2007) discuss both adoption of non-European children and sperm donation in this context, showing that although Norwegian discourses of nationhood (and Norwegian ethnic identity) tend to be racialised and essentialist, adopted children can bypass these constraints on group membership through the 'kinning' process taking place from a very early age in the adoptive family. It would probably be fair to say that Norwegian nationalism, like most European nationalisms, has an ethnic element, but that nationhood can also transcend ethnicity. This question will be discussed in greater detail in chapters 6 to 8.

SOCIAL FACTORS IN IDENTITY PROCESSES

Culture is in a sense invented, and the relationship between culture as ideology and culture as fact is tenuous. Yet it is evident that anything will not function equally well in the social legitimisation of ethnic identities. If the agents themselves hold that a certain description of their culture is obviously false, it cannot provide them with a powerful ethnic identity. If a group's version of its cultural history is seriously contested by other groups, as was the case with the Mauritian Muslims, it may also be problematic to maintain the identity postulated by that account of history. So we cannot conclude that anything goes and that everything about ethnic identity is deception and make-believe. A principal point throughout this

chapter has rather been that identities are ambiguous, and that this ambiguity is connected with a negotiable history and a negotiable cultural content. Even when the biological history of a person is scientifically documented, it is open to varying interpretations.

Many scholars have regarded *utility* as the master variable in accounting for the maintenance of ethnic identity, regarding identity as contingent on ethnic political organisation which is formed in situations of competition over scarce resources. However, notions of utility are themselves cultural creations, and so the boundary between that which is useful and that which is meaningful becomes blurred. It is therefore difficult to predict which ethnic or other identities will be dominant for any given population in the future. The rise of a global Muslim identity in the last decades, often overruling ethnic and national identities, is one example of a form of identity politics which had not been predicted by most scholars.

In addition, it has been shown that a number of ethnic categories reproduce their identity even if it actually reduces their chances of attaining prosperity and political power. I have myself written of Mauritian Creole identity along these lines (Eriksen, 1986, 1988): the features of Creole identity which are used internally and externally as identity markers emphasise values which are incompatible with social mobility and political organisation. Individual freedom is seen as a typical Creole 'cultural trait', and it is expressed in ways which make formal political organisation and long-term planning extremely difficult.

It has been argued, along similar lines, that the maintenance of Roma (Gypsy) identity in Europe should be seen as a cultural and symbolic phenomenon rather than as a competitive strategy. Roma society displays different values from mainstream society, and the goals pursued by Roma are different from those of the sedentary population (Okely, 1983; Stewart, 1991). For this reason, there is no real competition between the groups. Roma identity is thus better viewed as a cultural fact than as an aspect of group competition.

IS A EUROPEAN IDENTITY CONCEIVABLE?

In order to arrive at a better understanding (if not necessarily an explanation) of the development of the various forms of social identification, it may be instructive to look at the historical junctures where new overarching identities are being presented, and the processes which lead to their acceptance or rejection. The long-standing attempts to create tighter political, economic and

cultural integration in the European Union (EU), and the widespread counter-reactions to such attempts, offer interesting material in this regard, and may also suggest what is at stake in attempted redefinitions of identity.

The EU may be regarded as a coordinating organ, an economic market-place and an alliance between sovereign states. That was how it began in 1957. However, since the late 1980s, it has been an expressed policy of the EU to strengthen integration in important respects. Notably, the transfer of political power from the national capitals to Brussels which took place during the 1990s entailed attempts at redefining loyalties and attachments. A possible consequence of this shift could be that political parties in the European Parliament eventually align themselves along political, not national, lines, so that, say, Greens and Social Democrats will form blocs with Greens and Social Democrats from other European countries, respectively, instead of aligning themselves with other parties from their own countries. This has not come about yet in a significant way, but the EU of the early twenty-first century has been invested with more power than it had a couple of decades earlier. The common currency, the euro, finally introduced in January 2002, is one indication, as were the admissions of new member states from Central and Eastern Europe in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The attempted coordination of asylum and immigration policies is a third example, the Schengen Act allowing citizens from most membership countries to travel freely without a passport a fourth. The immense popularity of the pan-European Champions' League in football, often trumping both national leagues and international matches in spectator numbers, could also indicate the growth of shared collective emotions at the European level. Legislation has progressively been standardised among the member countries (and their satellites). A main issue of contention has been the issue of citizenship. As Cris Shore shows (2000: chapter 3), however, there is no common agreement concerning the substantial content of a European citizenship, what it should entail in terms of rights and obligations; and the failure to ratify the European Constitution in 2005 signals that many inhabitants in Europe prefer to be citizens of a European country rather than being European citizens.

The economic effects of European integration may also be formidable in that, for example, French peasants increasingly produce *for Europe* and not for France or their own region. This

kind of economic integration may serve as an encouragement for the formation of a European identification at the subjective level.

Will economic and political developments towards European integration lead to the development of a shared European identity overruling national ones? This question has at least three interesting aspects. First, it seems that enthusiasm for European integration is greatest in the poorest regions, and among the political and economic elites, which may for different reasons reap the greatest economic and political benefits. In other words, in this regard it seems that identity formation is conditional on perceptions of utility.

Second, economic and political processes are not in themselves sufficient for the development of identity, although they serve as an incentive. Ideology production – notably, the creation of a shared history – is also crucial. Several European history books have thus attempted to redraw the past. The most influential one in the 1990s was Jean-Baptiste Duroselle's *Europe – A History of its Peoples* (1990), where the author concludes that 'it should be possible ... to build a united Europe' (1990: 414). The book was published simultaneously in several of the European languages. Whereas many earlier history books had stressed the emergence of nation-states and have written history largely from the perspective of the nation, this book explicitly intended to play down the role of individual nations, instead emphasising the shared European heritage as well as the local and regional communities. The outcome was, bluntly phrased, a history of Europe where Greece ostensibly had the same history as Ireland, but not the same history as Turkey.⁴ This illustrates the general point that history is open to a variety of interpretations, which may be contested. There are political and economic reasons why nobody endeavours to create a Levantine identity encompassing all the peoples in the eastern Mediterranean, although such an identity might have as much to recommend it in terms of 'objective history' as a European one.

As Shore shows (2000: 52), the 'new repertoire of Euro-symbols' tried to neutralise national differences. A clear example, which shows both the inventiveness and perhaps fragility of contemporary European 'identity engineering', is the symbolism of Euro

4. Neumann and Welsh (1991) have described how 'the Turk' for centuries served as the significant Other for European identity, in other words how ideas of European identity have depended on contrasting and negative stereotyping of non-Europeans, particularly Turks (and, it must be added, 'pseudo-Europeans', particularly Jews and Gypsies). Perhaps this factor in European identity may partly explain why Turkey is unlikely to be admitted to the EU in the near future.

banknotes. Instead of using the notes to depict actually existing European buildings, landscapes and so on (at the risk of alienating Euro-citizens from other countries), the banknotes depict imaginary buildings, classic as well as modernist, none of which exist in reality but all of which may appear as European in character, almost like so many Platonic ideal types.

Third, a European identity is not necessarily incompatible with national or ethnic identities. Social identities are segmentary in character, following the general formula described in Evans-Pritchard's (1940) study of Nuer political organisation. Being a member of a family does not preclude being a member of an ethnic group; and being a member of an ethnic group does not necessarily preclude being a member of a more encompassing category. However, for that more encompassing group to exist, it must be *socially relevant*. It must have some goods to deliver – material, political or symbolic – and those goods must be perceived as valuable by the target group.

The question of whether a common, supranational European identity will be widespread in the near future cannot be answered straightforwardly. All we can say is that it would have to be conditional on *both* symbolic justification and political organisation.⁵ Many observers do not believe that this can come about. A.D. Smith (1995: 143) thus argues that 'to transfer the loyalties and identifications of the [European] populations ... and attach them to a new set of shared European myths, memories, values and symbols' will involve an impossible feat of sociocultural engineering. Others are more optimistic, but also more modest in their ambitions, which have been thwarted several times since the immense pan-European optimism of the early 1990s.

WHAT DO IDENTITIES DO?

Ethnic identity becomes crucially important the moment it is perceived as being under threat. Since ethnicity is an aspect of relationship, the importance of boundaries may thus be said to be conditional on the pressure exerted on them. On the other hand, we have seen that expressions of ethnic identity may also

5. Salman Rushdie, incidentally, has identified a kind of proposed identity which, apparently, does not work; namely, that linked with the Commonwealth. Being interviewed as a 'Commonwealth writer' by the British press, he had to admit that he found 'this strange term, "Commonwealth literature", unhelpful and even a little distasteful' (Rushdie, 1991: 61).

be regarded, not as psychological responses to threats from the outside or attempts to create order in the social universe, but rather as symbolic tools in political struggles. The social importance of ethnic identities is greatest when the two conditions are fulfilled simultaneously in enacted ethnic ideologies. We shall return to this important point in later chapters.

It must also be stressed that the rigidity and boundedness of ethnic groups is much less clear on the ground than commonly assumed. As Gerd Baumann puts it: 'all identities are identifications, all identifications are dialogical' (1999: 140) and identity formation is dynamic and many-sided. Add to this A.P. Cohen's critique of the boundary concept (chapter 3; see also A.P. Cohen, 2000), and it becomes clear that one should not, as a student or scholar, enter an ethnically complex situation, which may seem clear-cut enough from afar, with the prior assumption that all members of a category are culturally similar, relate in the same way to their ethnic label, and allow ethnicity to be the overriding concern in their lives. In all this, there is very considerable variation, as later chapters will show in detail.

Identity processes are fundamentally dual and comprise aspects of meaning as well as politics in a wide sense. Functionalist or actor-centred accounts of ethnicity may provide good analyses of ethnic incorporation at the level of interaction and group competition, but they usually decline to ask why it is that ethnic identities are so pervasive and fundamental to people; why, as Benedict Anderson (1991 [1983]) puts it, people are willing to die for their nation (or ethnic community) but usually not for their social class or city. Nor do they delve into the 'cultural intimacy' experienced by members of a group (Herzfeld, 1997), which enables them to trust each other (but not outsiders), and the ways in which primary groups offer a sense of security which is necessarily socially exclusive. I have deliberately not given a simple answer to these very complex questions here, but have instead shown a few ways in which they can meaningfully be asked without recourse to pure speculation.

The next chapter will approach the questions of ethnic identity and group formation from a perspective which is complementary to those developed so far. We now turn to assessing the importance of historical and societal macro processes for the development of ethnic groups and identities. Eventually, it will also be indicated how social anthropology, despite (or perhaps because of) its bias

in favour of small-scale societies and interpersonal relations, can be instrumental in creating an understanding of global processes in the contemporary world.

FURTHER READING

- Cohen, A.P. (1985) *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. London: Routledge. Very influential and consistent argument for the importance of symbolic meaning in communal identity.
- Fitzgerald, Thomas K. (1993) *Metaphors of Identity: A Culture-Communication Dialogue*. New York: SUNY Press. Textbook rich in ethnographic examples, combining perspectives from psychological and social anthropology.
- Romanucci-Ross, Lola and George DeVos, eds (1995) *Ethnic Identity: Creation, Conflict and Accommodation*, 3rd edn. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press. Written chiefly by American scholars, most of the chapters present a psychosocial perspective on ethnic identity, emphasising the significance of symbolic meaning.