

'Tribalism' and ethnicity in Africa

A review of four decades of anglophone research¹

CAROLA LENTZ*

Ethno-nationalist movements in post-Communist Eastern Europe, brutal 'ethnic cleansing' in the former Yugoslavia, radical right-wing violence against foreigners in Western Europe and the growing attraction of old-new racist ideologies, sometimes in the guise of seemingly liberal 'multiculturalism'...: these recent developments, like the racial conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s in the U.S.A., are a brutal reminder that ethnicity cannot simply be explained away, neither with modernization theories about stubborn but dying relics of pre-modern mentalities nor neo-Marxist concepts of 'false consciousness'. The global ethnicization of social identities and conflicts may at least reassure Africans and Africa scholars that ethnic or tribal particularism is not the specifically African problem it once appeared to be. In the years to come, ethnicity, in whatever concrete form and under whatever name, will be so important a political resource and an idiom for creating community that today's social scientists and anthropologists have no choice but to confront it. A review of the past four decades of research on ethnicity and tribalism in Africa may perhaps aid in a better understanding of ethnicization processes outside Africa as well.

The literature on ethnicity and tribalism in Africa is so voluminous that this essay can only survey the most important lines of research and refer to some relevant case-studies. It will concentrate on Sub-Saharan Africa (particularly west and southern Africa) and on the English-language literature which, I suspect, is not always well-known to the Francophone social science reading public. After some introductory

* *Anthropologist, Institut für Ethnologie, Freie Universität Berlin, Drosselweg 1-3, 14195 Berlin, Allemagne.*

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remarks on the controversy over primordialist versus constructionist concepts of ethnicity I will outline three major currents in research on ethnicity in Africa, each of which has been dominated by a different discipline and is deeply entwined with the actual history of ethnicity. These currents, in chronological order (although with temporal overlap), are studies of tribalism in the context of labour migration and urbanization undertaken by British social anthropologists particularly in the 1950s and early 1960s, discussions centred on politicized ethnicity and nation-state integration in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly among political scientists, and finally the study of the colonial 'invention of tradition' (RANGER, 1983) and 'creation of tribalism' (VAIL, 1989), which has been carried on by historians of Africa since the 1980s. Some general thoughts on the genesis and development of ethnic communities and discourses in colonial and post-colonial Africa round out the discussion.

PRIMORDIALIST AND CONSTRUCTIONIST CONCEPTS OF ETHNICITY

'Ethnicity' is a dazzling, ambiguous category, at once descriptive and evaluative-normative. It has long since ceased to be the exclusive domain of social scientists, having entered the practical vocabulary of politicians and social movements². In both spheres, the terms 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic group' frequently absorb, overlap or replace other concepts such as 'race' or 'tribe' which have become problematic. In the early 1970s, for example, SOUTHALL (1970: 47-48) called for the replacement of 'tribe', then current among Africanists, by 'ethnic group'. His argument was not that the latter term offered greater analytical clarity, but rather that the primitive connotations of the former affronted the sensibilities of African colleagues³. In South Africa, references to culture and ethnicity allow liberal as well as Christian-nationalist Afrikaaners to emphasize difference without resorting to the biologicistic and discredited concept of race (DUBOW, 1987). 'Ethnicity' functions like the joker in a card-game: it can be introduced into various play sequences, taking on the characteristics — in this case, connotations and conceptual vagueness — of the card it replaces.

² See GLAZER and MOYNIHAN (1975) on the use of the term in sociological and everyday language, and COHEN (1978) for the anthropological discussion.

³ EKEH (1990) analyses the change in terminology from the standpoint of an African social scientist, pointing out that the term 'tribalism' continues to play an important role in African everyday speech. According to him, it expresses a 'counterideology' which denounces 'obnoxious modes of behavior in multiethnic circumstances that threaten and endanger normal coexistence among persons from different ethnic groups' (688) and thus contributes to the stabilisation of 'harmonious multiethnic existence' (690) in the new states.

At the same time, the ubiquitous use of 'ethnicity' has contributed to its reification and naturalization. Classifying the most diverse historical forms of social identity as 'ethnic' creates the scientifically questionable but politically useful impression that all ethnicities are basically the same and that ethnic identity is a natural trait of persons and social groups. If, following SMITH (1991: 52), we use the term *ethnies* to refer equally to Old Testament Canaanites, early medieval Normans and modern-day Basques and Sikhs, it is no great feat to claim 'a greater continuity between pre-modern *ethnies* and ethnocentrism and more modern nations and nationalism than modernists of all kinds have been prepared to concede'. This is not an argument which bears up to historical scrutiny. Rather, it is a nominalist operation intended to provide scholarly legitimation for ethno-nationalist ideologies. And here we find ourselves at the centre of the controversy between (neo)primordialists like Smith and constructionists who take ethnicity to be an historically specific and socially generated pattern of identity.

Both concepts can with some justification invoke the chequered history of the Greek term *ethnos*, which, as in the case of ethnicity today, was above all a political category. In Homer, *ethnos*, still free of connotations of a common culture, language or history, mainly referred to large, undifferentiated groups of either animals or warriors (in the sense of 'swarm' or 'throng'). Later, Aristotle used the word as a term for both Greek and non-Greek segmentary societies (or the 'segmentary state', as Ehrenberg renders it), as opposed to *polis*, the Greek urban polity. In New Testament Greek, *ethnos* stands for 'heathen', and the adjective derived from it, *ethnikos*, for 'barbarian' and 'uncivilized.' Thus *ethnos* is embedded in a context-specific we/they dichotomy and was, to a certain extent, originally associated with 'others' and a lower stage of civilization or political development. Apparently only in the context of the consolidation of the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth century did *ethnos* become a term of self-identification for Greek Orthodox Christians and, finally, in conjunction with nineteenth-century Greek nationalist efforts, a term connoting a 'we group' with a common culture and history⁴.

The opposition between 'individualism' and 'romantic collectivism' which has marked European intellectual history since the eighteenth century (GELLNER, 1993) also runs through the debate about ethnicity,

⁴ For a discussion of the meaning of *ethnos* in the ancient world, see EHRENBERG (1965: 27-31) and BRUNNER *et al.* (1992: 151-171); for more recent developments, see Just, quoted in CHAPMAN *et al.* (1989: 11-17). The history of the word *tribus* (lat.) appears to have had an opposite development. Initially it referred to the three lower groups of the early gentilitarian Roman popular assembly, and only later to the populace at the periphery of the Roman Empire (COHEN and MIDDLETON, 1970: 30). There are traces of the latter usage in early British colonial vocabulary, which at first distinguished 'tribes' from 'kingdoms' (e.g. Ferguson in ARHIN, 1974). Only later did tribe come to connote cultural homogeneity and common ancestry.

and it has become common practice to distinguish between constructionist (or formalist) and primordialist (or essentialist) approaches⁵.

Constructionists emphasize that ethnicity is not suprahistorical and quasi-natural membership in a group, but rather a social identity constructed under specific historical-political circumstances. They insist that researchers must not naively adopt the actors' own discourses of ethnic identity, which typically claim 'hereditary' membership in an ethnic group as a group 'overlapping and including the family', a common history and cultural similarity (ELWERT, 1989). Ethnic groups, so the basic assumption of the constructionists goes, exist only in the plural, in the relationship between 'us' and 'others'. BARTH (1969: 14-15), in particular, has criticized the equation of ethnicity with a common culture, insisting that ethnic groups are only constituted through the construction of social boundaries — as self-ascription and ascription by others⁶. Constructionists emphasize the subjective manipulability, flexibility and strategic quality of ethnicity, but arguments and positions vary widely in detail. Some authors, like BANTON (1983) apply rational choice theories to ethnicity or otherwise look for the 'objective' interests upon which ethnic identity is allegedly based. Still others study the cultural construction of social identity, often ignoring questions of power (SOLLORS, 1989). Yet others stress the political instrumentalization of ethnicity by social movements (ARONSON, 1976) or competing élites (BRASS, 1991).

Essentialist concepts of ethnicity emphasize the significance of 'primordial ties'⁷ and a 'given' common history (ancestry), culture and language. VAN DEN BERGHE's (1981: 11-12) sociobiological model, which conceives of ethnicity and race as 'expansions of kinship' and of ethnocentrism and racism as 'biologically evolved mechanisms of pursuing self-interests', has not been embraced in this extreme form by any other social scientist⁸. ISAACS' (1975: 34) scarcely less problematic metaphor-laden definition of ethnicity as a 'basic group identity' which all members inherit at birth and which satisfies the human need for 'belongingness and self-esteem' much better than the 'secondary group identities' acquired later in life has been and continues to be more widely accepted. Geertz's analysis of the role of ethnic ties in the new

⁵ For an early 'constructionist' approach, see WEBER (1972: 234-244, first edition, 1921); for an exhaustive discussion of the history of the terms nation, 'Volk' (people) and related concepts, see BRUNNER *et al.* (1992).

⁶ For a general critique of Barth, see REX (1986: 86-91); for Barth's overemphasis on the stability of ethnic boundaries see COHEN (1978: 387-388), as well as ARONSON (1976) on the issue that a 'culture-free' definition does not adequately distinguish ethnic groups from other, e.g. religious or political groups.

⁷ The term 'primordial ties' gained currency in sociology through an article by SHILS (1957) and was subsequently introduced into anthropology by GEERTZ (1973, first in 1963). See ELLER and COUGHLAN (1993) for an overview and excellent critique of the concept.

⁸ See THOMPSON (1989: 21-48) for an extensive critique.

African and Asian states, which combines primordialist and historical-political arguments has been particularly influential, however. According to Geertz, it was only in the context of economic and political 'modernization' that ethnicity became a virulent idiom for defending particularist interests. But the ethnicity thus mobilized is itself presented as a traditional 'primordial attachment':

"that stems from the 'givens' — or, more precisely, as culture is inevitably involved in such matters, the assumed 'givens' — of social existence: immediate contiguity and kin connection mainly, but beyond them the givenness that stems from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular dialect of a language, and following particular social practices" (GEERTZ, 1973: 259).

Although these and similar postulates of the undoubted and a priori givenness of ethnic identity have been refuted by countless empirical studies, primordialist approaches have proved extraordinarily tenacious⁹. This may be due in part to the deficiencies of simplistic constructionist theories, which have had a difficult time explaining such phenomena as why people are prepared to die for ideologies of identity which supposedly arose out of rational political interests. It is nonetheless extraordinary, as Comaroff has pointed out, how stubbornly the controversy between (neo)primordialists and constructionists is constantly being recast. The only explanation he can find for this phenomenon is that the questionable theories themselves belong to the ideological arsenal of contemporary identity politics:

"Ethno-nationalisms see their own roots in primal attachments: it is by virtue of these attachments — and by effacing the traces of their historical construction — that claims to ethnic self-determination are typically conceived and justified. As a result, primordialism *appears* to account for, and to valorize, this kind of identity. By contrast, Euro-nationalism [that envisages a secular state founded on universalist principles of citizenship and a social contract] locates its origins in narratives of human agency and heroic achievements. It is, alike for those who hold it as worldview and for those who seek to analyze it, an historical creation; not surprisingly, it seems most persuasively illuminated by one or the other form of constructionism. And hetero-nationalism [that seeks to absorb ethno-national identity politics within a Euro-nationalist conception of political community] tends to be rationalized and explained by recourse to neoprimalist instrumentalism. Both the former and the latter hold that cultural identity has a primal basis; an immanent, enduring essence that is bound to express itself as soon as its bearers find cause and/or occasion to assert common interest. And both agree, explicitly or implicitly, that — inasmuch as such assertions are founded on 'natural' affiliations — they are undeniably right and proper" (COMAROFF, 1993: 33-34).

⁹ See e.g. MOYNIHAN (1993), as well as Hobsbawm's note that today it is more necessary than ever 'to reject the "primordialist" theory of ethnicity' (HOBSBAWM, 1992: 5).

Such political connotations and the peculiar mixture of instrumentalist and primordialist arguments can also be located in many of the studies of ethnicity in Africa outlined below.

'TRIBALISM IN TOWN'¹⁰.

THE STUDY OF LABOUR MIGRATION AND URBAN ETHNICITY

In the 1940s and 1950s, issues of social change, particularly the phenomena of labour migration and urbanization, gained in significance in British social anthropological research on Africa. A number of methodologically and theoretically innovative studies of 'African urban systems' (MAYER, 1962: 576) appeared, most of them focusing on the Rhodesian copper belt, which exercised a strong influence on the field more generally¹¹. In the mining towns, but also in other larger towns in southern Africa, the majority of the urban population was composed of migrant workers who returned, whether voluntarily or not, to their rural places of origin after shorter or longer stays in the city. Early studies which focused chiefly on the cultural implications of this mobility interpreted the adaptation of rural migrants to urban conditions as a process of 'detrribalization', with clearly negative connotations (e.g. WILSON, 1941-42). Gluckman, Mitchell, Epstein and other scholars from the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute insisted, in contrast, that the town and rural tribal homes represented different social fields, in which the migrants developed different forms of behaviour and organization appropriate to their respective situations. Or, as Gluckman expressed it in his famous pronouncement:

"An African townsman is a townsman, an African miner is a miner: he is only secondarily a tribesman [...] the moment an African crossed his tribal boundary. he was 'detrribalised', outside the tribe, though not outside the influence of the tribe. Correspondingly, when a man returns from the towns into the political area of his tribe he is tribalised — de-urbanised —, though not outside the influence of the town" (GLUCKMAN, 1960: 57-58).

'Tribalism in town' was not the extension of rural institutions and modes of behaviour into city life, but rather an urban phenomenon in its own right. It was, above all, 'a means of classifying the multitude of Africans of heterogeneous origin who live together in the towns' (GLUCKMAN, 1960: 55). Using social distance scales, MITCHELL (1956) studied how different actors distinguished tribes in different ways, classifying them in various hierarchical orders according to their own ethnic membership. The *Kalela* dance, which was popular in the Copper Belt during

¹⁰ GLUCKMAN (1960: 55).

¹¹ See WERBNER (1990) on the history of the 'Manchester school' of British social anthropology which developed around Max Gluckman and the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute.

the period, strikingly staged the complex interaction of competition and mutual stereotyping among tribes, but also their common imitation and parodying of European hierarchies and way of life. As MITCHELL (1970: 85) later summed it up, the reference to ethnicity, when turned outwards, facilitates the 'categorical interaction' between anonymous city-dwellers: 'people are identified by ethnic indicators and this identification predicates the patterns of behaviour expected from them'. On the other hand, a common ethnicity, turned inwards, provides the basis for 'enduring personal relationships', friendship networks and mutual aid associations.

With his case-study of a Rhodesian mining town, EPSTEIN (1958: 235) demonstrated that the decisive economic, social and political gap was between Europeans and Africans and that tribal loyalties were significant primarily in relations between Africans outside the workplace. Tribalism nevertheless also played a certain role in organizations such as the trade unions, 'in which a man's tribal affiliations would appear to be completely irrelevant', a phenomenon which needed explanation. The fact that the ethnic categories in play here were rarely identical to the tribal designations relevant in the workers' regions of origin appeared to EPSTEIN (*ibid.*: 236) as clear proof that what he was looking at were not 'loyalties and values stemming from a traditional social order'. Tribalism was, rather, an expression of growing urban social inequality, 'the lines of an emerging class structure... tending to coincide with tribal divisions'.

Other studies, for example that by MAYER (1961) on the Xhosa in the South African city of East London, emphasized that different migrant groups accorded varying degrees of importance to their home ties and tribal loyalties, on the one hand, and new urban friendships and associations on the other, 'determined ultimately by [their] personal choice' (MAYER, 1962: 588). The significance of individual choice in shaping social relationships and ethnic identity is also emphasized in *Social Networks in Urban Situations* (1969), a volume edited by Mitchell which sought, through actor-centred analyses, to overcome the deficiencies of the structuralist urban/rural 'dual-spheres model' (WERBNER, 1990: 163) still prevalent at that time. In contrast, most early studies of the role of ethnic identity in West African cities tended to come from a functionalist perspective, interpreting ethnic forms of organization as substitutes for rural kinship or political institutions¹².

¹² E.g. BUSIA (1950), ROUCH (1956), BANTON (1957), LITTLE (1965), MEILLASSOUX (1968), HART (1971), GRINDAL (1973) and SKINNER (1978). See also the overview in GUGLER (1975). Newer studies, e.g. LENTZ and ERLMANN (1989) and GUGLER (1991) emphasize, in contrast, that particularly in times of economic crisis and political instability, home ties and ethnicity represent an important source of security, especially for migrant labourers but also for urban white collar workers, and that they are actually used for remigration to the rural home or the organization of multiple, plurilocal income strategies.

In summary, one may say that almost all of the above-mentioned studies of tribalism in the urban setting emphasized that ethnic membership is situationally dependent, flexible and manipulable. They frequently suggested that urban ethnic categories often do not correspond to rural 'tribal groups' and social identities. Instead, migrants (and/or their employers) create new ethnic groups as the situation requires¹³. The literature scarcely questioned, though, the existence of clearly and permanently distinguishable rural tribes, even if controversies remained over whether, in the long run, massive labour migration would initiate the demographic, economic and cultural degeneration of tribes (SCHAPERLA, 1947; GULLIVER, 1955) or, on the contrary, foster 'tribal cohesion' and cultural conservatism (WATSON, 1958; VAN VELSEN, 1960). Whether the stress was on political aspects — 'each tribe is an organized political unit with a complex internal structure' (GLUCKMAN, 1960: 65) — or on cultural homogeneity, scholars do not seem to have doubted that the rural population was organized in historically-rooted tribes. While researchers took a constructionist approach to analyzing 'tribalism in town', they approached rural 'tribes' from an essentialist perspective.

'FROM TRIBE TO NATION'¹⁴. THE STUDY OF ETHNICITY AS A POLITICAL RESOURCE

Debates about the political role of ethnicity in post-colonial Africa as they have been carried on since the 1960s have also tended to adopt an essentialist understanding of tribes in rural areas. This found expression in the very terminology of the literature. In an early essay on ethnicity and national integration, for example, WALLERSTEIN (1960: 130) referred to the rural '*Gemeinschaft*-like community' as a 'tribe', but qualified urban groupings based on common ancestry and/ or culture as 'ethnic groups'. In contrast with rural tribes, membership of urban ethnic groups was flexible, 'a matter of social definition' (*ibid.*: 131) that often appealed to administrative units created by former colonial governments, a common language or even only common occupations¹⁵. WALLERSTEIN (*ibid.*: 133-34) predicted that, with increasing urbaniza-

¹³ This phenomenon is often referred to as 'supertribalisation' (see, e.g., SOUTHALL, 1970: 34; HART, 1971). The term is an adaptation of one introduced by ROUCH (1956: 31, 138-139), which he defines as a counterpoint to *détribalisation* and uses to point up the persistence of *systèmes traditionnels* and *cohésion tribale* among the Zabrana migrants in Accra. But ROUCH (1956: 33-40) also mentions that the ethnic distinctions prevailing in the migrants' home regions are absorbed in the migration situation into more comprehensive common *étiquettes tribales*.

¹⁴ COHEN and MIDDLETON (1970).

¹⁵ For a similar distinction between 'tribe' and 'ethnic group', see BATES (1974: 459).

tion, loyalty to these new ethnic groups would gradually overlay 'loyalty to the tribal community and government' and therefore forge a link between traditional particularism and modern nation-state integration. As associations which took over the tasks of social security — the traditional province of kin solidarity — but which did not recruit their members according to strict kinship principles, ethnic groups were 'perhaps a self-liquidating phase on the road to the emergence of the nuclear family' (*ibid.*: 135). By providing new skills, knowledge and contacts, these ethnic associations also served the 'resocialization' of rural migrants, furthering individual social mobility and thus preventing the establishment of rigid class boundaries. Finally, ethnicity was an 'outlet for political tensions' because, as WALLERSTEIN (*ibid.*: 137), borrowing from Parsons, put it, they fulfilled an 'important scapegoat function': dissatisfaction with new governments would be transformed into politically less disruptive 'complaints about the ethnic group or groups presumably in power.' The new ethnic loyalties brought with them, however, the apparently inevitable phenomena of nepotism and corruption, and in some cases secessionist movements, which stood in the way of national integration.

'Particularistic loyalties run counter to the most efficient allocation of occupational and political roles in the state' (*ibid.*: 134): this axiom not only formed the basis of normative modernization models but was also shared by pluralism theories. Here, though, in contrast to Wallerstein, ethnicity was not distinguished from tribalism. Rather, it was defined primordialistically as:

"common provenance and distinctness as a unit of sociological and biological reproduction; it accordingly connotes internal uniformities and external distinctness of biological stock, perhaps of language, kinship, culture, cult and other institutions" (SMITH, 1969 a: 103-104).

Pluralism theorists like Smith, Kuper or Van den Berghe regarded the African states as 'plural societies', which were shaped by the dominance of such ethnic, religious or otherwise traditionally demarcated 'collectivities', and by 'a social structure characterized by fundamental discontinuities and cleavages, and a cultural complex based on systematic institutional diversity' (SMITH, 1969 b: 27). While Wallerstein still harboured the hope that tribal and ethnic particularism might in the long run give way to cultural homogenization and national integration¹⁶, such optimism soon disappeared in the face of obvious 'ethnic' conflicts

¹⁶ In his later works in dependency theory, WALLERSTEIN (1979: 181) privileges global processes of class formation and interprets ethnic groups as 'status groups' and 'blurred collective representations of classes'. 'Ethnic consciousness', he now postulates in a primordialist mode, 'is eternally latent everywhere. But it is only realized when groups feel either threatened with a loss of previously acquired privilege or conversely feel that it is an opportune moment politically to overcome longstanding denial of privilege' (*ibid.*: 184).

such as the Biafran War in Nigeria. According to KUPER (1969: 479), instead of assuming the quasi-automatic political and cultural modernization of African societies, we should expect that phases of 'depluralization' — diminishing ethnic group ties and increasing institutional integration — will alternate or even coincide with phases of 'polarization' — 'an increasing accentuation of plural division based on race and ethnicity'.

The paradoxical coexistence of socio-political integration and an increasing emphasis on ethnic particularity provides the starting point for a number of works from the 1970s which examine ethnicity as a modern political resource. Before turning to these works, though, let us look briefly at an anthropological answer to the modernization and pluralism theorists, *From Tribe to Nation in Africa*, a collection of case studies of 'incorporation processes' edited by COHEN and MIDDLETON (1970). They criticize the ahistorical reification of tribes and the accompanying dramatization of the opposition between tribal-particularist loyalties and national integration which dominated the debates among political scientists. Anthropologists are partly to blame, however, according to the authors, since for many years, in the name of 'comparative analysis and theory building within the discipline', they isolated tribes as analytical units and overstressed the permanence of their boundaries and their internal cultural homogeneity, with the result that 'ethnic units, or tribes, have come to be regarded as more stable entities than they in fact are' (COHEN and MIDDLETON, 1970: 4). In fact, pre-colonial territorial and cultural boundaries were often exceedingly fuzzy and flexible. The complex processes of 'incorporation' of local societies into larger political, economic or religious networks — 'processes by which groups merge, amalgamate, and develop into new collectivities with new and/ or emerging identities' — were not only a product of the colonial or post-colonial period, but rather 'as old as man himself' (*ibid.*: 10)¹⁷. As Cohen and Middleton emphasize, the specific course and conflicts of recent state formation depend in no small measure upon the regionally diverse history of such precolonial processes of political incorporation:

"At first centralized states are brought into new nations as already organized units [...] unable to organize as a pressure group within the new nation almost from the very beginning, thus creating the very basis for ethnic politics [...] During this same time, the acephalous society has no means of articulating a traditional administrative hierarchy into that of the nation [...] there is little sense of

¹⁷ Nevertheless COHEN and MIDDLETON (1970: 10-11), in a surprisingly uncritical borrowing from pluralism theorists, also make essentialist arguments, claiming that 'ethnic distinctiveness' is the result of 'ecological adaptations' and is characterized by a 'wide set of shared, learned and at least partially transmitted modes of feeling, thinking, believing and acting'.

identity as a corporate unit or ethnic constituency among the acephalous groups [...] Given the fact that not all groups within the new country are centralized states, rivalries and competition between ethnic groups will be lessened when incorporation first begins. [...]

At a later period in the incorporation process, things change probably as a result of westernization and education, cash-cropping, party politics, and urbanization in the country at large [...] Among acephalous societies the later period witnesses the development of pan-ethnic identity and solidarity, which is accompanied by demands that local administration be given over entirely to members of their own groups... all this has taken place in Africa only after 20 or 30 years of colonial rule and in the mood of nationalist and independence political struggles [...] Thus at this later period ethnic rivalries begin to reach a peak, since both the acephalous and the centralized states are capable of being appealed to as unified interest groups" (COHEN and MIDDLETON, 1970: 28-29)

Geertz had already pointed in 1963 to the close connection between post-colonial state formation and the politicization of 'primordial sentiments'. But why did competition for education, income, status, infrastructure and political influence occur on the battleground of ethnicity rather than class struggle or religion? Taking an actor-oriented, situational analysis approach to the question, BATES (1974: 475) interpreted 'ethnic group formation' as 'dynamic and rational behavior' and as an 'attempt to deal with, organize, and benefit from the modernization of societies'¹⁸. That it was ethnicity which became an efficient political resource in the competition for the scarce 'goods of modernity' lies in the tensions and contradictions arising from the gradual homogenization of status criteria on the one hand, and the spatial differentiation of modernization processes on the other:

"Originating in 'nodes' or 'central places', modernity then spreads or 'diffuses' into the more remote regions of the territory [...] with the central places being the most modernized, the proximate areas being the next most developed, and the hinterlands lagging behind [...] While there is considerable debate over whether territoriality is a required component of the definition of an ethnic group, there is no denying that the members of an ethnic group tend to cluster in space; nor can it be questioned that colonial policy made every attempt to assign ethnic groups to stable and rigidly defined areas. The result of this correspondence in spatial orderings is that those ethnic groups which are most proximate to the locus of the impact of modernity and for status positions in the modern sector can become organized on ethnic lines" (BATES, 1974: 464).

While early studies of urban ethnicity focused above all on the role of labour migrants in the creation of ethnic identity, the significance of

¹⁸ In his groundbreaking 1969 study of Hausa traders in Ibadan, Nigeria (see below), COHEN had already defined ethnicity as an idiom of informal political interest organization. See also COHEN (1974).

educated élites now entered the picture. Bates argued that the latter failed to develop into a pan-ethnic dominant class with common interests and organizational forms because of pressures exerted upon them by their less well-off kin and fellow villagers:

“to share the benefits derived from their advanced positions [...] The result of these pressures is that the more advantaged members of the group are forced to draw into their sphere others of their kind. And the social-climbing less advantaged generate a mythology of consanguinity in search of modern benefits. The initially advantaged group thus consolidates itself in the modern sector and comes to view itself as an ethnic grouping” (*ibid.*: 468-469).

The actual or presumed nepotism of those ethnic groups favoured by differential modernization aroused feelings of disadvantage in other groups – beginning with their ‘more modern elements’ — and these feelings were also construed in ethnic terms:

“They come to understand that they are placed at a disadvantage by their inability to activate a sense of ethnic obligation so as to gain access to the modern sector. Moreover, they perceive that their individual progress is closely determined by the collective standing of their group; they therefore initiate programs of collective advancement in response” (*ibid.*: 469).

The educated élites of disadvantaged groups thus became ‘ethnic missionaries’, as ABERNETHY (1969: 108) called them, organizing ethnic associations devoted to the development of their home regions and imparting to the ‘rural masses’ a sense of belonging to an ethnic community. In the political arena, too, ethnic appeals are useful to politicians because constituencies would usually be dominated by an ethnic group and ‘the appeal of common ethnicity can generate unified support where other issues would be divisive’ (BATES, 1974: 470). Once the dynamics described by Bates had been set in motion, an ‘ethnic political machinery, patron/client networks, bossism and patronage structures’ gradually emerged which, as TAMBIAH (1989: 343) emphasizes, perpetuated the “‘strategic efficacy” [...] of ethnicity in making claims on the resources of the modern state’.

Most recent discussions of ‘politicized ethnicity’ follow Bates’ analysis of ethnic groups as ‘political interest groups’¹⁹. New questions have arisen, however, in the wake of the continuing economic crisis and notorious ‘weakness’ of African states, whose sinking export and tax revenues mean that there are ever fewer resources to go around: ‘What hap-

¹⁹ See, for example, KASFIR (1978), ROTHCHILD and OLORUNSOLA (1983) and CHAZAN *et al.* (1992: 105-129), which summarize numerous individual case studies and place particular emphasis on the role of ‘ethnic intermediaries.’ For a study reaching beyond Africa, see HOROWITZ (1985).

pens to ethnicity when the economy is at a standstill and when the centrality of the state is no longer a given?' (CHAZAN, 1986: 138). Ethnicity will play different roles depending upon the nature of the economic and political crisis, according to Chazan. In 'crises of maldistribution,' 'differential ethnicity' will be strengthened while in 'crises of dwindling resources', ethnic differences will be overshadowed by class interests, at least among the ranks of the élite. In 'crises of poverty', in contrast, ethnicity becomes a 'framework of human survival', facilitating partial withdrawal from the state, 'self-enclosure' and 'local self-reliance' (*ibid.*: 145-147). On closer scrutiny, Chazan's attempt to tie types of crises to the different functions of politicized ethnicity remains vague and not particularly convincing. She does, however, at least point out that ethnicity can mean very different things at different times to different social groups — educated élites, migrant labourers and peasants. In so doing she demonstrates the insufficiency of a one-dimensional view which reduces ethnicity to a political resource wielded by élites *vis-à-vis* the state in their competition for the 'goods of modernity'.

THE CREATION OF TRIBALISM²⁰.

THE STUDY OF RURAL ETHNICITY UNDER COLONIAL RULE

My previous statement that rural tribes have mainly been viewed from an essentialist perspective requires some modification. After all, anthropologists undertaking serious empirical research could not help but realize that the groups they were studying were by no means organized in unambiguously demarcated, isolated tribes. Scholars like FORTES (1945) and GOODY (1956) who studied stateless societies held that 'no "tribe"... can be circumscribed by a precise boundary — territorial, linguistic, cultural or political. Each merges with its neighbours in all these respects' (FORTES, 1940: 239-240). Ethnographers of African chiefdoms were well aware of the multiethnicity of the political entities they investigated, even if they tended to concentrate on one dominant ethnic group (e.g. COHEN, 1967). In their famous introduction to *African Political Systems*, FORTES and EVANS-PRITCHARD (1940) used the more neutral term 'peoples' rather than 'tribes', and emphasized that 'political units' were not congruent with either social networks or 'linguistic or cultural areas'. The complex processes of attributing ethnic identity to oneself and others, and actors' situational drawing of boundaries were not subjected to analysis, however. Authors usually paid lip-service in their introductions to the problem of delimiting and naming the unit under investigation, only to spend the rest of the text using terms like 'the LoDagaa', 'the Tallensi', 'the Kanuri' or 'the Nuer' to refer to presu-

²⁰ VAIL (1989).

mably homogeneous socio-cultural entities for the purposes of cultural comparison²¹.

SOUTHALL'S groundbreaking essay *The Illusion of Tribe* (1970) stands at the intersection between the essentialization of tribes, whether out of research pragmatism or *naïveté*, and their radical historicization since the late 1970s. He was one of the first scholars to point out that new ethnic identities — 'supertribes' — had arisen during the colonial period in rural as well as urban settings:

"The fact is that many tribes have come into existence [...] through a combination of reasonable cultural similarity with colonial administrative convenience, which in more recent times has often coincided with peoples' own sense of need for wider levels of organization to enable them to exert more effective pressure on events" (SOUTHALL, 1970: 35).

Anthropologists generally defined 'tribal societies' as politically autonomous societies characterized by a 'high degree of self-sufficiency at a near-subsistence level', 'simple technology' and a 'distinctive language, culture and sense of identity' (*ibid.*: 28). The African reality of 'interlocking, overlapping, multiple and alternative collective identities' (*ibid.*: 44) by no means conforms to this ideal type, though, and anthropologists' 'insistence on defining some global discrete entity as a tribe' (*ibid.*: 41) has led them astray. On the other hand, Southall viewed the present, with its multiplicity of social identities, as a 'long transitional period in which their [the "tribal societies"] members were in varying degrees becoming incorporated into wider systems, yet continued to retain strong elements of their former state' (*ibid.*: 29). To put it more strongly: tribes in the strict sense no longer exist, but they did in the precolonial past, until shortly before the anthropologists arrived²².

Marxists and dependency theorists, who began in the 1970s to analyze African history in terms of international and local class relations, provided an important impetus to the final historicization of tribes. They asserted that 'traditional' structures, whether in the city or the rural areas, did not represent failed modernization or chance leftovers, but rather had their function in colonial and post-colonial capitalist production. This argument, to be sure, tends to imply an economic reductionist view of ethnicity (and of culture and politics more generally). MAFEJE (1971), for example, considers tribes a colonial invention and tribalism mere 'false consciousness'. This ideology, created by 'expatriate theorists' and the new African élites for their own purposes, conceals oppression and prevents peasants and migrant labourers from

²¹ See also COHEN (1978: 380-384) on the 'unit problem' in anthropology.

²² See LEACH (1989) for a critique of this line of argument.

recognizing their class interests²³. Despite this one-dimensionality, Marxist and dependency theory approaches demonstrated the necessity of subjecting conventional anthropological terminology to historical-critical scrutiny.

It is above all historians such as ILIFFE (1979) and LONSDALE (1977) who, in their works on the history of British colonial rule in southern and eastern Africa, have developed the thesis of the colonial 'invention' of tribes. Before colonization, they argue, Africans belonged simultaneously to various social networks — nuclear and extended families, lineages, age sets, religious secret societies, village communities, chiefdoms, etc. Loyalties and identities were complex, flexible and amorphous, sometimes overlapping, sometimes complementary, and did not add up to clearly demarcated tribes. These multiple identities continued ['on' deleted] into the colonial period, and were multiplied yet further by the introduction of Christianity, schooling and industrialization. Within their policy of indirect rule, the British introduced a new political geography which ran counter to these complex networks and demarcated tribes with appeals to 'tradition'. The invention of tribes, however, was not merely an administrative act supported by the British authorities' political power. It was nourished by the active participation of African actors creating political and cultural 'traditions' and a new tribal history in their own interest. 'Progressive chiefs', mission school-trained 'progressive traditionalists', and elders played a central role in the codification of tribal 'customs,' a process which usually entailed thoroughgoing changes in the previous social organization²⁴. As ILIFFE (1979: 324) summarized:

"The British wrongly believed that Tanganyikans belonged to tribes; Tanganyikans created tribes to function within the colonial framework [... The] new political geography [...] would have been transient had it not coincided with similar trends among Africans. They too had to live amidst bewildering social complexity, which they ordered in kinship terms and buttressed with invented history. Moreover, Africans wanted effective units of action just as officials wanted effective units of government [...] Europeans believed Africans belonged to tribes; Africans built tribes to belong to."

HOBBSBAWM's phrase (1983) 'the invention of tradition' referred to neo-traditions (coronation ceremonies, flags, uniforms, national anthems, etc.) which were invented by identifiable actors at identifiable points in time in the context of nineteenth-century European industrialization

²³ Characteristically, even Mafeje, who aptly criticizes the essentialism and contradictions in British social anthropologists' concept of tribe, assumes that there existed in the pre-colonial period societies with a 'primitive subsistence economy' and 'local autonomy' which may legitimately be considered 'tribes' in the usual anthropological sense.

²⁴ See MOORE (1986) on the changing history of Chagga 'customary law', and DORWARD (1974) on the creation and repeated revision of Anglo-Tiv 'working misunderstanding'.

and the building of nation-states. In colonial Africa, 'invented traditions' encompassed both monarchist and militarist neotraditions imported from Europe and new African traditions, particularly of tribes and tribal customs, created by Europeans and/or Africans. Scholarly interest focused at first on the function of invented traditions in cementing authority, a phenomenon which RANGER (1983) saw as rooted in a partial congruence of interests between colonial masters and African chiefs and elders. Invented tribal traditions were used mainly by old men and chiefs to maintain control over young men (and their migrant labour income), women, and immigrants²⁵.

Recent works (e.g. in VAIL, 1989), however, also point to labour migrants' interest in the consolidated rural tribes and 'traditional' chiefs who protect their wives and families during their absence, defend land rights and, in the face of urban insecurity, provide an all-important home during crises. LONSDALE (1992) has introduced the notion of 'moral ethnicity', suggesting that ethnicity creates a moral community, which defines civic virtues and organizes the debate over the legitimacy of social differentiation. Vail and others have also examined more closely the complex interaction among colonial administrators, Christian missionaries, European anthropologists, local educated élites, and chiefs in producing and popularizing a convincing body of tribal traditions and history. Such inventions of history, and the manipulation of tradition by cultural brokers motivated by their own interests, do have their limitations. However, as PEEL (1989: 200) underlined in his critique of one-sided instrumentalist explanations of ethnicity:

"However compelling the reasons for ethnic mobilization — regionally uneven development, the expansion of nation-states, multi-ethnic urbanization, etc., it still has to be worked at in cultural terms. The resultant ethnohistory or 'historicist argument' has been the standard means of intellectuals or ethnic missionaries to raise their fellows' consciousness. But despite the 'invention of tradition' that it may involve, unless it also makes a genuine contact with people's actual experience, that is with history that happened, it is not likely to be effective."

In this sense, RANGER (1993) has recently noted self-critically that the term 'invention' overemphasizes the mechanical, authorial aspects and the fictionality and rigidity of the creation of tradition. A concept like 'imagination' might do more justice to the complex process of creating new, and rearranging older, elements - a process involving many actors with diverse intentions and interpretations.

²⁵ In a continuation of the Marxist class analyses of the 1970s, studies of ethnic categorizations in southern Africa in particular emphasize the intertwining of ethnic and socio-economic inequality. WILMSEN and VOSSEN (1990), for example, interpret 'ethnic divisions' as a 'feature of class domination', 'historical products of labour market segmentation' and 'masks for underlying class conflicts'.

PRECOLONIAL AND COLONIAL 'WE'-GROUP PROCESSES

Historians and anthropologists now agree that precolonial Africa was not — as modernization, pluralism and some dependency theorists would have us believe — composed of tribes or ethnic groups with distinct boundaries. On the contrary, the dominant characteristics of precolonial 'societies' (used here as conventional shorthand, without implying functional integration) were mobility, overlapping networks, multiple group membership and the flexible, context-dependent drawing of boundaries. FARDON (1995), for example, emphasizes that West African societies possessed no concept of individual, unmistakable persons with fixed identities (in the sense of 'uniqueness' and 'bounded sameness over time'). Instead, they considered people as beings composed of various elements, traits and relations to other persons. It was only under European colonial rule that new political institutions and administrative measures (censuses, maps, legal conceptions, commercialization of land, etc.) introduced the concept of individual, personal identity, together with its collective counterparts, culturally and linguistically distinct tribes and nations.

KOPYTOFF (1987) pointed to the great significance of the handling of 'frontier' situations, migration and new settlements, which, in the face of relatively low population density and sufficient reserves of free land, were a typical response to presumptuous rulers and social conflict. It was not the stability of political units that was remarkable, but rather the enormous capacity of African societies to reconstitute themselves continually through the creative use of 'old' practices and organizational forms. AMSELLE (1985) also emphasized the multiple interconnections of precolonial African societies through which overlapping but not necessarily congruent social 'spaces' of economic exchange, political and military rule, language and religion as well as culture emerged. In this process, the dynamics of interaction were determined particularly by the '*sociétés englobantes*', kingdoms or chiefdoms which claimed authority over expansive territory and demanded tribute or slaves of the mainly acephalous '*sociétés englobées*' living in the interstices between the dominant realms.

However, this flexibility and multiplicity of social and political networks does not mean, that ethnicity was purely a colonial invention, and that no processes of 'ethnicization' took place in the precolonial period. Without sources or an extensive literature, we know relatively little about such processes; however, according to the scattered information available, precolonial 'ethnic' ideologies of a common ancestry and history were also invented and propagated by cultural specialists to establish new 'we' groups, and ethnic categories were introduced to distinguish the group from 'others'. Widespread ideas like lineage and clan were socially produced group ideologies similar to ethnicity

and probably more recent than anthropologists have assumed. EKEH (1990) locates the origin of the strength and dominance of seemingly 'traditional' African kinship systems in the period of slave raiding and trade, against which Africans tried to protect themselves by extending family relationships rather than by using the state institutions which were mainly first developed in conjunction with the slave trade itself. WRIGHT and HAMILTON (1990) showed that already in the nineteenth century, Zulu rulers tried, at first unsuccessfully, to propagate a new collective identity, and new versions of history and Zulu nationalism. LAST (1995) notes the existence of an 'Islamic social science', which possessed synonyms for European concepts such as state, nation, tribe and individual. Particularly in West Africa, in the context of the slave trade and other commercial activities, Muslims developed a geography with a system of nomenclature and characterizations (particularly in regard to religious status) for the population, which colonial officials later adopted, often unquestioningly, and used as the basis for their own ethnic categorizations (SHARPE, 1986).

The colonial 'invention of tribalism' thus built on complex 'we'-group processes. They varied so greatly from locality to locality, however, that it is difficult to make generalizations. Let us at least summarize four significant aspects of colonial 'ethnicization'. Firstly, ethnic categorizations tended to develop within the context of social inequality as instruments for the stabilization (or re-establishment) of this inequality. Secondly, the cooperation between colonial authorities and local 'culture brokers' (VAIL, 1989), usually chiefs and former mission school pupils, intertwined European with local models of identity. In the process, quite new practices, symbols and histories were often introduced as 'tradition', while older elements were adopted, their character transformed by codification as 'customary law' and other processes of formalization in writing. Colonial ethnic categorizations were probably much more rigid and standardized than the precolonial production of collective identities. Thirdly, the cementing of newly produced identities through daily practice made them appear natural (process of 'essentialization'). The new ethnic identities came to seem more real because they were made the practical basis for colonial administrative boundaries and reproduced by the daily bureaucratic round. Fourthly, and finally, the factors which provoked the production of ethnic identities may have differed greatly from the factors which ensured their continued existence (COMAROFF, 1993). In many African colonies rapid social change — labour migration, urbanization and the growing monetization of rural social relations — fostered insecurity and an orientation towards 'traditional' values, making the new ethnic ideologies attractive for broad segments of the population (VAIL, 1989: 13-16; ELWERT, 1989). Ethnic identities created within the context of colonial practices of authority and enforced by chiefs thus also fulfilled the

migrant labourers' need for security. In the post-colonial period they became an idiom for political demands upon the state (or also for secessionist movements and wars).

IDENTITY, MORAL COMMUNITY AND POLITICAL STRATEGY. THE MULTIVOCALITY OF ETHNICITY

Such changes in the functions of ethnicity and often also — at times unnoticed — of its contents, make it clear that we should not overestimate the rigidity with which the boundaries, history, language and cultural inventory of colonial tribes were defined. This rigidity is more often a façade than a political reality. Social networks subordinate to or reaching beyond the boundaries of tribes retained and retain their significance to this day. Behind the façade of unambiguous history/ies, symbols, rituals and rules which are intended to demarcate the ethnic community, there lie ambiguities which become the object of conflicts and differing interpretations among various actors. I will end with a few illustrative examples.

Defining ethnic groups as 'informal interest groups', COHEN (1969) studied the use of cultural difference ('the idiom of custom') as an instrument for organizing and legitimating economic interests among Hausa immigrants in Ibadan (Nigeria). A Hausa was (or could become by assimilation) a person who spoke Hausa as a first language, was a Muslim, could claim origins in one of the Hausa states and bore no tribal marks of another ethnic group. In colonial times, the emphasis on ethnic distinctness was institutionally secured by the British authorities through the awarding of political autonomy with the granting of an own Hausa chief. After independence, however, the government guarantee of political autonomy ended, the authority of the Hausa chiefs was weakened and interaction with and competition from the Yoruba Muslim converts grew, threatening the Hausa trade monopoly. Hausa exclusivity was now re-established in a religious idiom, through the introduction of the Tijaniyya order, which was also accompanied by political reorganization and a renewed emphasis on cultural differences with the Yoruba.

SCHILDKROUT's study (1978) of Mossi migrants in Kumasi (Ghana) also examined the changing meaning of ethnic identity under new political circumstances and among the second generation of immigrants born in the *zongo* (quarter inhabited by northern migrants). For the first generation of Mossi settling in Kumasi during the colonial period, the appeal to a common ethnicity created a space for mutual aid. Ethnic identity as a Mossi, defined by patrilineal descent, developed as an idiom for constructing metaphorical kin relationships and the tribal headman, responsible for the regulation of internal conflicts in the Mossi commu-

nity, was a sort of lineage head. At the same time, Mossi immigrants were increasingly integrated through neighbourhood, friendship and marriage ties into the multiethnic *zongo* community, where Hausa was the common language and Islam the dominant religion. Metaphorical kinship among the Mossi was gradually replaced by actual interethnic familial relationships, and the second generation of Mossi was no longer linguistically or culturally distinct from other *zongo* dwellers. Unlike the Hausa in Ibadan, for the Mossi in Kumasi it was not economic but political interests that contributed to the continued emphasis on Mossi identity. Since the 1960s, this identity has been formally organized in the Mossi Youth Association, and demonstrated by the use of neo-traditionalist symbols such as 'Mossi cloth'. Mossi identity became a political resource in competition with the dominant Hausa for influence on *zongo* politics and in dealing with the insecurity created by the Ghanaian government's restrictive policies concerning 'aliens'.

PEEL's study (1983) on the history of Ijesha shows vividly that this Yoruba kingdom's growing incorporation into the colonial and post-colonial Nigerian state on the one hand, and the emergence of Ijesha (and Yoruba) ethnic identity on the other, are two aspects of the same process. Peel places particular stress on the great significance of a common history for the establishment of collective identity in modern Nigeria. Because Ijesha identity is rooted in their precolonial past as a political community, appropriated through memory and continually recalled in festivals and rituals, it has not been completely displaced either by class membership or a broader Yoruba identity. The latter is only a product of the early twentieth century: missionaries designated the dialect of the Oyo kingdom as 'Standard Yoruba' and — at first mainly among Christians and the educated who made their careers in the Yoruba-speaking region — Yoruba became an ethnic community distinct from other Nigerian (linguistic) groups. The Nigerian state's federal structure invested this new linguistically-based collective identity with political relevance, which also came to be reflected in party-political preferences. Political pragmatism alone, however, is not enough to anchor and sustain ethnic identity. Even the 'ethnic entrepreneurs' of the new Yoruba identity reconstructed — and invented — a common Yoruba history (PEEL, 1989). All the same, while 'Yoruba' may appear in the Nigerian context as a unified political community, internally it remains a framework in which smaller collective identities such as Ijesha, Ibadan or Oyo, based on precolonial polities, compete for resources, influence and prestige.

COHEN and ODHIAMBO's studies (1989, 1992) on the construction of a 'Luo identity' in Kenya show clearly how multilayered, contradictory and controversial the production of (ethnic) history and culture is. Unlike Ilesha, the creation of new collective identities here could not take up where a precolonial kingdom had left off. The geographical and

cultural boundaries of the 'Luo'— a tribe 'invented' by colonial officials and anthropologists but also created by migrant labourers and an educated élite — were and remained flexible, indefinite and situation-dependent. Illuminating the various actors and discourses in a sort of collage technique, the authors approach the production of social identity/-ties from continually changing perspectives. They address the anchoring of Luo identity in a new but backward-looking ideology of patrilineages and *piny* (sub-tribes) as central Luo organizational principles, the creation of myths of a common migration to western Kenya, the development of a consciousness of a broad common culture through stories and legends told to children by migrant wet-nurses, the creation of emotionally-charged notions of a rural 'home' under the circumstances of labour migration, the appropriation of urban space through the media of Luo bars, football clubs and political organizations, the growing pressure on wealthy Luo to display their new status through houses in the village [semicolon deleted] and the significance of funerals 'back home', which connect educated élites to their regions of origin.

Burying SM (COHEN and ODHAMBO, 1992) documents a conflict fought out in court in 1987/88 over the burial of a well-known Luo lawyer. According to the wishes of his wife and children (and, they claimed, his own wishes) he was to be buried on a piece of land near Nairobi on which he had built a house where he lived at weekends, farmed, and intended to spend his retirement. Luo 'customary law', however, stipulated that he be interred in his paternal village, and this was the wish of his Luo kin. The case, in which a court of appeal found for the Luo kin, became a topic of lively interest among the Kenyan public and an arena of debate about ethnicity and class, the rights of wives, the notion of 'home', the legitimacy of 'modern' social practices and the validity of 'custom' and tradition.

No universal 'theory' of ethnicity in contemporary Africa emerges from these case studies, and it would scarcely enrich the state of our knowledge if one did. What becomes clear instead is that the processes of creating ethnic identity are historically and regionally specific. Thus ethnicity can only be studied in historical perspective or, to use COMAROFF's expression (1993: 10), in the light of 'radical historicism':

"arguing that ethnic — indeed all — identities are not 'things' but relations; that their content is wrought in the particularities of their ongoing historical construction. Which is why [...] the substance of ethnicity or nationalism can never be defined or decided in the abstract. And why there cannot be a 'theory' of ethnicity or nationalism per se, only a theory of history and consciousness capable of elucidating the empowered production of identities."

Historically construed, ethnic identities remain open to change, and are multifaceted and ambiguous. Ethnicity can become an idiom of per-

sonal and collective identity in situations of alienation and insecurity, such as migration; it can provide the basis for a moral community, in which struggles occur over élite status and the right of less well-off tribesmates to redistribution and a minimum of reciprocity; it can also become a resource for client networks and political mobilization, which members use to compete for education, jobs, and state benefits more generally. Its efficacy rests on the transfer of the emotional power of kinship and 'home' to larger communities. Behind the essentialist 'façade', though, there is always room for multiple meanings and negotiation.

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