

## NATIONALISM AND ETHNICITY

Nationalism and ethnicity are forms of identification that mark out a group of people, conceived of as ethnic or national. Although the ideology that underlies these forms of identification frequently attributes a stable and objective content to ethnic groups and nations, these are constituted in a historical process marked by relationality. Ethnic groups and nations differ in scale and scope, but are formally constituted through similar processes: people who, in relation to each other and as a group, come to understand themselves as different, if not unequal, signify this difference or inequality in cultural terms. Thus, although collective identification arises from relations, it can be perceived as substantial. Nationalism and ethnicity posit a relation of juxtaposition between criteria such as language, culture, history, territory, and political interests. The most significant difference between ethnicity and nationalism seems to lie in the fact that the latter aspires to connect a nation to a state in a homogeneous way, while the former usually emerges within a national or colonial state.

In their constitution, nationalism and ethnicity include those who belong while excluding those who do not belong, in a process that totalizes units in contradistinction to other units: other ethnic groups, other nations. The fact that multiethnic states are sometimes understood as states in which there are different nations within a nation highlights the formal similarity between the two concepts. Yet, the contents that define nationalism and ethnicity vary widely. In the formation and imagination of ethnic groups and nations, social categories are juxtaposed with narratives of cultural difference in a process that is related to circumstantial political claims. Nations can be imagined as ethnic in character, but this is not always the case.

Ethnic differences are sometimes portrayed as a potential cause for conflict within and between nation states. However, this is not always the case. Some authors

emphasize the structural similarities between ethnic groups and nations and argue that it is more common for conflict to arise between parties that occupy a similar structural position and have more similarities than differences between them. According to this view, differences are rather a product of conflict than its cause. The well-known idea that a nation is an ethnic group with a state points to the fact that nationalism usually includes an ethnic element; when it does not, it depends on the subsuming of differences, which might be conceived of as ethnic or not, to national unity.

It is not uncommon for independence movements within nation states to be identified by themselves and by the state against which they fight as ethnic in character. In such cases, movements might fight for the equivalence between ethnicity and state that grounds many nation states. Through historical processes and generational changes, ethnicity and nationalism acquire a content that is precipitated out of a fluid set of representations and practices, in both everyday experience and grandiose rituals. In its amalgamation of old and new, the content of national and ethnic identification is molded through both creativity and contestation.

The content attributed to national or ethnic difference is marked through the names ascribed to national and ethnic units: Indonesian, South African; Malay, Tswana. It is not rarely the case that current ethnic names do not correspond to pre-colonial polities, and some authors argue that political allegiance, not ethnicity, defined belonging before the constitution of colonial and national states. Yet, this does not mean that such names are not relevant to understanding the current configuration of ethnic groups and nations in the Global South. Ethnicity and nationalism are historical formations even when such forms of designation precede colonialism and the nation state. The people thus designated actively participated in the process in which

ethnolinguistic groups were created through their relations with the state, Christian churches, social sciences, and migration.

As far as ethnic or national identification is concerned, religion can be an important marker of social distinction. Although from a Weberian perspective identification of national, ethnic, or religious character was expected to disappear with the process of rationalization and individuation that underlies modernity, this has proven to be wrong in many cases. In the last century, the Global South saw the emergence of ethnically based political organizations and movements within both colonial and postcolonial states. While in parts of Asia and Africa states are not rarely understood to be multiethnic, in Latin America ethnicities are often viewed as minorities within nation states in which, historically, the perception of ethnic ascription has undergone a process of homogenization. In such contexts, apart from being a marker associated with ethnic groups or nations, Christianity has had a significant role in the emergence of national and ethnic forms of identification.

Christian missions and churches, as mediators in the process in which the diverse subjects of colonialism and nation states were constituted, have contributed to the configuration of ethnicities through their systematization of languages and cultures. This includes the compilation of dictionaries, grammars, vocabularies, and ethnographies. In the effort to translate the Christian doctrine into vernacular languages, those they evangelized were divided into 'nations,' understood as ethnolinguistic units and at times compared with the biblical 'nations' of Israel. In this process, languages and dialects were formalized and gained concrete existence as separate entities pertaining to different social groups. The juxtaposition of language, ethnicity, and culture constituted what became known as ethnolinguistic groups. These, in turn, were subdivided into 'clans' or 'tribes,' a different dialect being attributed to each of them.

Not rarely, such political divisions created by missions were adopted by the colonial state and maintained by independent states.

Christian missions and schools have also contributed to the creation of new elites. In colonial contexts, missions mediated between pre-colonial forms of hierarchization and the social hierarchies enforced by colonialism. Thus, mission structures not only built upon previous hierarchies (for example, through the education of the children of the local elite); they also created new patterns of hierarchization in cases in which people who previously occupied lower positions in society experienced upward social mobility due to their relations with Christian missions and the education they provided. In Latin America, for instance, liberation theology has been associated with the emergence of leaders of minority ethnic groups. In Sub-Saharan Africa, most leaders of liberation movements were educated in Christian missions.

In many cases, missions were responsible not only for the vernacularization of local languages, but also for the dissemination of the European languages that became official languages of multiethnic independent states. Moreover, as the formation of a nation state has historically been the project of an urban elite and this elite was frequently educated in Christian schools, these institutions contributed to shape their particularistic and/or universalistic ideas and projects. Christian churches created the necessary conditions for nationalist projects to emerge through efforts that included the dissemination of literacy, extended networks of belonging, and shared ideas among emerging elites that would later gain currency among the population.

Missionary perceptions on whether particular ethnic groups were prone to embracing Christianity also played a role in the assignment of a content to ethnic units. Missions contributed to the self-objectification of the missionized as a coherent whole

marked by the same language, cultural background, and political interests. This particularistic view was gained in contradistinction to the universalist view of Christianity. Thus, people who were formerly members of a given polity and pledged alliance to it came to identify themselves with broader categories, such as ethnic groups and a universalist religion.

Belonging to a group of shared language and culture led to the idea that one also shares material and symbolic interests with other members of this group. This paved the way both for ethnic claims and for the constitution of national liberation movements. Ethnicity, as both an instrument and the form of colonial rule, can also become a form of anticolonial resistance. In the Global South, nationalism and ethnicity have not rarely risen simultaneously. This might be due to the structural similarity between ethnic groups and nations and to the fact that the political elites involved in nationalist projects also took part in processes of ethnic formation, both as identifiers and as identified.

### **References and Resources**

Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso.

Barth, Frederik. 1969. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organisation of Cultural Difference*. London: Allen & Unwin.

Chatterjee, Partha. 1993. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Comaroff, Jean and Comaroff, John. 1991. *Of Revelation and Revolution*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Eriksen, Thomas. 1993. *Ethnicity and Nationalism*. London: Pluto Press.

French, Jan. 2009. *Becoming Black or Indian in Brazil's Northeast*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Lomnitz, Claudio. 2001. *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism*.

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Mamdani, Mahmood. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late*

*Colonialism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Peel, John. 2000. *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*. Bloomington:

Indiana University Press.

Siegel, James. 1997. *Fetish, Recognition, Revolution*. New Jersey: Princeton University

Press.

IRACEMA DULLEY