Unit Five Identity, Inter-Ethnic Relations and Multiculturalism in Ethiopia

IDENTITY, ETHNICITY AND RACE: *IDENTIFICATION AND SOCIAL CATEGORIZATION*

What is Ethnicity?

Boundary/ Ascription as a Defining Feature of Ethnicity

Culture as a Basic Defining Feature of Ethnicity



CULTURE AS A BASIC DEFINING FEATURE OF ETHNICITY

The criteria which constitute ethnicity vary. For a long time it was common to equate ethnic groups with cultural groups; *any category of people who had a shared culture was considered as an ethnic group.* However, this position has become difficult to justify. This is because; **the sharing of cultural traits frequently crosses group boundaries and**, moreover, people do not always share all their 'cultural traits' with the same people. One may have the same language as some people, the same religion as some of those as well as of some others, and the same economic strategy as an altogether different category of people. In other words, cultural boundaries are not clear-cut, nor do they necessarily correspond with ethnic boundaries. ***Ethnicity is an aspect of relationship, not a cultural property of a group***. If a setting is wholly mono-ethnic, there is effectively no ethnicity, since there is nobody there to communicate cultural difference to.

- The Ethiopian constitutional triplet of "Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples" (the Amharic *behieroch, behiereseboch, ena hezboch) are defined in Article 39 of the Federal Constitution defines as: "a group of people who have or share a large measure of a common culture, or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identity, and who predominantly inhabit an identifiable, contiguous territory.“*
- There are three main kinds of ethnic community in the historical record. These are: ***ethno linguistic communities***, in which language is the most salient and vital element in the definition of ethnicity and the mobilization of ethnic sentiments; ***ethno-religious communities***, which have been defined and have defined themselves, primarily in terms of religious beliefs, practices, and symbols; and ***ethno-political communities,*** that have defined themselves, and been defined, by historical memories and political traditions

DEFINING FEATURE OF ETHNICITY

Ethnic group is a group of people who identify with one another, or are so identified by others, on the ***basis of a boundary that distinguishes them from other groups***. Fredrik Barth (1969a) argues that: the focus ought to be the *boundaries* which delimit the group and not the 'cultural stuffs' it encloses. Cultural variation may be an effect and not a cause of boundaries. If the mutual dichotomization between two groups (that were formerly same group) continues and the national borders between their states become permanent, it is likely that languages as well as other aspects of culture of the two will gradually become more distinctive.

In other words, an ethnic group is defined through **its relationships to others, highlighted through the boundary**. Ethnicity refers to aspects of relationships between groups whose members consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as being culturally distinctive. When cultural differences regularly make a difference in interaction between members of groups, the social relationship has an ethnic element. There is no ethnicity unless groups have a minimum of contact with each other and entertain ideas of each other as being culturally different from themselves. Ethnicity is categorical as ascriptions between 'Us' and 'Them'.

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- All approaches agree that ethnicity has something to do with the classification of people and group relationships. Ethnicity is the application of **systematic distinctions between insiders and outsiders;** between **Us** and **Them**. Dichotomization between insiders and outsiders; the process of self-ascription/attribution and ascription by others shapes the process of interaction among groups. If no such principle (social contact) exists there can be no ethnicity. However, ethnic boundary may change through time; it may shrink or expand, blurred or glared depending on situations and contexts. The compass of the 'We' category may expand and contract according to the situation. Depending on situations, different levels of group membership could be activated. There are different Us and Them groups. In some cases, ethnic identities are imposed from outside, by dominant groups, on those who do not themselves want membership in the group to which they are assigned.

- In spite of the difference in scholarly views of ethnicity among anthropologists, the 'basic social anthropological model of ethnicity' can be summarized as follows:
- ***Ethnicity is a matter of cultural differentiation*** - although, to reiterate the main theme of social identity (Jenkins 2004), identification always involves a dialectical interplay between similarity and difference.
- ***Ethnicity is centrally a matter of shared meanings*** - what we conventionally call 'culture' - but is also produced and reproduced during interaction.
- ***Ethnicity is no more fixed or unchanging*** than the way of life of which it is an aspect, or the situations in which it is produced and reproduced.
- ***Ethnicity, as an identification, is collective and individual***, externalized in social interaction and

ETHNIC GROUPS AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

- Some social anthropologists use to define ethnic groups basically based on objective criteria, others mainly depend on subjective elements, and still some others use a mix of objective and subjective ethnic elements.
- **Smith (1986)** defined ethnic groups as a named human population (a collective name) with myths of common ancestry/descent, shared historical memories, elements of common/shared culture, a link with a homeland (specific territory) and a sense of solidarity among at least some of its members.

- **Max Weber (1968)** defined ethnic groups as human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical types or customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration (Weber 1968). Some ethnic groups may be marked by ***shared culture***; some others may be defined by ***shared religion***, language, and/or customs. Nonetheless every ethnic group tends to have notions of common ancestry justifying their unity.
- **For Isajiw (1992)**, ethnic group refers to either a community-type group of people who share the same culture or to descendants of such people who may not share this culture but who identify themselves with this ancestral group.

By considering the various definitions of ethnicity, Hutchinson and Smith (1996) identified six main features that are predominantly constituted in the definition of an ethnic group:

1. A common proper name, to identify and express the “essence” of the community;

2. A myth of common ancestry that includes the idea of common origin in time and place and that gives an ethnic group a sense of fictive kinship;

3. Shared historical memories, or better, shared memories of a common past or pasts, including heroes, events, and their commemoration;

4. One or more elements of common culture, which need not be specified but normally, include religion, customs, and language;

5. A link with a homeland, not necessarily its physical occupation by the ethnic group, only its symbolic attachment to the ancestral land, as with Diaspora peoples;

6. A sense of solidarity on the part of at least some sections of the ethnic’s population.

ETHNIC IDENTITY

Ethnic identity is an affiliative construct, where an individual is viewed by themselves and by others as belonging to a particular ethnic or cultural group. An individual can choose to associate with a group especially if other choices are available (i.e., the person is of mixed ethnic or racial heritage). Affiliation can be influenced by ***racial, natal, symbolic, and cultural factors*** (Cheung, 1993).

Racial factors involve the use of physiognomic and physical characteristics, *natal factors* refer to "homeland" (ancestral home) or origins of individuals, their parents and kin, and *symbolic factors* include those factors that typify or exemplify an ethnic group (e.g., holidays, foods, clothing, artifacts, etc.). Symbolic ethnic identity usually implies that individuals choose their identity, however, to some extent the cultural elements of the ethnic or racial group have a modest influence on their behavior.

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- Ethnic identity can be defined as a manner in which persons, on account of their ethnic origin, locate themselves psychologically in relation to one or more social systems, and in which they perceive others as locating them in relation to those systems. By ethnic origin is meant either that a person has been socialized in an ethnic group or that his or her ancestors, real or symbolic, have been members of the group. The social systems may be one's ethnic community or society at large, or other ethnic communities and other societies or groups, or a combination of all these

- **External and internal aspects of ethnic identity.**
- External aspects refer to observable behaviour, both cultural and social, such as (1), speaking an ethnic language, practicing ethnic traditions, (2), participation in ethnic personal networks, such as family and friendships, (3), participation in ethnic institutional organizations, such as churches, schools, enterprises, media (4), participation in ethnic voluntary associations, such as clubs, 'societies,' youth organizations and (5) participation in functions sponsored by ethnic organizations such as picnics, concerts, public lectures, rallies, dances.
- The internal aspects of **ethnic identity refer to images, ideas, attitudes, and feelings.** We can distinguish at least three types of internal aspects of identity: (1) cognitive, (2) moral, and (3) affective.

- The **cognitive dimensions** of EI include the self image of the people towards their own ethnic group; and the knowledge of ethnic members about their heritage and historical past.
- The **moral dimension** of EI is basically associated with the feeling of group obligation in the form of the importance a person attaches to his/her group. Eg., of teaching the ethnic language to one's children, of helping members of the group in times of difficulty.
- The **affective dimension** of EI constitutes the feeling of attachment to one's group which can be manifested in the associative preference for members of one's group & the feeling of security and comfort with the cultural patterns of the group.
- Le (2009) also identified two forms of ethnic identity. The first is "**resurgent ethnic identity**" in which the traditional or ancestral identities reemerge through historical events and particular circumstances.
- The other is "**emergent ethnic identity**" which involves the creation of new forms of group identity due to the convergence of particular circumstances. "More specifically, because of demographic changes or competition and conflict with other groups, a new ethnic identity based on group solidarity and similarity of experiences might form".

RACE –THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RACIAL IDENTITY

- Race is an elusive concept like ethnicity –used in a variety of contexts and meanings; sometimes interchangeably with ethnicity, where the relationship between the two concept remain complex. When first appeared, ethnicity/ethnic identity was used in synonym with race or racial identity, which complicated their relation. Moreover, the boundary between the two concepts is historically variable; what was 'racial' before 1945 may be more publicly acceptable as 'ethnic' today. Race/racial identity as a social construction of group categorization and identification, and come up with the significant distinctions among the races and the major difference between race/racial identity and ethnicity/ethnic identity.
- Race is the idea that the human species is divided into distinct groups on the basis of inherited physical and behavioral difference.
- Race generally refers to a group of people who have common some visible physical trait, such as skin colors, hair texture, facial features and eye formation.

RACIAL CLASSIFICATION: A SHORT HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

- For some time, it was common to divide humanity into four main races, which recognized both on the scientific and folk notions of the concept. In this regard, race was used both as a system of human classification and social stratification as follows:
- ***Europeaeus:*** White; muscular; hair – long, flowing; eyes blue – Acute, inventive, gentle, and governed by laws.
- ***Americanus***: Reddish; erect; hair – black, straight, thick; wide nostrils – Obstinate, merry, free, and regulated by custom.
- ***Asiaticus***: Sallow (yellow); hair black; eyes dark – Haughty, avaricious, severe, and ruled by opinions.
- ***Africanus***: Black; hair –black, frizzled; skin silky; nose flat; lips tumid – Crafty, indolent, negligent, and governed by caprice or the will of their masters.

- ‘Race’ is human groups defined by itself or others as distinct by virtue of perceived common physical characteristics that are held to be inherent. In this sense of the concept, race is a group of human beings socially defined on the basis of physical traits. At this level, concept of race would be important to the extent that it will inform people's actions; where it exists as a cultural construct, whether it has a "biological" reality or not.
- Racism, obviously, builds on the assumption that personality is somehow linked with hereditary characteristics, which differ systematically between "races", and in this way race may assume sociological importance even if it has no "objective" existence. Social scientists who study race relations need not themselves believe in the existence of race, since their object of study is the social and cultural relevance of the notion that race exists. Hence, in societies, where they are important, ideas of race may therefore, be studied as part of local discourses on ethnicity.
- ‘Racial group’ is a group of people, defined by itself or others as distinct by virtue of perceived common physical characteristics that are held to be inherent.

- Many scholars argued that while there is much overlap between race and ethnicity, they are distinct concepts that need to be distinguished. For example,
- **a) Max Weber (1922):** proposed that a *blood relationship* was necessary for racial identification but not for ethnic identification.
- **b) John Rex (1973):** explained that ethnicity is a wider classificatory or organizational principle than 'race'. In the case of ethnic groups, a far wider set of situations are based upon cultural differentiation of groups than those which are commonly called racial. But, few of ethnic groups have anything like the same conflictual consequences like racial situations do. That means, few ethnic conflicts are as bloody as 'racial' ones.

- **C) Gerald Berreman (1972, 1981):** viewed ethnicity as something linked in a dichotic relationship with race:
- ***racial stratification/ categorizations*** is associated with birth-ascribed status based on physical and cultural characteristics defined by outside groups.
- ***ethnicity*** is also ascribed at birth, but the ethnic group normally defines its cultural characteristics itself.
- Thus, racial categorizations are normally laced with inaccuracies and stereotypes, while ethnic classification is normally more accurate of a cultural group because it is defined by the group itself. Yet, ethnic classifications can also be defined and used by **outside groups** to stereotype an ethnic community in ways that are often oversimplified and that view ethnicity as a static cultural group. Some scholars claim that the external ethnic boundaries [i.e. the boundaries that are defined from the outside] are the source of racial distinctions and of race as a group phenomenon. That means, race is a response to external categorization and exclusion and whatever internal

THEORIES OF ETHNICITY: *PRIMORDIALISM, INSTRUMENTALISM AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM*

Perspective	Description
Primordialist approach	Ethnicity is fixed at birth. Ethnic identification is based on deep, 'primordial' attachments to a group or culture.
Instrumentalist approach	Ethnicity, based on people's "historical" and "symbolic" memory, is something created and used and exploited by leaders and others in the pragmatic pursuit of their own interests.
Constructivist approach	**Ethnic identity is not something people "possess" but something they "construct" in specific social**

THE PRIMORDIALIST PERSPECTIVE ON ETHNICITY & ETHNIC IDENTITY

- Primordialism is the idea that nations or ethnic identities are fixed, natural and ancient. They argued that individuals have a single ethnic identity which is not subject to change and which is exogenous to historical process.
- In the extreme case, ethnicity is treated as an extension of a *pre modern social bond*, an innate aspect of human identity, something that people are born with where attachment among ethnic members and its persistence is attributed to the ties of blood.

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- Another version of the primordial perspective primarily equates ethnicity with culture. An enduring character of ethnicity is viewed as the outcome of ***cultural and linguistic features***. Ethnicity is treated as something we are **socialized** into through which the cultural meanings related to ethnicity (e.g. language, history, and values) develops into durable tendencies and become self-evident frame of reference. This latter version of primordialism views cultural ties as indefinable with a deeper psychological effect on members of the group. In general, the primordial theory argues that there is something fundamental about the nature of ethnicity that ties individuals together and provides a sense of communal anchorage and protection lacking in other forms of organization.

- **Clifford Geertz** (1973): who systematized the primordial model articulated ethnicity as a ***natural phenomenon*** with its foundations in primordial ties deriving mainly from kinship, locality and culture. He recognizes the role of culture in defining the primordial '*givens*' *that* strength of such primordial bonds, and the types of them [i.e. primordial bonds] that are important differ from person to person, from society to society, and from time to time. What matters analytically is that ties of blood, language and culture are *seen by actors to be* indefinable and obligatory; that they are *seen as natural. Geertz argues that in some respects* these putative 'primordial attachments' are actually likely to be stimulated and quickened by the political modernization of nation-building. In

- **Anthony D. Smith** (1986) also theorized the defining elements of ethnic identification as *psychological and emotional*, emerging from a person's historical and cultural backgrounds. He illustrated that the 'core' of ethnicity resides in the myths, memories, values, symbols and the characteristic styles of particular historic configurations, i.e., what he calls 'a myth symbol complex'. The durability of the ethnie (ethnic group) resides in the forms and content of the myth-symbol complex. Of pivotal importance for the survival of the ethnie is the diffusion and transmission of the myth-symbol complex to its unit of population and its future generations. He emphasizes the "extraordinary persistence and resilience of ethnic ties and sentiments, once formed" and argues that they [ethnic ties and sentiments] are essentially primordial since they are received through ethnic socialization into one's ethnie and are more or less fixed. Smith (1986) regards primordial ties as the basic organizing principles and bonds of human association throughout history. He concluded that, 'primordialism' makes two distinct claims: firstly, ethnicity and ethnic attachment is "natural and innate", which would never change over time, and secondly, it is "ancient and perennial".

- The primordialist theory has been criticized for presenting a view of ethnicity and ethnic identity alternatively characterized as **static, fixed, involuntary, compelling, essentialized and naturalistic.** Although cultural traditions are shared, transmitted and internalized by people and are sources of internal cohesion and belongingness; they are not like “natural species” but dynamic and changing. The primordialist perspective is also inadequate to explain observed geographical variations in the expression of cultural identity by sub groups of people from the same ethnic origin. The primordial view is unable to adequately account for the observed flux in ethnic solidarity. It cannot account for ethnic change and dissolution, and the dynamics of ethno-genesis. The theory of primordialism also misses the fact that individuals’ attachments vary across situations, and identity shifts do occur. It is observed that in several cases where no “primordial ties” can be shown to have existed historically, ethnic mobilization has actually taken place as a result of socioeconomic and political factors.

THE INSTRUMENTALIST THEORY OF ETHNICITY & ETHNIC IDENTITY

- The instrumentalist theory views ethnicity as an ***intentional or conscious strategy***, an adaptive response to the conditions governing the contest for acquisition of desired resources and a strategy to defend or seize resources. The reasons for a group asserting and maintaining an ethnic identity are said to be economic and political rather than psychological. Ethnic identification is encouraged by the pursuit of collective interests. The persistence of ethnicity is attributed to the functions it fulfills in terms of interest aggregation and group mobilization in pursuit of economic or political gain. When people can see no net usefulness in such group memberships, they will tend to attempt to disassociate themselves from it. The change in ethnic identity is explained in line with the cost-benefit calculations of individuals.

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- **Banks** (1996) explained the instrumentalist understandings of ethnicity as *an instrument of group mobilization for political and economic ends. Ethnicity is something that can be* hanged, constructed or even manipulated to gain specific political and/or economic ends. Proponents of instrumentalism advocate that bin the contexts of modern states, leaders (political elites) use and manipulate perceptions of ethnic identity to further their own ends and stay in power. Ethnicity is created in the dynamics of elite competition within the boundaries determined by political and economic realities" and ethnic groups are seen as a product of political myths, created and manipulated by culture elites in their pursuit of advantages and power.

- **Abner Cohen (1974),** emphasizes on the ethnic group as a collectively organized strategy for the protection of economic and political interests. Ethnic groups share common interests, and in pursuit of these interests they develop *"basic organizational functions such as: distinctiveness or boundaries (ethnic identity); communication; authority structure; decision making procedure; ideology; and socialization"* .
- Abner Cohen's perspective on ethnicity defines ethnic organization essentially as a kind of ***political organization***. Ethnic ideology offers answers to the questions of ***origins, destiny and, ultimately, the meaning of life.*** However, Cohen argues that ethnicity must also have a practical function in order to be viable. He argued that ethnicity is an instrument for competition over scarce resources, which is nevertheless circumscribed by ideologies of shared culture, shared origins and metaphoric kinship. This may or may not be acknowledged by the agents themselves. Only by focusing on this aspect is it possible to explain why some ethnic groups thrive while others vanishes, and why only some ethnic identification assumes great social importance.

- Daniel Bell (1975) and Jeffrey Ross (1982) also emphasize the political advantage of ethnic membership choice. Ethnicity is "*a group option in which resources are mobilized for the purpose of pressuring the political system to allocate public goods for the benefit of the members of a self-differentiating collectivity*" *(Ross, 1982).*
- Rational choice and elite theories are examples of the instrumental perspective. Predicated on the 'theoretical primacy' of the individual, not the group, rational choice theory holds that *individual actors act rationally and in their own best interests*. It sees any action as determined by a rational motive and as the basis for the pursuit of scarce resources.

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- The instrumentalist theory underplays the emotional power and affective dimension of ethnic bonds. In its tendency to reduce ethnic phenomena to purely material motives the instrumentalist approach lack an adequate account of the emotive strength, and often apparently irrational power or pull associated with ethnic identities. The subjective import of ethnic group membership does not lie just simply in one's pursuit of practical interest, but also in one's feelings and a complex conception of identity. It has been shown that a number of ethnic categories reproduce their identity

THE CONSTRUCTIVIST THEORY OF ETHNICITY AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

- The constructivist theory is an intermediate perspective. It recognizes that ethnicity cannot be simply taken as a given or conceptualized as an independent variable without also acknowledging its dependent status. Constructivism holds that ethnicity is ***constructed and that ethnic identities are not singular, nor are they fixed;*** they may change over time and differ in their relative significance. Ethnicity is subject to fluctuation depending upon a group's solidarity and position in society. It is the circumstances that locate groups in particular situations and encourages them to define themselves in such a way that their interests are met. Therefore, ethnic identity has to be conceived of as a process, affected by history as well as contemporary circumstances, and by local as well as global dynamics. Ethnic identities are (re)constructed as narratives from the political–economic–cultural facts and fictions of history told in contemporary settings.
- *The central idea of constructivism is that ethnic groups are*

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- Because the emphasis is on construction, this theory borrows a great deal from the instrumentalists' focus on specific contexts and circumstances whether they are economic or political, immediate, or structural. It explains ethnic group solidarity and the maintenance of ethnic group bonds underlining historical, structural and cultural contingencies and circumstantial aspects in ethnic relations. Ethnicity is viewed not as something that people possess as a property of a group but as aspects of relationships between groups and is constructed in certain situations.