

THE PROBLEM OF NATIONAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN POLYNESIA*

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Two conceptions of ethnicity are briefly dealt with in this paper – one based upon free choice and another reminiscent of classical racism. The former is common in Central Europe and in pre-Contact Polynesia while the latter is more typical of the Anglo-Saxon countries. In Polynesia, ethnic identity seems to rely more often upon cultural traditions than upon language.

Tragic consequences of the explosions of extreme nationalism and racism in the 20th century have produced a widespread negative attitude to nationalism in general. Cosmopolitanism (in the liberal milieu) and internationalism (in the communist sphere) have been assiduously recommended on both sides of the Iron Curtain. However, as Anthony Smith has observed, the disappearance of nationalism has turned out to be one of the quixotic hopes of the West (Smith 1981).

Both liberal cosmopolitanism and proletarian internationalism tended to be misused as instruments of power serving the goals of expansion or at least of preservation of status quo. Both doctrines tended to ignore the fundamental difference between nationalism of the oppressed and that of the oppressors. The former ought to be carefully distinguished from chauvinism while the latter usually deserves to be qualified as self-defence.

Nationalism as a manifestation of ethnicity is linked to the social nature of human beings and to their culture. People are grouped in terms of a variety of criteria. Ethnicity as a grouping criterion has to do with such diagnostic features as shared culture, way of life, language and a contiguous territory. In the atmosphere where cultural differences (instead of economic or social inequality) are proclaimed as possible causes of future conflicts (cf. Huntington 1993), one cannot expect that those who believe in it would prefer ethnic variety to a global *Eintopf*.

* This paper was supported by Grant agency: VEGA No. 2/7182/20.

Alan Howard (1930: 263ff) points out that there are at least two interpretations of ethnicity. In the West (especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries) too much weight is assigned to the genetic inheritance and therefore ethnic affiliation tends to be regarded as constant. It seems not to be a matter of free choice and may become an obstacle to social mobility.

The Oceanic interpretation of ethnicity is, however, of social nature and as such is more flexible. (In Central Europe the idea of ethnicity seems to be closer to that current in Oceania). In the past, the peoples of Polynesia were willing to integrate foreigners including Europeans into their societies just as they were willing to adopt children of other parents into their families. Besides, in the pre-contact era, the Polynesians were much less conscious of their ethnicity simply because they lived in relative isolation from other ethnic communities and the differentiation within any of the archipelagoes was insufficiently developed. In such a situation the islanders as a rule did not even need true ethnonyms. The latter are lacking in the Marquesas where they began calling themselves simply *'Enata* or *'Enana* "people", just as the Hawaiians. Their word *kanaka* "human being" has undergone a remarkable semantic shift so that nowadays it refers to the natives of the Pacific and is used even in non-Polynesian New Caledonia. The New Zealand and Rarotongan word *Maori* means normal, usual, ordinary.

The absence of true ethnonyms is no exception among other populations living in relative separation from the rest of the world, for example among the Eskimoes.

Ethnic identity is a guarantee of the continuity and unity of the *ethnos* among other ethnic groups. Ethnic identity is defined largely negatively, in confrontation with other communities. On the other hand, its culture has a positive content and thus exists even within completely isolated communities.

The Western economic system has torn the inhabitants of many islands from their social roots and from their culture, and the inevitable emancipation resulted in their alienation. Often they have lost their original culture, their ethnic consciousness without having time, possibility or even will to replace it with something comparable. No wonder that many urbanized Maori in New Zealand are labelled *brown Pakeha* ("brown Whites"). They got stuck somewhere between the two communities.

Originally, the Polynesian ethnic identity was rooted in kinship and genealogical ties. Their carefully preserved continuity was interrupted under the heavy influence of Western economics and social organization. Even the threat of physical extinction has loomed high upon the not so distant horizon, especially in Hawaii, the Marquesas and New Zealand. And yet the renaissance has come, although it has taken some time until the Polynesians started to wake up. Logically enough, it was and is culture that was chosen as the fundament of their fresh ethnic consciousness – admittedly under Western influence. Interestingly enough, culture seems to be more stable than language in parts of Oceania. In Hawaii and New Zealand this is obviously due to the decline of the original inhabitants to a minority status and ur-

banization, and in Rarotonga to the fact that most Rarotongans work away from their home, in New Zealand. And thus the Hawaiians and Maori remind us of the Irish who have preserved their ethnic identity and lost (almost completely) their language. Here the original languages may have preserved their symbolic or representative function. The causes of this condition are to be looked for in historical circumstances just like, for example, in Ireland.

Another notion closely linked to culture and ethnic consciousness is tradition. Ethnicity does not view tradition as something past but rather as a selection of some salient features that are relevant for the present and future. These features of tradition undergo repeated modification and the selectively defined tradition is a kind of ethnic memory that cannot dispense with culture. Therefore tradition is useful and stays useful despite any changes to which it may be subjected. In this respect the process of renaissance among the Hawaiians and Maori, the two communities that have sunk to the minority status within their countries, displays quite a few analogous properties.

There are countries in Oceania where an ethnic or even national identity has to be created out of diversity (New Caledonia, Solomons, Australia, Papua New Guinea). Even in Hawaii and New Zealand the recent (post-contact) settlers seem to be willing to embrace some features of the native culture and the endemic languages are being learned by the immigrants from overseas.

In Polynesia there are peoples that somehow have managed to resist the threat of total breakdown of their tradition and culture. This holds both for Tonga (which remained a kingdom under British protectorate) and for Samoa, especially Western Samoa (Eastern Samoa has undergone a marked Americanization). The Samoan language has remained the medium of instruction and Europeanization was condemned as early as 1923 (Rutherford 1931).

In Tonga, ruled by Tongan kings, the feeling of uninterrupted continuity is even stronger than in Samoa and English is taught as a second language. In addition to literature written in English, both Samoan and Tongan writers write in their original languages.

The loss of original culture was in most instances initiated by a massive impact of the foreign culture and economics. However, there are instances when the aboriginal population rejected their old tradition of their will, for example in Hawaii. This happened as early as 1819 when the complicated tabu (kapu) system was abolished by King Liholiho (Kuykendall 1957). This revolutionary act uprooted their religion and shattered the position of the local aristocracy, which opened the way to new economic relations as well as to missionaries. The status of foreigners has increased while that of Hawaiians have sunk to the bottom of the society. When the renaissance came, it was too late for some fundamental features of the original culture to revive. In the reborn form it has rather acquired the nature of folklorism. In New Zealand, the revival of ancient culture is more successful. The Pakeha are beginning to take it for their own. And yet the fate of the Maori language seems to

have been sealed as early as in the fifties and sixties of the 20th century – when the parents gradually ceased to teach their children to speak Maori. Knowledge of it is highly valued but obviously it will continue to be used only as a ceremonial language by the future generations.

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