
The concept of ethnogenesis is what unifies the nine essays by cultural anthropologists in this new volume. The essays show how various African American and indigenous groups in the Americas have emerged or rethought their identities as a response to the impelling socioeconomic conditions they faced. Arranged chronologically, they begin with articles about ethnogenesis in the first years of the European presence in the Americas and end with articles dealing with the present day.

One of the most interesting things about this volume is how the authors engage with the term "ethnogenesis" itself, defining it and developing or expanding its original meaning in new directions. What exactly are the parameters of this term as it is employed in this book? According to the editor, Jonathan Hill, it is "an analytical tool for developing critical historical approaches to culture as an ongoing process of struggle and conflict over a people's existence and their positioning within and against a general history of domination." (1)

Two uses of the term, defined in this sense, predominate in the examples of this collection; ethnogenesis as a matter-of-fact organic process and as associated with consciousness-raising and protest.

Some of the articles, particularly those about early indigenous groups by Whitehead, Sattler, and Hickerson, present ethnogenesis as an apparently fluid and practical matter, conceived of as an act less of protest than of necessity. In the atmosphere of regular conflict between ethnic groups characteristic of these examples, it seems almost a matter of course that defeated groups retreat and regroup as best they can—a process that sometimes occurs as ethnogenesis. In these examples, European colonials are only some of the many groups that exert influence or pressure, and are not especially singled out for criticism. However, the articles show how this process occurs increasingly as a response to the growing power of the new nation-states and their policies affecting indigenous peoples. This can be seen in Patricia Alber's article on indigenous groups in the Northeastern Plains region of the United States during the nineteenth century and Jonathan Hill's article on indigenous groups in the Venezuelan Amazon from the eighteenth century to the present. The articles about the most recent examples, particularly the studies of contemporary groups by Staats, Guss, and Whitten, show ethnogenesis as occurring in response to attempts to foment the conscious realization of ethnic difference within a state, as a strategy for protesting the abuses suffered by members of the groups.

This group of writers has deliberately revised the definition and employment of ethnogenesis. As Patricia Albers explains, the term was first employed by William Sturtevant in 1971, in a ground-breaking article that described the process by which the Seminoles came to differentiate themselves from the Creek. Although Sturtevant defined the term as "the establishment of group
distinctiveness” (90), Albers, thinks that he described not merely static difference but a complex and long process of differentiation (90). The association of process with this term has important implications since it opposes what Jonathan Hill describes as the “implicit contrast between static local cultures and dynamic global history” (1), or the “billiard ball” theory of history, which sees individual cultures as sealed, self-contained units. When such units encounter other such units, they make history happen. These two theories have tacitly underlain much work in this area. In contrast, the articles show the interpenetration of ethnic groups and various processes by which new hybrid groups are slowly formed and come to conceive of themselves as ethnically distinct entities within a state.

Cultural anthropologists following Sturtevant typically used ethnogenesis to describe the historical emergence of peoples who define themselves in relationship to a particular sociocultural and linguistic heritage. The writers in this book examine more closely than many of their predecessors the ideologies and political processes of these groups, as they respond to and interact with other groups, and they show how, via these processes, ethnic identity comes to be lost or reinvented. Richard A. Sattler, for example, reexamining Sturtevant’s subject, the ethnogenesis of the Seminole, twenty-five years later, looks in more detail at the process through which the group created a new type of political system by combining the ideas of the different ethnic groups of which they were composed.

Other writers show how the reinvention of religion by African American and indigenous groups can emphasize ethnic difference, express the perspectives of those whose ancestors were abused or enslaved, and voice the problems the group has with state policies. Susan K. Staats, in her examination of the Alleluia Church in Guyana, shows how the church members revised the Christian creation myth to forge a strong group identity and oppose a theology which they saw as empowering whites and disenfranchising them. In “Cimarrones, Theater and State,” David M. Guss analyzes the more problematic example of a grassroots movement that used religion and theater to promote ethnogenesis. The process started when, as a consciousness-raising strategy, the black organizers of the San Juan Festival in Barlovento, Venezuela, began to substitute heroic stories of cimarrones, or escaped slaves, for the canonical celebration of a Christian saint. In a country where, Guss argues, the myth of racial equality is widely disseminated and accepted, it is highly provocative to show how the history of black Venezuelans has been suppressed and how blacks continue to be among the poorest and most disenfranchised of Venezuelans. The situation became ideologically problematic when the organizers of the festival accepted the support of the white, right-of-center Christian state government and allowed themselves to become associated with its policies.

These last two articles raise interesting questions about religion and politics in the process of ethnogenesis. Does religious belief equal ethnicity? Are black Venezuelans, who are discovering their roots by participating in the consciousness-raising theatrical productions described by Guss, truly participating