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CULTURE IS A PROCESS!

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Abstract. Cultures change and are not static, so culture can be regarded as a *process*, not a state. Change can be produced by either internal or external factors, or a combination of both, so assumptions about cultures being in equilibrium are probably unrealistic. This paper considers ways in which ethnicity is commonly defined in terms of cultural markers: these overlap with one another within a culture or else, over time, can diverge from one another to such an extent that a new culture can be born.

Keywords: ethnicity, culture, cultural change, language, religion.

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Change occurs in all cultures, either because of internal or external factors. However, this fact calls into question the validity of a theoretical perspective that had been dominant among some of the founding fathers of Social Anthropology. "Structural-functionalism" was the idea that everything in a culture is closely integrated with other institutions, like the organs in a body[1]. Such a model tends to imply a relatively static view of indigenous cultures and does not easily accommodate social change. In ethnographies taking a structural-functionalist approach, if there is any mention of change it is often regarded as being due to external agents (colonialism, globalization and so on), with indigenous agents for change tending to be overlooked.

Actually, this is true only if institutions are in equilibrium. Structural functionalism saw the various components of a culture as being so closely interrelated with one another that a change in one area would have knock-on effects in other areas. In this sense, it was not a static view of society because it recognized that change might occur. Some models, such as the one advanced by Edmund Leach in his book *Political Systems of Highland Burma* [Leach, 1954] were more nuanced, serving as a critique of the structural-functionalist model by analyzing processes of political change among the Kachin and Shan peoples over a period of about 140 years[2]. Although Leach's depiction of an oscillation between the Kachin and Shan political systems describes cultural change at one level, it still implies that the oscillations were themselves part of an ongoing relatively closed system – a state perhaps comparable to that of binary stars.

[1] See, for example, Kuper [Kuper, 2015, pp. 42-63] for an overview of some of the history of British Social Anthropology in the 1930s and 1940s. Such ideas were not only promoted in Europe by, for example, Radcliffe-Brown or Evans-Pritchard, but also in China by Fei Xiaotong.

[2] His PhD. thesis at the London School of Economics was entitled *Cultural change, with special reference to the hill tribes of Burma and Assam*. URL: http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/665/1/Leach_Cultural_change.pdf (Accessed: 11 March 2021).

Anthropology has moved on since these earlier days and to some extent the foci of interest have shifted. A plethora of studies of different societies have generated a wealth of information and some fresh perspectives on particular aspects of social or cultural change within certain cultures, although it can be difficult to discern more general patterns unless there is broader theoretical model of change. Nevertheless, a common assumption among many anthropologists was that, in the absence of external forces, the culture would change little, if at all. It was generally assumed that many "tribal" cultures described by anthropologists were usually in a state of equilibrium or would return to that state naturally by the interplay of internal dynamics. Where major change did occur, it was usually assumed to be a result of contact with outsiders. For many anthropologists, the impact of outsiders was at least implicitly viewed as undesirable, as it would damage the culture. (Of course, the anthropologists themselves were exempt from this charge!).

Such a view of the world is unrealistic, perhaps even naïve, because we cannot keep an exotic culture intact, shielded from external influences, as a kind of "living museum". Realistically, whether we like it or not, there is likely to be contact with others besides the anthropologist. Some outsiders may inflict harm on the people but others are seeking their wellbeing. There are those who come into the area inhabited by the ethnic group because of the mineral wealth under the ground or for the timber and other resources above the ground already being used by the indigenous people. Mining and forestry businesses, or farmers from outside who cut down the forests to plant their own crops, have a huge impact on the local people and their culture – often of a negative kind. By contrast, others may seek to bring benefits to the community through health care or education, literacy projects and so on. Often their influence mitigates or even counteracts the negative influence of outsiders who come to exploit the people or their lands. It is possible that there can be positive transformation of the material, social, psychological or spiritual lives of the local people, if they have been given new hope or new prospects for improving their lives through better access to health care, education or employment, or if their social relationships have been improved through reconciliation between former enemies. On the other hand, some negative forces may destroy the culture so much that any equilibrium that had existed is virtually impossible to restore. However, even the idea that the culture had been in some kind of equilibrium implies an assumption about the nature of culture – namely that culture is a *state* which gravitates towards a balanced equilibrium. In many cases this is probably an unrealistic assumption. It is more realistic to regard culture as a *process*, not a state. Not only is culture a process but process also implies change, even if we might not be sure of its trajectory.

This process also has a starting point, perhaps also a finish. How do cultures begin? Nowadays we might apply the word "culture" to sub-cultures such as "youth culture", "pop culture", "drug culture" and so on, meaning that such groups have a distinctive set of values and behaviour that sets them apart from the mainstream. It is not the same as the concept of a culture that usually anthropologists have applied to ethnic groups around the world, whether the Berber of North Africa, the Rohingya of Myanmar or the Uighurs of Central Asia. Nevertheless, the idea of a sub-culture gives a clue to one of the main ways in which separate cultures can emerge. Essentially we can assume that one original population for some reason split into two or more groups, each with ideas and traditions derived from the original population. As the groups diverged, especially if they began to lose contact

with one another, each population became more distinct in some of its own values and expectations about proper behaviour: eventually, these led to the emergence of distinct traditions or ways of doing things. Different cultures emerged.

Such a hypothesis is consistent with observations about languages and genetics. Linguists can identify various language families with a common ancestry that in some cases can be documented in history (*e.g.* the diversification of the Romance languages from Latin) and is assumed to have been the case also among non-literate peoples sharing similar languages. Within languages, variation might at first be regarded as relatively minor differences in accents or pronunciation but as the number of variations increases a point may be reached when the differences are regarded as dialects. Eventually the divergences may become great enough to be regarded as different languages. The cut-off point between a "dialect" and a "language" may at times be difficult to define, though it is largely dependent on the degree of mutual intelligibility. Variations that are regarded as different "dialects" in China could be considered as different languages in Europe. Each province of China is comparable in size and population to a country of Europe but the choice of the term 方言 *fāngyán* (translated into English as "dialect") to refer to regional forms of speech as compared with 语言 *yǔyán* (language) perhaps to at least some extent reflects the difference between a unified state in China, having a writing system that can be read by those speaking a variety of different dialects, as contrasted with a multiplicity of political entities in Europe with alphabets reflecting regional pronunciations, often also having somewhat different forms of orthography. Likewise, in China regional differences in cuisine, traditional house designs and other features are viewed as variations within the Han majority nationality, whereas in Europe such differences might be regarded as cultural or ethnic markers.

Similarly, we can see the concentration of certain genetic traits in different parts of the world (so-called "races") because the human population has spread out and certain genes have been lost from the gene pool. The fact that human beings all over the world can still interbreed means that we are one species and, by implication, all share a common ancestry, but the concentrations of genes that have been retained in different areas impart to certain ethnic groups physical features that might be regarded as characteristic of that group[3]. In the past, attempts to delineate broad groupings

[3] DNA analyses show that some modern human beings share a small proportion of their DNA with Neanderthals and Denisovans – a hominin group named after the Denisova cave in the Altai mountains, where finger and toe bone fragments were found in 2008 and 2010. URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259386999_The_complete_genome_sequence_of_a_Neandertal_from_the_Altai_Mountains/link/00b7d53c7a1c8b7b4c000000/download; https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4031459/; https://www.quantamagazine.org/fossil-dna-reveals-new-twists-in-modern-human-origins-20190829/ (Accessed: 21 November 2020). If Neanderthal, Denisovan and African hominins could interbreed, it indicates that they too were essentially one species sharing a common ancestry. However, their dispersed distribution in Afro-Eurasia, with Neanderthals in western Eurasia and Denisovans in East Asia, besides hominins in Africa, meant that differences among these groups were probably somewhat analogous to "races". Although Neanderthals and Denisovans later died out, some of their genes still remained among at least a few of the human survivors of whatever circumstances caused the extinction of these groups. Conjectures about the relationships between early hominins are based on rare finds of early hominin remains, the relative scarcity of which may be partly connected with the manner of disposal of a body after death. Inhumation was probably rare prior to the Neolithic (with the beginnings of agriculture), as such burial would normally require spades or other tools. Mobile populations of hunter-gatherers were more likely to have left dead bodies above ground, where the remains would have quickly been scattered by birds or animals that ate the dead flesh – as happened in Tibetan "sky burials" [Li and Qiao, 2021, pp. 171-172]. Perhaps

of humanity as "races" tended to focus on relatively superficial (but therefore visible) differences such as skin tone or hair types, but more local distinguishing features are sometimes regarded as markers of ethnicity. For instance, blue eyes occur in some Asian ethnic groups, including the Ainu of Japan, the Nuristani peoples of Afghanistan, the Li people of Hainan island (China) and Melanesians of New Ireland. In an Asian context perhaps these phenotypes are more likely to be manifested on islands or, in the case of the Nuristanis, in mountainous areas with a relatively confined gene pool. By contrast, even if the genes are present elsewhere in Asia the phenotype might be less likely to be manifested, although this depends on the relative frequency of the genes within the gene pool. The presence of such features is sometimes interpreted as evidence of past migrations or contact with outsiders – giving rise to suggestions that blue eyes in Afghanistan may be a legacy of Alexander the Great's army there – but the genes could also have been derived from much more distant ancestors, even if they have been lost, or become rare, in certain gene pools. Several different genes can contribute to a blue eye colour but traits based on the coming together of recessive alleles are not very good indices of ethnicity because such phenotypes are not manifested among many of those who do belong to that ethnic group; moreover, the tendency for intermixing with surrounding populations also means that such genetic markers may occur, albeit perhaps less frequently, among other peoples. It is only in relatively rare cases that certain phenotypes might be regarded as more definite markers of ethnicity but these tend to be cases in which a population has a history of migration or some isolation from its neighbours. For instance, the Kalmyk people who live to the north-west of the Caspian Sea – in European Russia – have a distinctive Asian appearance because their ancestors had migrated there some four centuries previously from areas of Central Asia that are now in China. Their language and traditional culture were of a Mongolian type but nowadays many younger Kalmyks speak Russian rather than Kalmyk and have become Russified in many other ways too. For them, practically the only remaining marker of their being Kalmyk is their Asian phenotype [Guchinova, 2006, pp. 12-16, 63-74, 222].

Many different features that are often regarded as markers of ethnicity – language, traditional food, dress and various traditions or beliefs – are also regarded as characteristics of culture. Ethnicity and culture are so closely intertwined that it is very difficult to distinguish one from the other. At the risk of pushing a genetic analogy too far, we might say that ethnicity and culture are like the complementary strands that form the double helix of DNA: each conveys information but the codons complement one another. Together they convey the information that is necessary for the organism to reproduce itself. That information needs to be passed on to the next generation, and then to subsequent generations, because this is what makes the species unique. Likewise, each ethnic group is unique but its specific attributes are conveyed by its culture.

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certain caves could have been used as the equivalent of cemeteries – a practice which is mentioned much later on with reference to a nomadic family in the Bible (Genesis 23:19; 25:9; 49:29-30; 50:13). Among mobile populations, other possible methods for disposing of dead bodies apart from burial included placing the body in a tree – as was sometimes done for shamans in Siberia – or else, if enough firewood was available, perhaps at times by cremation. Those living near a river or lake might have put the body there, where it would usually be eaten by fish or other aquatic scavengers. In general, remains of dead creatures are much more likely to be preserved if the body was rapidly covered by mud or other sediment before the remains could be dispersed by scavengers; this is one reason why marine creatures tend to be more abundant in the fossil record than those living on land.

Whereas the culture of an ethnic group can be passed on from generation to generation irrespective of the presence or absence of outsiders, the concept of ethnicity often arises through contrast with another people group. It is the presence of a boundary of some kind which tends to mark out "ethnicity" as distinct from "culture" because an ethnic group is often perceived as a distinctive entity through its interaction with those outside the group. In other words, ethnicity is defined not only by what it *is* but also by what it *is not*.

Owing to the overlap between ethnicity and culture, most of the features that have been regarded as markers of ethnicity are also seen as characteristic of that culture. Moreover, there is often an overlap between the cultures of different ethnic groups: they share features that are regarded as indices of a culture (or markers of ethnicity) but are not in themselves unique to that people. Chopsticks in East Asia are seen by at least some outsiders as reinforcing their stereotypes of what it means to belong to a certain ethnic group, although there are also differences between the styles of chopsticks in China, Korea and Japan. In Central Asia and the Caucasus, carpets may be seen as markers of ethnicity, with typical designs distinguishing the carpets and rugs of the Turkmen, Uzbeks, Turks, Azeris, Dagestanis and others, besides sub-regional differences such as the carpet styles of the five Turkmen "tribes". Whether chopsticks or carpets, these features of certain regions of the world are seen by outsiders as distinctive features of the cultures of those regions but the details can also serve to distinguish local ethnic groups (or even sub-ethnic or regional groups) from one another. A visit to an ethnographic museum in, for instance, Udmurtia (in the Volga-Ural region of Russia) would show traditional costumes of various groups or sub-groups of Udmurts, but if they also include displays of such costumes from other ethnic groups in that region (*e.g.* Mari, Mordvin or Komi) one would notice that certain features recur in varying forms among different peoples. Some of them, such as the traditional wearing of rows of coins on a woman's chest or as a headband, may derive from much further afield in antiquity, as indicated by a parable of Jesus (Luke 15: 8-10) alluding to a similar type of custom.

Although there is borrowing between ethnic groups, there is also adaptation and innovation. A particular local "stamp" is put on a "custom" so that it becomes in some way "ours" and makes us different from our neighbours. On the other hand, some aspects of traditional cultures might to some extent become commodified nowadays owing to the process whereby local or national governments may wish to promote "ethnic tourism" to stimulate the economies of their regions. For example, in Yunnan, China, certain features of the indigenous ethnic groups may be put on display for tourists, expressed in a performance by Naxi people for tourists in Lijiang, or Dai dancing and singing in Xishuangbanna, or local guides wearing costumes of the local Sani people at the "Stone Forest" in Shilin. Nevertheless, what is presented as distinctive to that ethnic group may also include elements that have been adapted or borrowed from others. Within the diversity there can also be a certain degree of uniformity or at least similarity.

This continuous mixing and borrowing between cultures is one of the reasons why culture is a process, not a state, but it also makes it more problematic to define what actually constitutes a particular culture. A person might regard himself or herself as being, for instance, Chinese or Udmurt, but what is felt in the heart or thought in the head is not so easily recognized by outsiders. To claim to be Chinese but to look European at the very least invites scepticism!

Therefore, if asked to explain what it means to be, for example, Uighur, Fulani or Arab, many people would give a list of features that they regard as distinguishing marks of that culture (or ethnic group). Very often language is mentioned, perhaps religion, diet, dress, traditional housing or various "customs" (perhaps in the realm of etiquette, festivals or folk beliefs). The problem is that there are almost always exceptions of one kind or another, or else some of these might need to be defined in terms of the degree of usage or other criteria. All of us, whatever our ethnicity, begin life without being able to speak the language of that group but we soon learn to do so. As culture is learned, not innate, the usage or knowledge of any aspect of the culture is likely to be less among children. Some things may be more familiar to women than to men, or *vice-versa*. There can also be individual differences, regional variations, and so on. It is difficult to find any one item, or even a cluster of items, that includes everyone in the ethnic group; nevertheless, people still attempt to demarcate certain features that they consider to be typical.

A former student of mine in China, of Tibetan ethnicity, regarded three features as defining what it means to be Tibetan – namely, language, religion and food. For each of these items we could quibble and try to find possible exceptions: not only are there different languages or dialects spoken by Tibetans in various places but there are also Tibetans who are Christians rather than Buddhists, and Tibetans living outside of Tibet who rarely eat traditional Tibetan food. Despite such exceptions, I could agree with my former student that for the majority of Tibetans these three markers of ethnicity are very important and do seem to apply very widely. Moreover, we could say that they correspond roughly to the kinds of conceptualization that sees human beings in terms of spirit (the relationship with God), soul (personal characteristics, including ways of thinking that are expressed through language) and body (the physical dimension to humanity that needs food, shelter and other forms of sustenance or protection). Just taking these three features of the culture, we could depict them schematically as follows:

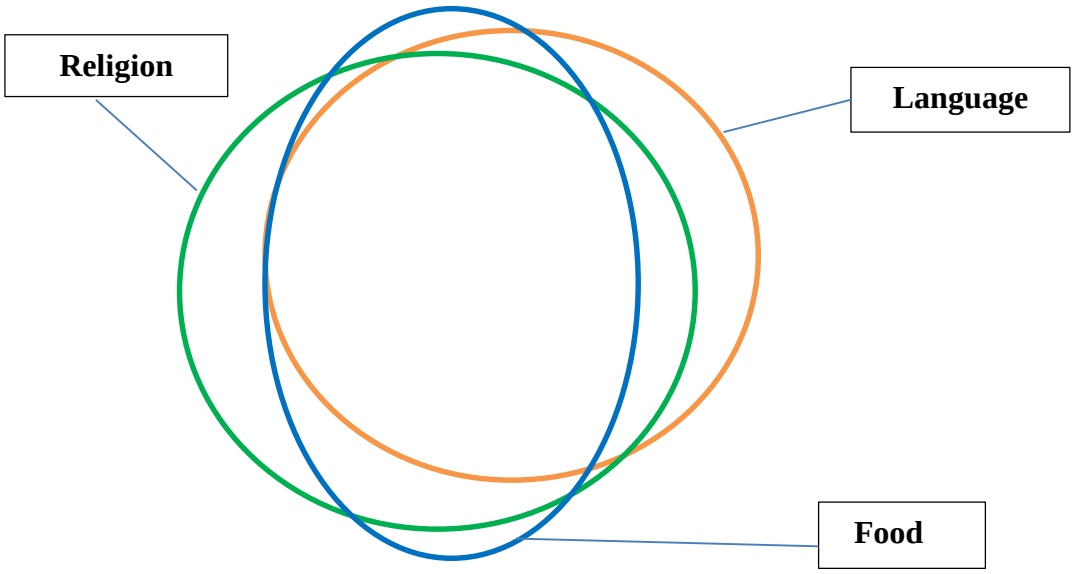

Fig. 1. Some closely overlapping elements of a culture

In this example, there is considerable overlap between these three elements. The majority of people have all three characteristics: they speak the language, eat Tibetan food and believe in Tibetan Buddhism. Nevertheless, there still remain some people who speak the language but do not subscribe to Tibetan Buddhism, and some who rarely eat Tibetan food. Likewise, there are some who are Tibetan Buddhists but do not speak the language or eat the food, and so on.

For a different culture, these three elements might be represented somewhat differently, as follows:

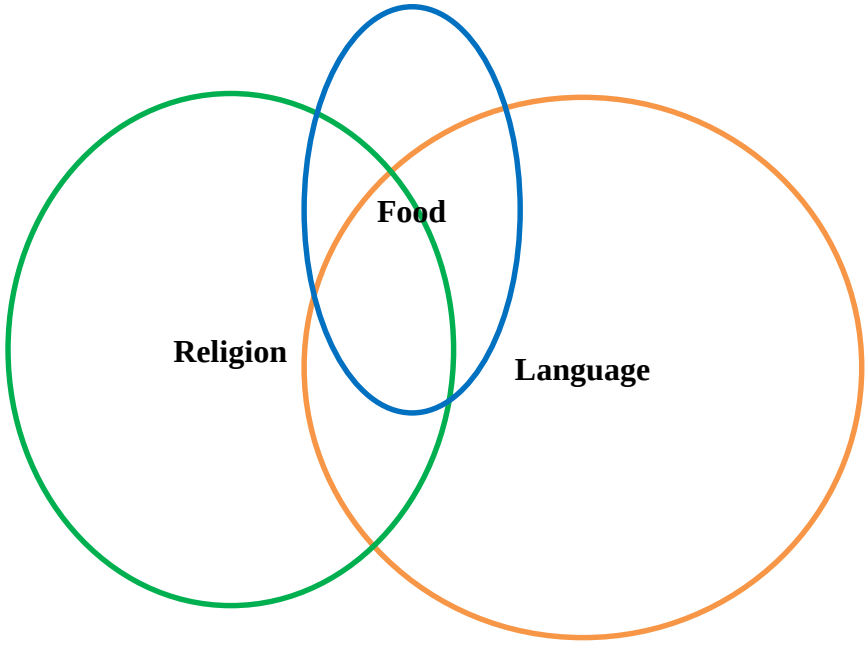

Fig. 2. Some more dispersed overlapping elements of a culture

In this culture, there is much less overlap between the three elements. Only a relatively small percentage of those who speak the language subscribe to the religion associated with that ethnic group and not very many members of the ethnic group regularly eat the food traditionally associated with that ethnicity. Perhaps to some extent this might be seen as an approximation to the situation among the Russians today – if by "religion" is denoted the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church and by "food" one thinks of some "traditional" food associated with Russia, such as borsch (борщ) or caviar (икра)! Of course, this is a gross simplification: there are other religions apart from the Moscow Patriarchate which could be regarded as "Russian" – for example, the "Old Believers" (literally "Old Ritualists" Старообрядцы) or the "True Orthodox" Church (Истинно-православная церковь); in terms of food, borsch is not only "Russian" but also a traditional dish of other Slavic peoples, while caviar is something that many Russians might only eat very occasionally, if at all. Nevertheless, the point is that in a particular culture such elements are regarded as being "traditional": moreover, they are much more tightly-knit, and much more at the "core" of the culture, than is the case in a different culture.

The schematization could be made far more complex by adding in other elements besides these three – for instance, the observance of specific festivals associated with that ethnic group. One would end up with a cloud of overlapping features, some of which might hardly, if at all, overlap with other features but might be included within a larger circle representing, for instance, language. At the centre there might be a "core" representing a proportion of the population, perhaps only a small minority, who manifest all of these characteristics, whereas the majority of people display a more limited bundle of traits. Nevertheless, they still consider themselves to belong to that ethnicity.

The second figure shows the elements becoming more separated from each other. If this process continues, a stage may come when they become isolated and no longer overlap, or are scarcely overlapping. At this stage the culture as we had known it may be dying. Elements of that culture may be passed on to other cultures but the entity that had been known as, for example, "Hellenistic culture" or "Byzantine culture" is no longer recognizable.

The fact that some cultures eventually disappear for various reasons does not justify ethnocide (the murder of a culture), just as the fact that human beings eventually die is no pretext for the murder of a person. To attempt to "speed up the process" artificially is theft of the worst kind – stealing a person's very life, in the case of murder, while to steal the cultural identity of an ethnic group is "identity theft" of the worst kind. Sometimes ethnic groups have been persecuted and suffered ethnocide or genocide on slim pretexts, such as accusing the whole people group of being implicated in the crimes of a few individuals. For example, even if a small number of Kalmyks had assisted the Germans during the Second World War when the Kalmyk territory was taken over by the Nazis, it was no reason to accuse the whole nation of betraying the Motherland and deporting them to Siberia, where many of them died and their culture was severely repressed [Guchinova, 2006, pp. 23-42]. A similar false logic prevails in any kind of stereotyping, whereby the whole ethnic group is portrayed as having the same characteristics as a minority of its members.

To some extent, the kind of Venn diagram used above in depicting elements of ethnic identity could also be used in characterizing language change, especially as language is often used as a criterion in defining ethnicity. Within many languages, there are differences of dialect, accent or usage which distinguish geographical regions, social classes or generations. To some extent, languages are changing all the time as new words are introduced – some of which may become prevalent throughout a wide spectrum of speakers – and some other words become obsolete. Within a viable linguistic community there is sufficient overlap for mutual intelligibility, even if some sub-cultural or specialist groups have their own distinctive linguistic sub-sets, but the community as a whole is ultimately a combination of mutually intelligible idiolects. If differences between dialects or linguistic sub-groups become wider through geographical or social isolation, eventually the sub-groups may become so dissimilar that they are no longer comprehensible to one another: at that point a "dialect" may be reclassified as a "language".

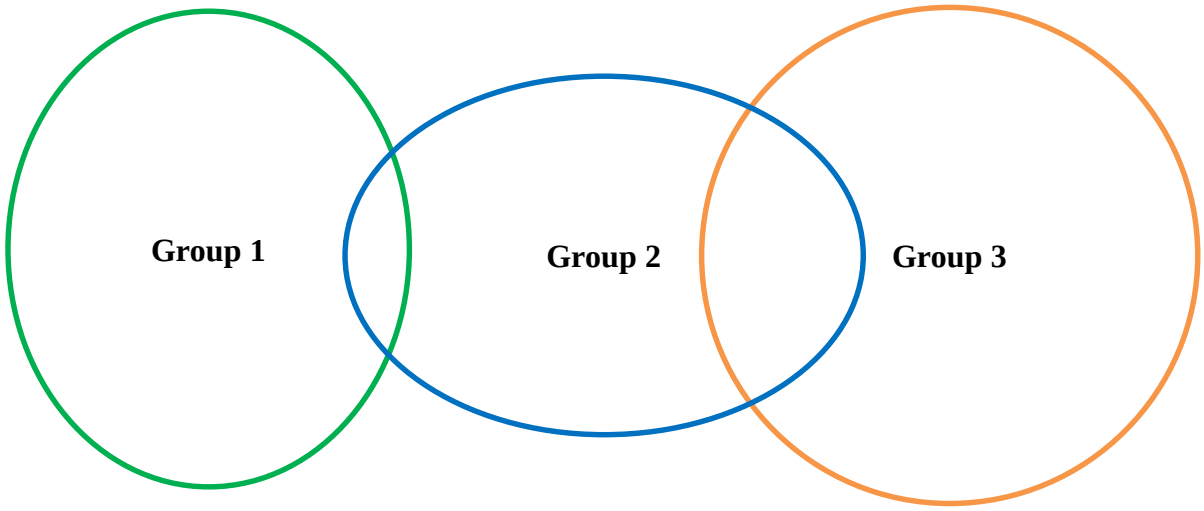

Fig. 3. The differentiation of linguistic and cultural communities

In practice, there usually remains a degree of overlap also between groups one and three but I have depicted it this way to emphasize the process of diversification. This kind of schematization could be applied either to ethnic groups or to languages. For example, if the groups in the above diagram refer to languages, groups one and three no longer share any common words but group two shares some of the words of each of these others. Each of these was originally a dialect of a single speech community but over time the differences became so great that they have now become languages. For instance, the Yukagir people of Siberia living in the Arctic in the village of Andryushkino told me that they do not really understand the language of another group of Yukagir living much further south in the forested region around the village of Nelemnoe. A common ethnonym is used for two distinct groups whose linguistic differences seem to be tantamount to separate languages[4]. Likewise, among the Yi peoples of China there are reported to be about seventy different linguistic sub-groups[5]. This may be one of the reasons why official classifications of ethnicity show more ethnic groups in Myanmar than in China, if the boundaries of different peoples or "tribes" are drawn at a more local level.

The same kinds of processes lead to differentiation between cultures which might share a common ancestry but over time have become socially separated. Historical examples abound of ethnic groups which have disappeared, at least under the names that they were known during their existence. The people themselves might have continued to live on but they started to call themselves by a different ethnonym. Sometimes the end of a culture comes as result of war, when the people are wiped out, or, more commonly, assimilated or perhaps made into slaves. If enslaved, they would commonly be deported from their original homelands, thereby cutting their ties with their own background and any hope of reviving their culture, state or social unit. Sometimes states have actively pursued policies of ethnocide, the purposeful elimination of cultural identity through policies leading to the repression of cultural traits among certain minorities. In multi-cultural states (*e.g.* Russia, Iran, China or Brazil) the dominant ethnic group has expanded into territories which had previously been

[4] Unfortunately both of these languages / dialects are dying out, with very few speakers left.

[5] The Sani people near the Stone Forest (Shílín 石林), referred to earlier in this chapter, are one of the Yi groups.

inhabited by indigenous ethnic groups, who have now become minorities within their own original homelands. For educational and employment purposes they often have to use the language of the state and gradually they are in the process of losing many features of their traditional cultures. In such cases, migration within the borders of the modern nation-state has led to internal colonialization. Another type of cultural erosion can come from high levels of international immigration into a country which then becomes so pluralistic that the titular ethnic group becomes a minority within its own homeland. It is a process that is feared by some of the states of Europe. They might remain as their own nation states but their cultures might change almost beyond recognition.

In many multi-ethnic states, or confederations of states (such as the European Union), there can be a tendency to downplay a person's specific ethnicity while promoting instead citizenship or national identity. If ethnic pluralism has the potential for inter-ethnic conflicts, it is in the interest of governments and societies to focus on what unites rather than on potential sources of separatism or disunity. Over time, if certain ethnic groups begin to assimilate or intermarry, the boundaries between them and at least some other ethnic groups may become less distinct. For younger generations growing up in multi-ethnic states, the question "Who am I?" might no longer be answered in terms of ethnicity. It might not be answered in terms of citizenship either, except in specific circumstances such as crossing international borders or applying for certain rights or privileges which are exclusively for citizens. Instead, other types of interest groups may begin to form the basis for personal identity or association. It is sometimes observed that "youth culture" has so many similarities in different countries that to some extent teenagers might relate more easily to others of a similar age, despite differences of ethnicity or nationality, than they do to their parents or others whose ethnicity they share. Recently I was told of an international gathering attended by a wide variety of people, including a substantial number of those who were deaf. One of the participants noticed that the deaf people seemed to relate more easily to other deaf people than to hearing people of their own ethnicity or citizenship: deaf Muslims and deaf Christians of different nationalities got on better with each other than they did with fellow-religionists[6]. Although their deafness was a marker of difference from their hearing compatriots, it also became a point of mutual solidarity and identification which cross-cut national boundaries. In different contexts, people may focus on their religious identity as, for example, Muslim or Christian, or may use or other characteristics as markers of identity which transect those based on ethnicity, language or citizenship. Shared experiences between people can build bonds across cultures and provide another mechanism by which there is cross-cultural interaction and potential change over time.

In these and other ways, ethnicity, culture, language and identity can all be regarded as *processes*, not states. Each of them changes over time and each may be situational, modified in accordance with prevailing social factors, at times even subject to individual negotiation or manipulation. In the longer term (usually measured in centuries or millennia) cultures, languages and ethnicities may emerge or even die out but their legacies may be passed on to others following after them.

[6] Lara Heneveld, personal communication, August 2020.

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