

## The Problem: Ethnicity and Community

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, no one travelled along the fast-flowing rivers that snake toward the mountainous centre of Borneo without remarking on the stupendous buildings that were to be found along their banks. They were massive structures, accommodating hundreds of residents under one high-pitched roof, their floors raised well above ground level on sturdy pilings, their roomy interiors shady and inviting after the tropical brightness outside. To travel at all in the region was to travel between longhouses, and every arrival was a surprise. After hours of seeing nothing along the riverbanks but mangroves and palms and behind them the great trees of the rainforest, the first indication was a clump of canoes drawn up around an impromptu dock made of floating logs. On the bank above was a screen of fruit trees, and behind that the looming bulk of the longhouse. From apparently empty forest, the visitor was abruptly immersed in the social density of a city.

### Why Longhouses?

No simple feature of ecology or geography requires this peculiar mode of residence. In other parts of Southeast Asia, populations with similar forest environments and technologies of swidden agriculture live dispersed more evenly across the terrain. Throughout large areas of the Philippines and

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Indonesia, relatively insubstantial single-family houses are typically sited in small clusters directly adjacent to current farm sites. Indeed, there are obvious advantages to this arrangement, as compared to travelling back and forth between longhouses and jungle farms that have to be cleared anew every year. Even within Borneo, many people do not build longhouses, and evidently do perfectly well without them. So why do people in central Borneo live in longhouses? It is a perfectly reasonable question, but it will come as no surprise that ethnography has produced no direct answer. If you were to ask the longhouse residents, they would simply say that there was no other civilized way to live. I sympathise with their response, but it will not satisfy those who have never tried it. Consequently, my goal is to put longhouse communities in a broader context, using both ethnographic and historical data, and examining in turn the key issues of leadership, trade, and ritual.

## The Larger Question

Despite their impressive size, however, longhouses are not as permanent as they appear. On the contrary, viewed over the century and a half for which we have historical records, and the longer period covered by oral history, they are amazingly volatile. This, too, requires explanation, but the point for now is that there is no neat fit between longhouse communities and “tribes.” Elements of any one ethnic population are never neatly bounded. Instead, there are some here, some there, scattered among peoples of other ethnicities. Moreover, multiple ethnicities are represented even *within* longhouse communities, so that any discussion of community invariably becomes entangled in the complexities of ethnicity. Consequently, I am drawn into an issue that goes well beyond the shores of Borneo, one that bears on the whole practice of anthropology in the post-everything era.

The issue is this: most details reported in ethnographies are things characteristic of particular cultures or societies. How could it be otherwise? Is that not the whole *raison d'être* of ethnography, of “writing ethnicity”? Yet, we have become suspicious of all ethnic labels, seeing in them a reification of something invoked but unreal, without definite form or boundaries. It would be as if biologists suddenly discovered that any and all creatures could cross-breed without regard to species. Where then would be comparative zoology? The amazing achievements of generations of natural scientists in expanding and correcting the Linnean classification, a task still far from complete, would be reduced to nothing.

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This is not going to happen, of course. Nor would it be reasonable to equate such an unthinkable crisis in the modern worldview with a mere change of fashion in what were once called the “social sciences” – a phrase that no longer carries any conviction. Nevertheless, the scepticism that now surrounds the notion of “a culture,” if taken seriously, must surely bring the enterprise of ethnography to a halt. So pervasive is the critique that it would be laborious to enumerate even its major sources. As a summary of it, however, Robert Brightman’s (1995) article, “Forget Culture: Replacement, Transcendence, Relexification,” serves well to identify its main thrust. Fundamentally, we know that the world is not paved with neatly bounded cultures that we can set about describing in orderly fashion, one after another. Meanwhile, what is true of cultures is, *a fortiori*, true of ethnicities. This assertion has now become a platitude, and it amazes me to find that, having announced it, most of my colleagues then simply carry on as usual (Brumann 1999). This book is an attempt to confront the issue in one particular corner of the globe.

Sometimes the cultural indeterminacy that we see around us is taken to be a modern phenomenon, a recent product of the ever-increasing mobility of people and ideas in the contemporary world. Arjun Appadurai argues that each person is now the locus of intersection of global cultural influences in technology, economics, the media, and ideology, all pulling in different directions, so that our worlds are, in his term, “disjunct” (Appadurai 1990). In my view, this leads to a kind of revised transactionalism (Metcalf 2001a), but for present purposes I want to emphasize that Central Borneo is a region that has manifested this quality of disjuncture for centuries, as the communal histories recounted below amply demonstrate. Moreover, it is clear that previous generations of ethnographers found the same problem elsewhere. I am told by those who knew him that Meyer Fortes, for one, understood only too well that his characterisations of Talle culture were always partial and provisional. His reaction was to drive his colleagues insane by constantly hedging every statement he made with caveats and exceptions (Metcalf 2002a:96–7). He described the Talle – the name his informants gave for themselves – as a “congeries” of tribes. The root meaning of the term is “heap.” Just so, we are dealing with heaps of tribes. Why this issue did not bring mid-twentieth-century ethnography to a grinding halt is not clear. Putting it charitably, there was a clear job to carry out, and quibbles would have to be left for later. The most pressing intellectual need of ethnographers in mid-century was to drive home the reality of cultural difference, of the vast array of possible ways there were for humans to live their lives (Sahlins 1998). One must concede that they succeeded brilliantly in making their point, and that some form of cultural relativism is now virtually inescapable

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for anyone who is reasonably well read. In the process, however, the issues that are now most pressing were swept under the rug. The dangers of reification were not adequately confronted, and that lapse left anthropology vulnerable to deconstructive criticism.

My response to this dilemma is radical but not nihilist. It is not to jettison the concept of ethnicity, but to de-essentialize it. In other words, the goal is to treat ethnicity as itself a cultural construct – and, indeed, one that is key to understanding longhouse communities. I offer a “cultural account” of ethnicity in Borneo in the same manner as David Schneider (1968) in *A Cultural Account of American Kinship*. The crucially relativist character of that account is made clear in the postscript to the second edition, where Schneider (1980:121) displays his irritation at a junior colleague who had tried to generalize (i.e., make widely applicable, or even universal) the “core symbols” that Schneider had found in American kinship, such as “blood” and “love.” The whole point was that those core symbols were *not* universal; instead, they were part of system of meaning that was characteristically and peculiarly American.

In the same way, I turn my back on such hopeless questions as how many tribes there are in Borneo, or worse yet, what ethnicity might be, essentially and universally. Instead, I show how ethnicity appeared in the thoughts and actions of longhouse-dwelling people, and how it was constituted by, and constitutive of, their communities. How ethnicity appears elsewhere requires other studies by other authors.

## Rehabilitating Ethnology

What this amounts to is the reinvention of the moribund discipline of ethnology to serve the needs of contemporary ethnography. There is a certain perversity in this proposition, I realize. The term “ethnology” has for long had a musty air about it, something left over from the nineteenth century, evoking only museum collections. In the twenty-first century, when so much of what seemed secure even a couple of decades ago is now questionable, surely ethnology is doubly dead.

Anthropology is, however, remarkably parsimonious with its concepts. Nothing ever seems to be finally thrown away, like the proverbial attic in Maine containing a box marked “string too short to save.” When, for example, Claude Levi-Strauss began writing about totemism in the 1960s, the subject had become a minor curiosity relegated to courses on intellectual history. He dusted off the Australian material that had intrigued Durkheim at the turn of the twentieth century and found a new use for it – a very

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proper piece of intellectual bricolage. Totemism is central to *The Savage Mind* (Levi-Strauss 1962), a book that had enormous influence within anthropology and beyond. Such a spectacular precedent might set anyone looking for obsolete terms to rehabilitate, but it is one thing to find them and quite another to find a way to recycle them. Meanwhile, ethnology has exactly the character of leftover bits of string, wrappings from boxes whose contents are now forgotten. Is there really any way to save it?

Levi-Strauss was clearly drawn to the anthropology of an earlier age. As has often been remarked, his *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Levi-Strauss 1969) looks more like Lewis Henry Morgan's (1870) *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* than ethnographic studies such as Meyer Fortes' (1949) *The Web of Kinship among the Tallensi*. Clearly, what appealed to Levi-Strauss about late-nineteenth-century anthropology was its grand sweep. When the discipline was in its infancy, it captured the public imagination in a way that it has never done since. Its objective was nothing less than the discovery of the whole history of mankind: the evolution of technology, society, and religion; the rise of civilisations old and new; and the diffusion of people and culture across all the continents. It is the last item on the list that gave rise to the new science of ethnology, which immediately took on a taxonomic function. Despite all that happened in anthropology in the succeeding century, it is the original definition of ethnology that persists in the authoritative *Oxford English Dictionary*: "the science of human races and their relations to one another and their characteristics" (1984:425). "Races" were to be classified to reveal the different branches of the human family tree, from which could be deduced the routes involved in "the peopling of the world."

It is difficult now to recover the excitement generated by so ambitious a program, but those of us who are teachers have seen it often enough in the eyes of undergraduates new to anthropology. Perversely, it is then our job to extinguish their enthusiasm by reciting a familiar list of charges: racism, ethnocentrism, faulty logic, and so on. It is hard not to sound begrudging. The trick is to separate the issues from the methods. The intuitively reasonable premise that what is most simple in human cultures is also most ancient does not fit the known facts. Consequently the celebrated Comparative Method cannot be relied on. Similarly, trying to distinguish "races" by measuring bodily features of people all over the world produced, in the end, results that were totally garbled and open to as many interpretations as there were experts. Nor is it possible to argue that the advent of computers would now make the project feasible. It would remain a question of "garbage in, garbage out." Just why this great scientific project was so complete a failure is an interesting question, one that has many lessons to teach students of the

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history of science, but that is not the issue here. The point is that ethnology as conceived in the late nineteenth century was unmistakably dead by the mid-twentieth century.

After its early heyday, ethnology persisted only in a weakened form. When the term was used, and that rarely, it signified loosely the overarching project of which ethnographies were the particular manifestation. In effect, ethnology had become “the science of human *cultures* and their relations to one another and their characteristics.”

The project of reconstructing “the peopling of the world” led an even more shadowy existence. There were still those interested in the diffusion of culture traits and the reconstruction of prehistoric contacts or migrations, but the time depth involved was shorter. There could obviously be no grand reconstruction of the branches of mankind because the traits in question were, by definition, impermanent – that is, subject to cultural change. There was still room, however, for interesting speculation and discoveries. For example, the spread of Southeast Asian cultigens to Africa clearly was an important factor enabling the expansion of Bantu people through the tropical rainforest belt and into the vast savannahs to the south (Wolf 1982:41–2). Moreover, specialists in different regions of the globe continued to trade information among themselves, despite the unfashionability of ethnology as a subdiscipline. In the bars of convention hotels, they could be heard asking questions in the form: “I’ve heard that there are some X people living over at Y. You ever been up that way?” Ethnology took on a hobbyist quality, demoted from journal articles to gossip. There is often a guilty air about these insider conversations, as if every valuable snippet of information was implicitly preceded by some disclaimer: “I don’t really believe in all this, but.” What could account for the contrast between professional invisibility and lively discourse? My answer is that ethnicity is the last of our standard technical terms still understood in essentialist terms. Moreover, that is a survival, if I may use the word, of the discredited assumptions of nineteenth-century anthropology.

## The Process of De-Essentializing

The process of de-essentializing basic concepts has not been painless. Think, for instance, of the traumas inflicted on the study of kinship during the past few decades. There was a time, not so long ago, when it seemed obvious that kinship studies provided the bedrock of anthropology. Kinship theory appealed comfortingly to a universal logic; after all, everyone surely had a mother and a father. Moreover, it was clear that stateless societies were run predominantly according to kinship principles, and even the

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institutions of kingship were only superimposed on those of localized clans and lineages. Finally, ethnographers were able to demonstrate an amazing variety of kinship systems that could be analysed in terms of a few basic principles, so showing how diversity arose out of a common human nature. Most gratifyingly, kinship studies generated a vast elaboration of jargon, a specialised knowledge that justified the very existence of the discipline. To become an anthropologist was primarily to master the use of that technical language. This cheerful professional self-confidence was undermined by dissident voices in the 1960s and collapsed entirely in the 1970s, when two of the foremost exponents of kinship studies, one in England and the other in the United States, announced that all of this theorizing was faulty and required radical revision (Needham 1974; Schneider 1977). Kinship studies were increasingly marginalised in anthropology curricula. Empty at its very centre, it seemed as if anthropology would fall apart. This was not, of course, what was intended by Needham and Schneider. What they had argued for was the abandonment of an essentialized understanding of kinship as something directly consequent on biology, and therefore universal.

Religion, conceived of as a universal human attribute, underwent a similar process, although with less trauma. Most ethnographers of comparative religion are by now resigned to the fact that there is no watertight definition of either religion or ritual. For many theologians, it is still shocking to discover that the Manus Islanders, for example, lack all notion of gods, creators, or an afterlife. As Reo Fortune (1935) describes it, the Manus look forward to nothing more than becoming sea slugs, thousands of which litter the floor of the lagoon over which their houses are built. For those of a missionary bent, it would be easy to say that the Manus simply have no religion. The ethnographer, however, notices something else. Not only do the Manus have a clear code of morality, but a strict one at that. Are not morals something we expect to find tangled up somehow with religion? Adding morality to the list of defining features is not going to help, however. What is really going on in such a process of definition is not isolating a category of human experience, but framing a theory of it. To say that religion consists of belief in gods is a shorthand way of arguing that almost all humans – with maybe a few appallingly primitive exceptions – inherently have a belief in gods or, better, a God. This is the kind of argument that appealed to Thomas Aquinas.

Only one approach to defining religion shows a way out of this dilemma, and paradoxically, it is provided by that arch-definer, Emile Durkheim. A religion, he says, is a “system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things” (Durkheim 1965 [1912]:62). He declined, however, to define “the sacred,” insisting that it was so varied that one could not know in advance what it might be from one place to another. It might be an idol or a *churinga*,

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but it could as easily be something immaterial, like a myth. Instead of a list of possible sacred things, Durkheim offers us a test for locating the sacred wherever we happen to be. Look out he says for “negative rituals,” those signs of dread and awe that invariably surround the sacred. Durkheim’s test is not always easy to apply, but it has this huge virtue: instead of telling us what religion is in advance, it tells us to go and search for what there might be out there that connotes religion. In this way, Durkheim shifts the emphasis from essentialism to nominalism. The question is not whether certain people have a religion or not, but what sorts of things are going on in various parts of the world that are religion-like, or remind us of religious things elsewhere. It is an invitation to explore. If we discover a place where religions are radically different from anything described previously, so much the better. We might call this an open door policy to religion.

## De-Essentializing Ethnicity

How then might we manage an open door policy to ethnicity? The hesitation that we have comes from the fact that ethnicities have provided our units of study. If we lose our grip on that essential category, do we not undermine the validity of all ethnography, past, present, and future? In his influential study of Quebecois nationalism, Richard Handler (1988) grasps the nettle. Instead of writing as others did before him about what constitutes the uniqueness of the Quebecois people in terms of cultural contribution and historical experience, he shifts the view to how Quebecois themselves go about constructing this uniqueness, that is, how they tell it to themselves, remind themselves periodically about it, and seek to propagate it among their fellow Quebecois. It turns out that there is a lot of this activity in Quebec, providing rich material for Handler’s account. Even car license plates bear the motto “Je Me Souviens.” As an ethnographer, he is agnostic about the existence of Quebecois national culture – he is neither for it nor against it – instead, he defines his job as finding out how it is structured as a discourse. He shifts his view, as it were, through 90 degrees. Instead of looking at the grand façade of Quebecois nationalism, he looks at it from the side, to see what is propping it up.

Nationalism is not synonymous with ethnicity, so applying Handler’s approach to central Borneo requires some readjustment. In the longhouse communities I studied in the mid-1970s, there was no such cultural self-awareness as one finds everywhere in Europe. All the intellectual apparatus that Handler describes as characteristic of Western notions of national identity, and the struggle to preserve it, were absent. There were no “nationalist” activists warning against the loss of identity and the risks of cultural

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pollution. This is not to argue that longhouse people were incapable of chauvinism – on the contrary – but it was not expressed in terms that we would recognize as nationalistic. It had a different quality about it, which it is my task to convey.

The crucial point is that deconstructing either nationalism or ethnicity – a mission for which contemporary anthropology is well equipped – does not imply that we will stop talking about nationalisms and ethnicities, as if they had suddenly ceased to exist. On the contrary, our job is to track them down in all their exotic manifestations, just as we have done with religions. As a general description of what this involves, Handler borrows from Bernhard Cohn the term “cultural objectification,” and that is the focus of Section V. My argument is that cultural objectification in central Borneo is accomplished primarily through ritual. It does not follow, however, that ritual is the glue that holds longhouse communities together, as in the classic Durkheimian model of solidarity. For one thing, longhouse communities do *not* stay glued together; their histories are full of rivalry, collapse, and dispersion. Ritual consequently plays an ambiguous role, providing a mode of subversion as often as a tool of control. In making this argument, the model I develop is adapted from Levi-Strauss’ “totemic operator.”

**The Reality of Communities in Borneo**

Having de-essentialized ethnicity, it would be foolish to reify the even more slippery term “community.” We are all accustomed to the politicians’ invocation of the word to imply a cosy integration, a uniformity of opinion and culture that they claim either to represent or are to be in touch with. If a politician in a major American city begins talking about the “Hispanic community” or the “African American community,” we know he or she is imminently about to engage in ideological conjuring tricks and fakery. Used in an ethnographic context – the “Nuer community?” – it would be hard to know what was implied.

Nevertheless, I use the term frequently because I can offer a specific definition of what I mean in reference to central Borneo, namely, the inhabitants of those impressive buildings with which I began. Longhouse communities not only had a concrete existence, they were also separated by miles of jungle from their nearest neighbours. This is not to suggest that there have not always been connections between longhouses involving transfers of people and goods – on the contrary, we see how important they were in Chapter 7. Moreover, there are two caveats. First, residents are often away from the longhouse at their farms, perhaps for extended periods,

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so that the house has an abandoned air. Second, longhouses have to be rebuilt, often at new sites, and meanwhile, people are housed in shacks. Both conditions are temporary, however. It remains true that, until recently everyone in central Borneo belonged to one longhouse community or another, and their lives revolved primarily around those communities. Other places and communities were alien.

That technical and locally specific definition of community means that I can not use the term in any other sense, nor am I tempted to. Prior to the colonial era, longhouse communities were sovereign polities. There were no larger tribal or ethnic “communities” in anything like the same sense. Consequently, when I speak of communities, I mean longhouse communities and nothing else.

## Ethnicity Is an Object of Research, Not a Preliminary to Research

If ethnology is to be rehabilitated and ethnicities are to be held up for inspection rather than taken for granted, it follows that we must get down to details. The problem in central Borneo is that there are literally hundreds of ethnic labels. Moreover, each has a contrastive quality, having relevance only in regard to other labels. There is nothing in this of Levi-Strauss’ “structure” – no orderly arrangement of parts, let alone predictable “transformations” (1966:279). The reality is far messier and far more historically contingent. In the following pages, I am guilty of retailing, not just one ethnic label, but dozens. Everyone who talks about central Borneo does the same – it is that kind of place. This can easily take on an air of positive obfuscation. Worldwide, there are no more than a handful of Borneanists who would recognise most of these labels, and there are some that have never before appeared in print. True, a certain tolerance for ethnic labels is part of the *metier*. Who could imagine a properly trained graduate student who did not know the difference between the Nuer and the Dinka, for instance, and of how many people outside the discipline could the same be said? The tangles of ethnology in central Borneo, however, would strain the patience of a saint.

This complexity has had the effect of stalling theoretical discussions before they started. That is to say, the provision of an adequate ethnic taxonomy seemed a logical and necessary first step, and nothing could be done until we had a firm grip on who lived where. That this was true of colonial administrators is no surprise, since postcolonial theory has taught us that sorting people into groups is a technique of control. Oscar Salemink (1991:248) quotes the maxim of a French officer in Vietnam: “Name your tribes, and