

John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.*  
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## THE BUSINESS OF BELONGING

In the tropical lowlands of Yunnan, home to two dozen of China's ethnic minorities, the Dai welcome the New Year with hoses and water pistols in a raucous deluge of wet fun. Once a festival enjoyed only by those living within dousing range, revellers from Beijing are now arriving in busloads to take part in the annual celebration. After drying off in the comforts of Xishuangbanna's Dai Park, they wander past women weaving at looms, watch locals in colourful garb harvesting rubber, and enjoy an indigenous barbecue while staying in homes on stilts. A few weeks after the *New York Times* ran a story on this fetching sample of heritage tourism, a full-page advertisement in the *Financial Times* blared, 'The British Bottom Line: 8 Million Ethnic Consumers—a Figure You Simply Can't Ignore'. The ad plugged a diversity media company's 'bespoke ethnic marketing solutions' for those hoping to capitalize on economic opportunities 'just too significant to overlook', represented by a slant-eyed mask casting a shadow in the shape of a pound sign.

Either of these items could have come straight from the pages of *Ethnicity, Inc.* by the Comaroffs, a husband-and-wife team of South African anthropologists now working at the University of Chicago. The couple are the authors of numerous works on colonialism in South Africa, as well as editors of volumes on broader theoretical issues in current ethnography. They have been leading figures in the transformation of their discipline in recent decades, as its centre of gravity has moved away from studies of kinship or ritual in tribal societies towards a wider concern with patterns of relations, identities and meanings in the contemporary world, in which the boundaries between the pre-modern and the modern have been eroded.

The concept that gives title to their book is itself a marker of the shift. It first shows up in the 1961 edition of *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, but had to wait until 1972 to make it into the *OED*. From a handful in the sixties, books with 'ethnicity' in the title jumped to over one hundred in the seventies, up to three hundred in the eighties, and since the nineties have been running at seven hundred a decade, or one every other month. It is not hard to see why. Talk of the 'tribal' sounds old-fashioned nowadays, while straightforward reference to the 'national' has been rendered obsolete by mass immigration from the Third World into the First, the rise of indigenous movements, not to speak of the spread of multiculturalism. Without actually displacing them, the 'ethnic' avoids either of these shoals. It also, obviously, allows for just that fluidity of movement across post-modern, modern and pre-modern lines at which anthropology has become adept. With an adjective as indispensable as this, the noun had to follow.

For most of its short history, the analysis of ethnicity has typically been political in focus. Since the word one usually hears after 'ethnic'—to the point where, at any rate in the media, they virtually go together—is 'conflict', that seems understandable. The originality of the Comaroffs is to argue that this way of looking at the ongoing role of ethnicity is too narrow, and misses what is actually its most significant configuration today. It is not the politics of ethnicity, they insist, but its political economy that is tending to restructure communities and identities across the world in the new century. Anthropology, as anyone who has struggled through the works of Alfred Kroeber or Meyer Fortes would know, has not always been the most readable of disciplines. No such problem with the Comaroffs: without a ponderous line, their argument is spun from a taut skein of piquant illustrations, punctuated by sly inversions and aphorisms. Some might complain that all this is even too stylish. But it is for a serious purpose.

The basic argument of *Ethnicity, Inc.* runs as follows. The vision of ethnic identity originally set forth by Herder saw it as the unmediated expression of the spirit and culture of a people. Today, however, ethnicity is being gradually transmogrified by two complementary processes: the commodification of culture at large, commercializing what is supposed to be most distinctively authentic in any *Volksgeist*, and the reconfiguration of ethnic groups themselves as fledgling business corporations. The first, it might be said, is nothing new to cultural anthropologists, who have studied it from Fijian festivals to Québécois heritage industries. In such cases, it has long been recognized that consumerist re-packaging of local objects and traditions can serve to conjure up and concretize ethnic identities, along lines famously laid out by Trevor-Roper's essay on the modern origins of the Scottish kilt. The Comaroffs argue, however, that the scattered emergence of ethnic products, heritage industries and national marketing are part of a

world-historical transformation that is radicalizing and consolidating earlier kinds of ethnic commodification into something else: the emergent forms of Ethnicity, Inc.

This is a transformation that thrives on the psychic dislocations wrought as capitalism engenders both the apparent loss of and simultaneous longing for 'authentic experiences'. In these conditions, consumer desire mediates the recognition of ethnic identities, as moderns find themselves through consumption of authentic otherness or self-fashioning via the consumption of ethnic goods. The result is an Identity Industry comparable to the Culture Industry, but one that 'replays critical theory as caricature, Adorno as farce'. For unlike other commodity forms, whose aura becomes etiolated in the cycles of reproduction, distribution and consumption, ethno-commodities see their mystical complexion revived through these processes: their raw material—ethnic identity—not depleted but restored through replication and mass circulation. Turning back on itself, commodification enlivens the ethnic basis that lends the commodity its auratic qualities in the first place, producing not estrangement, but new forms of value, new ethnic identities. On the one hand, recognition of an ethnic group's value comes through the eyes of the other, the digital cameras of ethnotourists generating legitimacy and cultural memory. But this recognition increasingly demands the market's stamp of approval. As one Tswana elder cited by the Comaroffs put it, 'if we have nothing of ourselves to sell, does it mean that we have no culture?'

On the other hand, the distant closeness of Benjamin's aura is maintained as the line between producers and consumers blurs, and locals now seeing, hearing or tasting their hypostatized roots come to act on their own ethnic self-fashioning, as 'ethnopreneurs' marketing what is most their own. Take, for example, the *koma* initiation rituals of southern Africa in which youths pass into adulthood through rites transmitting the knowledge expected of adults, culminating in circumcision. One group, the Pedi, have been able to transform the *koma* into a profitable business, with members of neighbouring tribes willing to pay a premium for their 'more authentic' Pedi-brand *koma*. Monkey dances in Bali and Cajun festivals in Louisiana have gone much the same way, with tourist-oriented performances replacing disparate local practices as the bona fide versions. The Comaroffs reject any moralizing judgement: 'vendors of ethnic authenticity are not alienated proletarians' but, as often as not, poor or disenfranchised minorities desperately seeking 'dignity and capital'.

The new game is not played for matchsticks. Extended to include food, fashion, music and cultural artifacts, the 'ethnicity industry' turns over about \$2 billion a year in the United States. Of course, when the chips are cashed, not all members benefit equally, and too often a substantial portion of the profits are carted off by external investors who provide the impetus

for many such projects in the first place. The projected unity of the ethnic group often belies the divisions created when the spoils are divvied up. Here the law serves to transform cultural objects and practices into expressions of a unique substance constituting ethnic groups, to be copyrighted as ‘intellectual property’—protecting the authorial rights of the product’s ‘creator’ while facilitating its mass circulation.

After setting out their theoretical stall, the Comaroffs then turn to the case studies that form the core of the book, demonstrating how ethnic groups have become businesses managed in the interests of shareholders, and how ethnic identities have been crystallized around marketable products. Their exemplar for the first process comes from the indigenous peoples of the US. While Native Americans were granted rights to acquire corporate status when the 1934 Wheeler–Howard Act empowered tribes to conduct property transactions as businesses, the legal repackaging of cultural and kinship ties has taken on more pernicious social forms since then. A typical result was the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971, which organized indigenous peoples into twelve regional corporations, run as for-profit businesses by a board of directors issuing stock to each member, defined by possession of at least one-quarter Native blood. The ethnobusiness accrues profits by selling territory and goods marked with their Silver Hand logo. The limited sovereignty achieved by incorporated tribes across the continent has famously provided gaps in legality on which ethnopreneurs have capitalized, supplying casinos, cheap tobacco, and other pleasures regulated or outlawed by their surrounding states. Tribal leaders become the CEOs of these high-return investments.

In the process, the Comaroffs mordantly observe, ethnic groups can be ‘raised from the dead by the occult power of capital’. Attracted by the spoils, even single families ‘re-membering’ their ancestors have won legal recognition as native peoples, and now compete for casino rights, often underwritten by distant corporate investors. When Maryann Martin, who grew up African-American in Los Angeles, became aware of a deceased Native American grandmother, she took her three children and four nieces and nephews, and moved east to an abandoned reservation in Riverside County. Within a few years, this ‘tribe’ of one adult and seven children had its own casino. But such cases are not merely instances of ethnicity being turned to economic ends. Once legal recognition is achieved, the institutions that ‘thicken’ ethnic culture—museums, educational programmes, conferences, books, festivals—typically follow, grounding the integrity of the originating claims.

With the financial stakes raised, social closure becomes increasingly vital in protecting the gains from outsiders. The artifacts and practices marketed by, or licensing, Ethnicity, Inc. may be cultural. But its demarcation rapidly

turns biological, as blood becomes the central means for determining inclusion and exclusion. Questions of membership, previously pondered as fluid and ambiguously post-modern, can now be answered once and for all with genetic testing. In the flourishing recreational genome industry, people pay to discover what percentage of Native American heritage they possess, whether they have the requisite Jewish ancestry to claim an Israeli passport, or in what part of West Africa their forebears were enslaved. There is a reason for this essentializing trend. The legal groundings of ethnobusinesses prefer objective criteria to subjective beliefs when deciding who is in and who is out, and genetic definitions of membership guard against extending the ethnic umbrella too widely, barring new claimants' attempts to muscle in and become shareholders. Hanging a dream-catcher on the wall does not make one an Ojibwe—a DNA swab does. Yet the biological and the cultural remain in tension. Ethnic identity becomes an unstable synthesis of opposites: simultaneously choice and destiny, essence and self-construction, 'Genesis and Genetics'.

The scene then shifts to southern Africa for a discussion of how notions of intellectual property can congeal a loose collection of the disenfranchised into an ethnic group with high-stakes business interests. For the Comaroffs, the invention of the San people in Botswana is emblematic. For generations, hunter-gatherers at the edge of the Kalahari Desert have used the barbed xhoba plant (*Hoodia gordonii*) to stave off hunger—a property useful not only to those without guaranteed food sources, but also for those with guaranteed access to too much of it, as soaring obesity rates in the developed world show. Phytopharm, a small British pharmaceuticals company, made the obvious connection, and by the time news of the xhoba plant's hunger-suppressing effects hit the Oprah Winfrey Show, the potential harvest was clear. As Phytopharm moved in, a regional NGO fighting for local rights against 'biopiracy' took up the cause. But to establish the claim that the xhoba plant's use as a dietary supplement was the intellectual property of an ethnic culture and subject to copyright laws, the NGO needed to solidify the social and legal identity of the hunter-gatherers, now reframed as the 'San people'. Population registers were established and luxury game camps for experiencing San culture set up to legitimate this cultural group and protect its interests against predators. Here the battle-ground shifts, for in the neoliberal world, the medium of conflict is—a typically pungent Comaroff coinage—'lawfare'. As they put it elsewhere, 'politics may or may not be about class any longer. But it certainly *is* about class actions'. The upshot of legal wrangling between foreign business interests, humanitarian NGOs and eventually the Botswana government was both over-harvesting of the now endangered plant and proliferation of alternative substances marketed,

of course, under Bushmen images. Left to scratch out a living among the debris was the new social, legal and political entity, the San people.

Why all this now? Having laid out an arresting map of their subject, the Comaroffs are laconic as to what has generated it. Though they suggest at different points that Ethnicity, Inc. is continuous with trends stretching a long way back, the thrust of their argument is that something quite new has emerged in recent years. Describing the conditions for its emergence in only the broadest terms, they point to three developments: the increase in migration from the periphery to the metropolitan core since the end of colonialism, the proliferation of indigenous-rights movements since the 1980s, and the global advance of neoliberalism since 1989. Tacitly, the weight of their explanation falls principally on the last of these: Ethnicity, Inc. is at its core a product of the neoliberal era. For as the state has entrusted more and more of its traditional duties to the market, individuals are forced to become ever more entrepreneurial; and as any sense of the social dissolves, collective agency tends to relapse from political projects to primordial givens—race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion.

Yet missing from this bare-bones account of motivating forces behind Ethnicity, Inc. is any discussion of its most immediate economic context. This is surely the dramatic surge of the global tourist industry over the past two decades—a business whose total receipts skyrocketed from \$265 billion in 1990 to almost \$6 trillion in 2009, and which now employs 235 million people, or 8.2 per cent of workers across the globe, more than any other single industry. The impact of these advances has not been uniform, for although revenues have grown at an annual average of 5 per cent over the past twenty years, the underdeveloped world has posted rates nearly double that, with Africa the leading region. Precise figures are not readily available, but most of the investment behind this spectacular boom will have come from the First World, and probably the bulk of the profits are channelled back to it. But local incomes and opportunities (if also for corruption and demoralization) certainly rise too. The Comaroffs argue persuasively for heightened attentiveness to the economics of ethnicity. But here they let slip the chance to dissect the actual structure of unequal relations in its new political economy.

Cracks appear in their political analysis as well. Although it is a product of the slimming of the state, Ethnicity, Inc. needs its shelter to operate. According to the Comaroffs, the dialectics of self-determination tend to drive ethnocorporations into seeking exemption from ordinary national jurisdictions, in a kind of legal *Lebensraum*. A territorial enclave offers a vital means for grounding the material and affective claims that project the ethnic group into the past and the future. The Comaroffs speak of this as a quest for sovereignty. But, one must add, such claims are necessarily limited: they do not

aim at an independent nation-state, and sovereignty in its most fundamental form remains unchallenged. The exclusion that ethnopreneurs pursue is circumscribed: a zone of autonomy that is defined in their favour, but guaranteed by the legal system and military might of the more powerful entity. In other words, the commercialization of ethnicity is only possible when the state itself is not under dispute—when ethnic violence has not reached its most destructive flashpoint. Claims are made *within*, not *over* the state. The contrast with ethnonationalist movements proper, sidelined by the Comaroffs, speaks for itself. The olive oil sold by the Palestinian Farmers Union is not marketed for identity consumerism, but basic subsistence and political awareness. Even the meagre attempts, cited by the authors in passing, to sell access to skulls from the genocide in Rwanda were only possible long after the killings were over. The moment of violence—a topic largely written out of their text—is too destructive for commodification.

But if depoliticized and tamed by the market, the internal fissures that *Ethnicity, Inc.* magnifies can, so the Comaroffs argue, be harnessed for successful branding by what they term ‘Nationality, Inc.’ This centres on the notion that ‘statecraft itself has come to be modelled ever more openly on the rhetoric and rationale of the for-profit corporation’. But the evidence they adduce for the emergence of ‘corporate nationhood’—cases in which national identity is recast in business moulds—is brittle. Much of it comes down simply to national branding: Swiss cheese, Hungarian salami and the like. This is a flimsy affair compared with the effects of *Ethnicity, Inc.* Moreover, in arguing that *Nationality, Inc.* is derived from these sub-national transformations, and that it can be distinguished from earlier national imaginings by its embrace of ‘hetero-nationhood’, the Comaroffs rely on an overly flattened image of history. Outside the narrow geographic confines of the European peninsula, hetero-nationhood has in many cases served as a bedrock definition of the state. Besides the former Soviet Union, or even the United States, both India and China and even once Japan—now the poster child of national homogeneity, but not when it ruled Korea and Taiwan—have all made much of claims to internal heterogeneity. With the shift from the sub-national to the nation-state level, the Comaroffs’ tightly woven analysis begins to loosen. Colourful though some of its illustrations are, *Nationality, Inc.* does not really convince. The same applies to its brief companion section on religion—‘Divinity, Inc.’—where the Comaroffs discuss the ‘commodification of the numinous essence of faith’, and attempts at asserting copyright over its rituals. (Though much can be forgiven for the vignette that in 1986, when the Indian government sued for the return of a twelfth-century bronze Shiva ‘it did so on behalf of the offended god himself’ who was thus ‘named plaintiff in the case’; God, the authors comment, becoming the ultimate legal person.)

Yet while Nationality, Inc. packs less explanatory punch than Ethnicity, Inc., it would be unwise to dissociate the two altogether. Take, for example, the Japanese tea ceremony. In this 500-year-old, highly stylized form of hospitality, tea is prepared and a meal served with an intricate etiquette supposedly condensing the core of Japanese sociability. But the full four-hour version is only rarely performed, and a scaled-down, twenty-minute rendition has become the normal practice, exhibiting Japaneseness at community festivals, 'Culture Day' celebrations or tourist sites. On these occasions, natives and foreigners alike can imbibe the national essence. But knowledge of tea ceremony is the intellectual property not of the Japanese, but of a handful of families, organized both as non-profit and for-profit corporations, who control the multi-million dollar tea-ceremony industry, selling the practice as both specifically Japanese and universally open. Rights to tea ceremony are not limited through ethnic copyrighting, but rather expansively defined, as tea leaders portray the practice as at once a quintessence of the peaceful, cosmopolitan and enlightened culture of Japan, and an exemplification of universal values. Here, one side of Ethnicity, Inc., the commodification of culture, has reached an apotheosis, while the other, the incorporation of identity, has yet to find its fullest expression.

But this case of what is, according to the Comaroffs' logic, only a partial completion of its drive should not be read as evidence against, but for Ethnicity, Inc. For how could one expect wholly coherent effects if it is a compound of opposites—essential being and existential choice, commodification and inalienability, public claims and private benefits—whose capacity for animation or annihilation can only be unevenly distributed, according to the whims of history, ecology and geography? To ask this is not to gloss the weaknesses or overstatements in the Comaroffs' tale. The proliferation of smart coinages sometimes creates what it seems innocuously to label. Eliminate the 'ethno-' prefixes, and their extended discussion of the mining interests of Bafokeng rulers in South Africa—it occupies half a chapter—could easily be read as a run-of-the-mill story of economic development and exploitation of local resources. Certainly the CEO/King of Bafokeng, Inc. has used ceremonial and spectacular occasions to wed the symbolism of the state to an economic enterprise: in business meetings he can refer to the Bafokeng people as 'our shareholders', and the requisite heritage village has been built. But it remains unclear how these logics have altered matters for his subjects. The Comaroffs' macroscopic focus rarely reaches down to the revision of ethnicity in people's daily existence, an unexpected oversight in writers who remind us that the implications of Ethnicity, Inc. always need to be worked out in the 'pragmatics of everyday life'. That the San 'people' have not begun to move *en masse* to their newly (sub-)sovereign homeland may tell us something.

It could also be argued that the authors' angle of vision is skewed by the two settings in which they have done their work. In the South Africa they come from, we learn, 'a recent study shows that less than 25 per cent of the population regard themselves primarily as South Africans'; the vast majority think of themselves first as members of 'an ethnic, cultural, language, religious or other group'. In the United States at which the Comaroffs have arrived, Native Americans have acquired—or been consigned to—a kind of corporate extraterritoriality that seems never to have been replicated elsewhere in the world. From one post-Bantustan to another, are readers being shuttled between outliers in a world that mostly consists of more ordinarily integrated, yet often multinational, states? It could be complacent to think so. But *Ethnicity, Inc.* has the terse form of a manifesto, of which it would be unfair to expect the elements of a census. Though unmistakably, even deeply, critical of what it describes, it is not judgmental, lacking the 'either/or' of any moral ultimatum. The prevailing note is rather 'both/and'. Of the commodification of ethnic minorities' culture it describes, its part-caustic, part-melancholy verdict is: better exploitation, at least, than extinction.

By the end of the book, the incongruities of ethno-capital no longer seem so surprising. There we encounter the entrepreneurial efforts of an association of ethnic groups in Bogotá. Lacking territorial claims, it has formed a political coalition to set up an 'indigenous shopping mall'. Asked just what that might be, Ati Quigua, one of the inspirers of the project, explained that the architecture of the building will 'symbolize indigeneity'. Housing theatres for ethnic dance and ritual performances alongside traditional retail venues, the mall will provide a 'space where we can display our cosmology' and shoppers 'can be with us'. Hopefully equipped with a credit card.