

EDITED BY paul spickard



RACE AND NATION

ethnic systems in the modern world



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Race and Nation, Identity and Power

Thinking Comparatively about Ethnic Systems

PAUL SPICKARD

The old man and I sat in the dust of the bazaar, our backs against a whitewashed wall, hiding from the sun in what little shade we could find. Radio Beijing blared from a loudspeaker on a pole nearby, unheeded by the people around us. Like my companion and 95 percent of the people in Turpan, this little oasis town in the Takla Makan Desert in China's far western borderlands, they were Uygurs.¹ Hawk-nosed with slanted eyes and tawny complexions, they spoke a kind of Turkic and very little Chinese. When they talked about their Chinese colonial overlords they spat with contempt and used words like "hate" and "kill."

To pass the time, the old man and I tried to make conversation using the few Chinese words we each could command.

"So you're Japanese," he declared.

"No, I'm American," I answered.

"What's that?" he asked. Aside from the radio playing overhead, there was no local means of learning about the outside world. No Uygur language radio, no television, no newspaper. Few outside visitors except for Chinese bureaucrats. No way of knowing about the United States, or much else outside Turpan.

I tried to describe my country to the gentleman. He wasn't buying it. No place like that existed, so far as he was concerned.

He knew about three kinds of people. There were *people* — that is, Uygurs of many tribes and lineages. There were Chinese, the hated colonizers, and, as it turned out, there were Japanese. Every two weeks a minibus brought about a dozen Japanese tourists to Turpan. Outsiders, in this man's worldview, people who were neither Uygur nor Chinese, were *ipso facto* Japanese. A White American like me was Japanese.

I expect that things have changed a lot in Turpan since that hot spring day in 1989. Probably today I would not be labeled Japanese. But that day I was not *mistaken* for Japanese; I *was* Japanese, in the language of the Turpan racial system of that time.

My encounter in Turpan suggests a few themes that reemerge persistently throughout this book. First, there are many kinds of racial and ethnic systems in the world: many ways that groups of people with different ancestries come into contact with one another, interact, and assort themselves into socially significant groupings. Second, these groups may initially see each other as simply ethnic or cultural groups, but at some point — I will call this *the racial moment* — they begin to see themselves as fundamentally and irrevocably different from one another. And third, at such times power is at issue between the groups, and there is a tendency to associate physical markers with racial difference. In short, *race is about power, and it is written on the body*. I will have more to say about each of these themes in the pages that follow.

In almost every place on earth where people live, there is more than just one kind of people. And in each such place, there is a system of ideas and a language describing the relationships between those peoples. Most often, those peoples arrange themselves in hierarchies. Theoretically, a system of difference might be articulated without hierarchy, but historically, I know of no situation where racial or ethnic difference has endured without some element of domination. Frequently, we use terms like “racial” or “ethnic” to characterize those hierarchies. According to the estimates of scholars and government agencies²:

- Afghanistan is 38 percent Pashtun, 25 percent Tajik, 19 percent Hazara, 6 percent Uzbek, and 13 percent various other ethnicities.
- Angola is 37 percent Ovimbundu, 25 percent Kimbundu, 13 percent Bakongo, 2 percent Mestico (mixed European and African), 1 percent European, and 22 percent others.
- Belgium is 55 percent Fleming, 33 percent Walloon, and 12 percent mixed and others.
- Bosnia and Herzegovina is 40 percent Serb, 38 percent Muslim, and 22 percent Croat.
- Brunei and Darussalam is 64 percent Malay, 20 percent Chinese, and 16 percent others.
- The Gambia is 42 percent Mandinka, 18 percent Fula, 16 percent Wolof, 10 percent Jola, 9 percent Serahuli, and 5 percent various others.
- Kazakhstan is 46 percent Kazak, 35 percent Russian, 5 percent Ukrainian, 3 percent German, 2 percent Uzbek, 2 percent Tatar, and 7 percent others.
- Malaysia is 59 percent Malay, 32 percent Chinese, and 9 percent Indian.
- Samoa is 92 percent Samoan, 7 percent Afakasi (people of mixed Polynesian and European ancestry), and less than 1 percent European.
- Serbia and Montenegro is 63 percent Serb, 14 percent Albanian, 6 percent Montenegrin, 4 percent Hungarian, and 13 percent others.
- Slovakia is 86 percent Slovak, 11 percent Hungarian, 2 percent Gypsy, 1 percent Czech, and smaller numbers of Ruthenians, Ukrainians, Germans, and Poles.

- Switzerland is 65 percent German-speaking, 18 percent French, 10 percent Italian, 1 percent Romansch, and 6 percent others.
- Trinidad and Tobago is 43 percent Black, 40 percent East Indian, 14 percent mixed, and 3 percent White, Chinese, and others.
- The United Arab Emirates is 19 percent Emiri, 23 percent other Arab and Iranian, 50 percent South Asian, and 8 percent other expatriates from the West and Asia.

In every one of these places, there are dynamics between peoples that observers would call “racial” or “ethnic.”

As one can tell from this recital, what the relevant racial and ethnic groups are — and what one may mean by such terms as “race,” “ethnicity,” or even “people” — is quite different in different places. So too, there is substantial variation in the ways that peoples relate to one another in such diverse places.

The goal of *Race and Nation* is to address such questions as these: What is the nature of ethnic systems? Are they the same things around the globe, are they distinct but related things, or are they very different things in different places? We see enough similarity to call them by common terms such as “racial” and “ethnic”; are the similarities we perceive real? If so, what are the common issues in ethnic and racial systems around the globe? And what are the sources and shapes of the differences that exist in different places?

It is fair to say, whatever the differences may be, that nearly all the parts of the world have systems of hierarchy that most observers call “racial” or “ethnic.” For example, Colombia lists its population as 58 percent Mestizo, 20 percent White, 14 percent Mulatto, 4 percent Black, 3 percent mixed Black and Indian, and 1 percent Indian. Peru reports its population as 45 percent Indian, 37 percent Mestizo, 15 percent White, and 3 percent other.³ Does it mean that in these places great care is made to note fractions of mixed ancestry? Some would say that it represents an attempt on the part of individuals to flee association with Blackness or Indianness by emphasizing that they have some European ancestry. Others would say that the ideal of a Mestizo nation is an attempt to erase the Indian element entirely. Still others that the distinctions are primarily ones of class, not of ancestry at all — that “Indians” are just poor, rural “Mestizos.”⁴

To take another example, consider Israel, where 82 percent of the population is Jewish. We all are familiar with the Jewish domination of the nearly 18 percent of the Israeli population who are ethnic Arabs. But we are probably less familiar with the complex dynamics among various groups we might call “ethnic” within the Jewish part of the population. Not only are there splits along lines of religious affiliation — secular Jews versus the ultra-orthodox, to take the two extremes — but there are also differences among Jews with respect to their origin — to simplify, those born in Israel (50 percent of the total population), immigrants who were born in Europe and the Americas (20 percent), the 7 percent who were born in North Africa, and so on. This is to say *nothing* of

divisions along class and political lines. How all those groups and identities assort themselves in the Israeli nation (or is it the Israeli community?) is an incredibly complex affair.⁵

Myanmar is another polyglot place: 68 percent ethnic Burman, 9 percent Shan, 7 percent Karen, 4 percent Rakhine, 3 percent Chinese, 2 percent Mon, and 2 percent Indian. Outsiders are generally aware of the bloody dictatorship that has run Myanmar for a couple of decades now, but few of us know much about the ethnic character of some of that oppression. Karens, particularly, have a long history of suffering at the hands of ethnic Burmans.⁶

How is one to deal with all this variety in ethnic situations and systems? Is there any way to comprehend race and ethnicity as a global phenomenon — not all around the world at once, but in its particularity in various different places? There are many studies of racial or ethnic hierarchies in individual countries, such as the United States, Britain, China, Brazil, Zambia, Indonesia, and so on.⁷ There are a few comparative studies of racial and ethnic systems in two or three places.⁸ But almost never have scholars attempted to compare racial and ethnic systems across a wide range of countries in a single study.

The main impediment, I think, has been that it has been hard to gather expertise on enough places and organize it into a single, coordinated study. There also is the very real question of comparability. How are we to know that what we are calling “racial” or “ethnic” or “people” groups in one place are the same kinds of groups as those to which we are attaching similar labels in another place? Is there a common language we can use, a common set of concepts? Then there is the matter of choosing the right size frame for studying racial and ethnic systems in various places. I say “places” to be purposely vague, but, in fact, most of the authors assembled here and I have used the nation as their frame. Why would we necessarily choose that unit of view? Is there another that might work better? Should we compare regions? What is a “region,” and how are we to make regions comparable to one another?

Our project: to write a comparative history of racial systems in the modern world

The subtitle of this book is *Ethnic Systems in the Modern World*. I am increasingly convinced that the way to write world history (at least the way that satisfies me most) is as widely comparative as practical, yet as specific as possible. Thinking of the history of the world’s peoples in an integrated fashion has been one of the most prominent growing trends of the past few decades in the historical profession. Some, like Arnold Toynbee, Will Durant, and William H. McNeill, once approached world history from the angle of one grand theory or another.⁹ More commonly in recent years, scholars like Oliver Cox, Immanuel Wallerstein, Andre Gunder Frank, and Janet Abu-Lughod have sought to understand world history primarily as a matter of large-scale economic systems.¹⁰ Some others, such as Philip Curtin, Alfred Crosby, Jerry Bentley, and John Thornton, have sought to describe specific kinds of connections between

very large regions — for instance, the slave trade or plantation economies.¹¹ Each of these approaches operates at such a very high level of abstraction, however, that it is very difficult to discern in them the lives of humans, or even the shapes of the experiences of quite large groups of people.

There are lots of theoretical studies of race and ethnicity. But, useful as they are, like the world histories of Durant and Wallerstein, most theoretical treatments seem remote from the everyday interactions of people on the ground, and so make concrete understanding of and comparisons between ethnic systems in different places impossible. This is no criticism, for that is not their purpose; they are promulgating theory.¹² Other theoretical studies, while each may be more grounded in a particular place and set of experiences, are bound to those places and do not lend themselves to cross-cultural or international comparisons.¹³ Some scholars attempt to make more universal statements about race and ethnicity based on their analysis of racial and ethnic dynamics in a particular place — usually the United States or Britain — but fail genuinely to transcend those bounds. Insofar as they do make attempts to analyze dynamics outside the United States and Britain, they, nonetheless, merely apply the phenomena and categories of analysis they see in the United States or Britain to another place, rather than actually exploring racial or ethnic dynamics there in that place's own terms.¹⁴

In the present project, we are using a group approach to scholarship in order to gain something of a worldwide comparative perspective yet not completely sacrifice detail and the stuff of human lives. In putting together this working group, I have tried to foster a sense of the specificity of experiences in each of the various places; at the same time, I have tried to gather scholars from a wide enough set of places and disciplines to make some real comparisons work. The common questions we have all attempted to address should, I hope, provide some element of glue.

There are only a few people who have attempted anything like the kind of coordinated international study of racial and ethnic dynamics that I have in mind. George Fredrickson wrote a much-respected comparison of the development of White supremacy in the histories of two places: South Africa and the United States. He mainly used secondary sources in a single language (English), although he did consult some archives and read some documents in Afrikaans. Establishing some scholarly competence on two widely disparate countries might be about as much as one could expect of a single scholar. Michael Banton and Anthony Marx both wrote about the United States, Brazil, and South Africa, although they did so from, primarily, sociological rather than historical points of view, and without much recourse to archival sources or sense of change over time. St. Clair Drake adopted a scattershot approach in *Black Folk Here and There*. His geographical and temporal range was broader than Fredrickson's, but he dealt at even greater remove than Fredrickson, Banton, and Marx from the details of scholarly investigation, and operated solely from secondary and tertiary sources.¹⁵ In the past few years, a few books have begun

to look at African-descended peoples across a number of settings with some precision of comparison. As I have suggested, in order to explore a broader geographical range with any depth of expertise, these projects bring together many scholars who are specialists on African-descended peoples in particular places. *Blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean* harnesses the talents of three dozen anthropologists. It divides the Caribbean and Latin America into four geographical zones and presents a wealth of mainly ethnographic studies of local populations in each zone. It attempts only limited historical analysis, however, and the studies do not respond to a common set of analytical issues. *The African Diaspora* is a compendium of more than thirty literary and artistic analyses, organized by theme rather than geography or genre. The closest relative to the present volume is *Crossing Boundaries: Comparative History of Black People in Diaspora*. Editors Darlene Clark Hine and Jacqueline McLeod gathered twenty historians to address the commonalities, connections, and discontinuities between the experiences of African-descended peoples in various parts of Africa and the Americas over the past three centuries.¹⁶

These three works treat only one kind of racial or ethnic dynamic — that between African-descended peoples and European-descended peoples — although they do treat that dynamic in multiple settings. There is only one writer, Philip Mason (in *Patterns of Dominance*), who so far has done what we are attempting to do in *Race and Nation, Identity and Power*: compare the dynamics of ethno-racial interaction in several societies made up of various combinations of peoples. Mason's is as magisterial and wide-ranging a synthesis of scholarship as one can imagine. It wanders across India, Europe, Rwanda, South Africa, Brazil, Spanish America, and the Caribbean. It treats not just African-descended peoples but as many of the peoples as it can in each of those places. Although *Patterns of Dominance* is long out of date, it is a daring and prodigious work of scholarship. It asks the big questions in comparative ways and with some depth in each of the places it examines.¹⁷

Now, more than thirty years later, with a new generation of scholars asking a revised set of questions based on new data that have emerged over the intervening decades, we are collectively trying to do the kind of work that only Philip Mason has been able to do in the past. *Race and Nation: Ethnic Systems in the Modern World* is an attempt at a coordinated study of ethnic and racial systems in various parts of the globe. In 1999, I began to organize an international group of scholars via the Internet to talk about comparing racial and ethnic systems. We exchanged ideas about how to frame our project and what questions to address. In 2001, a dozen scholars who know about the ethnic systems in various places came together in Cagliari, Sardinia, at the biennial meeting of the Collegium for African American Research. We presented papers at a series of interlocking workshops, listened carefully and commented on one another's ideas, and mapped out plans for the remainder of the project.

In Sardinia, each author was asked to write about the racial or ethnic system of the part of the world about which he or she was knowledgeable. Each author