

Chosen Peoples: Why Ethnic Groups Survive*

ABSTRACT

The persistence of ethnic communities is a neglected area of research. The study of *ethnies* over long time-spans requires comparison of different patterns of ethnic survival, in terms of symbols and myths of ethnic election. Such myths can be found in the ancient Near East, in Judea, Greece, Armenia, Persia, as well as Byzantium, Russia and Western Europe, mobilizing and inspiring ethnic survival. Four main patterns of ethnic survival are outlined: imperial-dynastic, communal-demonic, emigrant-colonist and diaspora-restoration. In each case, modern nationalism reinforces and politicizes the old myths of ethnic election and its forms and intensity can be explained in terms of these patterns of ethnic survival.

Why do some ethnic groups survive, and others perish? What are the factors that help to sustain ethnic communities? How far do the many national conflicts that we witness today across the globe stem from the conditions of ethnic persistence?

I need hardly say how important such questions have become in the contemporary world. The last two decades have seen a surge of ethnic sentiments and movements, first in the West and latterly in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Several states in Africa—Chad, Sudan, Ethiopia, Angola, and South Africa—are wracked by ethnic dissension. In the Middle East and Asia, the frequency and intensity of ethnic conflicts have, if anything, increased in recent years: Druse, Kurds, Azeris, Armenians, Sikhs, Tamils, Tibetans, Uigurs, Achinese, and Moro are demanding autonomy, if not outright independence; while the larger conflicts of Indo-China, India and Pakistan, and Arabs and Israelis, show little sign of abating.

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Thus it is a matter of some urgency to seek a broader understanding of the roots of ethnic conflicts and nationalist movements that threaten the peace of the world. It would be easier, and more comforting, to view these conflicts as so many symptoms of modernization, secularization, the globalization of capitalism, or the birth-pangs of a general democratization of society. In these perspectives, ethnic movements and nationalism, like neo-traditionalism, feminism and the green movements, are seen as populist and non-rational reactions to the exponential advances of technology and communications, the great shifts in population and economic power, and the general bureaucratization of social life in the modern world: so many diversions and obstacles to the great march of history.¹

Evolutionary perspectives like these, for all their lingering popularity, tend to be profoundly misleading, even dangerous. Many of the movements I have mentioned attract growing support, often from the educated classes in democratic states. All of them answer to deep-seated aspirations and needs in modern society. Above all, they draw their power from fundamental ethnic, gender, religious, and regional cleavages that modern economic and political processes often reinforce.

Here I shall concentrate on some of the underlying conditions of modern ethnic conflicts, which can, I believe, be traced to the different patterns of long-term ethnic survival across the globe. The study of ethnic survival is a subject that could absorb the labours of many scholars, singularly and together, over many years. Here I can only touch on some key issues in this vast field, with examples drawn mainly from Europe and the Middle East.

THE STUDY OF ETHNIC SURVIVAL

The terms 'ethnic' and 'ethnicity' have attracted wide-ranging debates and are used in a variety of ways. For my purposes, the study of ethnic survival, two levels of ethnicity and ethnic identity, individual and collective, must be distinguished. For the investigation of *long-term ethnic persistence*, individual sentiments and attitudes, though important, are secondary. The focus here is rather on the social and cultural properties of ethnic communities, that is, collective cultural units claiming common ancestry, shared memories and symbols, whether they constitute majorities or minorities in a given state.

For the same reason, we cannot confine our attention to rates of ethnic attrition at the level of the individual, or to processes of ethnic assimilation or resistance in modern *immigrant* societies, as much of the literature

would suggest. We need to consider persistence and change in *all* ethnic communities, or *ethnies*, over long time-spans—what the Annales school termed the *longue durée*—and in many kinds of society, pre-modern as well as modern. At any rate, that is how I propose here to approach the phenomenon of ethnic survival.²

Such a study requires an initial working definition of the object of explanation. The term 'ethnic' is generally taken to refer to *cultural* rather than biological attributes, despite the recent revival of interest in kin selection and genetic inheritance as explanations of ethnic solidarity (Van den Berghe 1978; 1979). Be that as it may, it is with cultural units wider than the family that individuals identify when they belong to, and feel solidarity with, ethnic communities. Yet the family metaphor retains its importance. When people identify with *ethnies*, they feel a sense of wider kinship with a fictive 'super-family', one that extends outwards in space and down the generations in time (Horowitz 1985, ch. 2).

Ethnies also possess common codes and shared symbols and myths of common descent from a putative ancestor. These codes, symbols and myths and the associated historical memories of common past experiences, albeit selectively remembered, are the main features of collective cultural identities in most societies; and they serve to differentiate *ethnic* from other types of human group and social bond. Belonging to an ethnic community endows members with the sense of sharing in a vastly extended 'family' which claims descent from a single, usually heroic and glorious, ancestor.³

An *ethnie* is defined, however, not only by historical memories, codes and ancestry myths, but also by its possession, or loss, of an historic territory or 'homeland'. Over the generations, the community has become identified with a particular, historic space, and the territory with a particular cultural community. The homeland need not be the cradle of the community, but it must provide the terrain, the 'soil', for its 'creative genius' at some (suitably distant) epoch in its history. The Jews traced their origins to Ur and Harran in Mesopotamia, but realized themselves in the land of Canaan. The Turks traced their forebears to Oğuz Khan in the steppes of Central Asia, but their cultures flourished in Anatolia and northwest Iran, after the conquest of the Seljuqs from the eleventh century A. D. (B. Lewis 1968, ch. 10; Kushner 1976).

We can now define an ethnic community, or *ethnie*, as a *named human group claiming a homeland and sharing myths of common ancestry, historical memories and a distinct culture*. In addition, we should normally expect an ethnic community, or segments thereof, to express sentiments of solidarity, even if only the urban classes share in the ethnic culture.⁴

'Ethnic survival', in turn, would entail the persistence over several generations of each of the attributes of ethnic communities: a collective name, a homeland, myths of common ancestry and the like. This is a fairly stringent definition of ethnic survival. It means that we cannot speak of communities like the Greeks, Chinese and Japanese surviving, simply because they may have retained their names and homelands for over two millennia. They would also have had to retain their memories, symbols, traditions and culture—everything, in fact, that made them distinctive. Given the massive changes undergone by most societies, and the vast time-spans involved, this criterion would effectively rule out most *ethnies*, quite apart from the practical problems of furnishing adequate evidence of survival in periods where records are meagre (see Armstrong 1982; Smith 1984b).

For these reasons I shall adopt a less severe test of ethnic survival. Ethnic communities can reasonably be said to have survived in something like their earlier forms, if *successive generations continue to identify with some persisting memories, symbols, myths and traditions*. In other words, ethnic survival does not require the retention of one's culture, intact; nor of one's homeland, as the Armenian and Jewish examples demonstrate; nor even of one's former religion, as the introduction of Buddhism in Japan or the Islamization of Iran suggests, *provided that the new religion enshrines the ancient symbols, memories and myths, or at least some of them*—which is what happened in Iran during the New Persian literary renaissance of the tenth and eleventh centuries A.D. (Frye 1966, ch. 6; Cambridge History of Iran 1975, IV, chs. 1, 19).

If the problem of conceptualizing 'ethnic survival' is complex, that of explaining how and why some *ethnies* survived while others were absorbed or dissolved is still more baffling. In theory, we should be able to attempt some kind of multivariate analysis of the conditions and rates of ethnic survival or dissolution, assuming always that we had clear measures of such survival. However, in practice the historical evidence is often too scanty, and the number of possible factors involved is too great, to make this a feasible project. Ethnic survival depends on a whole range of conditions from the demographic and economic to the cultural and political; while on the other side, well-documented cases of long-term ethnic survival are few. This means that we can expect only limited and uncertain results from a large outlay of time and effort. Perhaps we may be able to isolate a few very general conditions of ethnic persistence, such as the effects of organized warfare or religion. However, for such insights we hardly require statistical techniques (see Armstrong 1982, ch. 9; Smith 1988).

Perhaps this is why the historical and anthropological case-study approach has proved so attractive. Detailed studies like Braudel's of some of the conditions of French identity, Richard Frye's analyses of ancient and medieval Persia, and Salo Baron's social and religious history of the Jews, make us vividly aware of the many special circumstances that ensure or disrupt ethnic continuity. They also reveal the diverse elements that go into the making of French, Persian, Jewish, or whatever, ethnic identity over the *longue durée* (Baron 1952–76; Frye 1975; Braudel 1989).

Few of these case studies, however, directly address issues of ethnic survival. These have to be inferred from the narrative of events or from discussions of quite different issues. Nor does the analysis of a single case, however illuminating, allow one to control for particular factors or isolate those elements crucial to ethnic survival from surrounding circumstances. Only *comparisons* of different patterns of ethnic survival, on the basis of some hypotheses, can enable us to grasp some of the necessary conditions that facilitate long-term ethnic survival. It is to comparisons on the basis of one such hypothesis that I now turn.⁵

MYTHS OF ETHNIC ELECTION

It is worth recalling first the very different factors and hypotheses from which a comparative analysis of the patterns of ethnic survival can depart. The ones usually highlighted are political in nature: the degree of a community's autonomy, its political will to survive; and its leadership qualities. Sometimes analysis will focus on economic and ecological variables; the possession of specific homelands, their location, extent and population, and the presence of various material resources, facilities and skills for the support of a community. Yet another set of hypotheses treats *ethnies* as networks of communication, and seeks to ascertain how customs, language and other symbolic codes bind the members of communities together over generations (see Deutsch 1966; Krejci and Velimsky 1981).

Each of these approaches, and the hypotheses that derive from them, can make valuable contributions to the study of ethnic survival, and they merit further intensive comparative investigations. It is worth remembering, however, that ethnic communities can, and have, survived over long periods without political autonomy, without a homeland of their own, even without a common language—as the linguistic divisions in Switzerland remind us—though this is rare. In such cases, other social and psychological factors appear to compensate for these absences.

This suggests that we need to pay more attention to the subjective elements in ethnic survival, such as ethnic memories, values, symbols, myths, and traditions. The reason is that long-term ethnic survival depends, in the first place, on the active cultivation by specialists and others of a heightened sense of collective distinctiveness and mission. The members of an ethnic community must be made to feel, not only that they form a single 'super-family', but that their historic community is unique, that they possess what Max Weber called 'irreplaceable culture values', that their heritage must be preserved against inner corruption and external control, and that the community has a sacred duty to extend its culture values to outsiders. Persians, Armenians, Poles, Russians, Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, Americans, Irish, English, and French, to name but a few, have all cultivated this sense of uniqueness and mission by nurturing ethnic values and traditions, through myths of distant origins and symbols and memories of a golden age of former glory.⁶

We can go further. Myths of common ancestry and memories of a golden age may unite and inspire the members of an ethnic community over several generations. Yet what is even more important for ethnic survival is to cultivate a *myth of ethnic election*. Those communities that managed to formulate and cultivate such a belief have succeeded in prolonging the specific collective life of their members over many generations. The creation and dissemination by specialists of the belief that 'we are a "chosen people"' has been crucial for ensuring long-term ethnic survival.

A myth of ethnic election should not be equated with plain ethnocentrism. Ethnic communities have quite commonly regarded themselves as the moral centre of the universe and as far as possible affected to ignore or despise those around them. A myth of ethnic election is more demanding. To be chosen is to be placed under moral obligations. One is chosen on condition that one observes certain moral, ritual, and legal codes, and only for as long as one continues to do so. The privilege of election is accorded only to those who are sanctified, whose life-style is an expression of sacred values. The benefits of election are reserved for those who fulfil the required observances. The classical expression of such beliefs among the ancient Israelites is to be found in the book of Exodus (ch. 19):

Now therefore if ye will obey my voice indeed and keep my covenant, then shall ye be a peculiar treasure unto me from all peoples; for all the earth is mine; and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests and an holy nation (Exodus 19: 5-6; cf. Deuteronomy 7: 13 and 10: 12-22).

The covenant here refers to a code of morality, law, and ritual, set out in detail in the book of Deuteronomy, which the Israelites must observe if

they are to remain chosen and redeemed by God. Only by keeping these laws and ceremonies can the community and its members be saved.⁷

ELECTION MYTHS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND EUROPE

Even in antiquity, the Jews were by no means the only people to have believed that they were 'chosen'. Intimations of such ideas can be found over a millennium earlier in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. In the lands of Sumer and Akkad, (now southern Iraq), the scattered city-states, while prizing their independence, acknowledged their ethnic kinship, particularly in times of crisis. The kings of one or other of the city-states united the Sumerians periodically, while worship of Enlil, chief god of the Sumerian pantheon, at his shrine in Nippur, acted as a religious focus for the Sumerian city-states. During the Sumerian revival under the Third Dynasty of Ur in the late third millennium BC, a greater sense of common ethnicity found expression in nostalgia for an earlier Sumerian golden age. Yet the sense of ethnic election was muted and indirect. It was vested in the king, as Enlil's representative on earth, and it was through kingship that any covenant between the gods and the community was mediated (Kramer 1963, ch. 7; Roux 1964, ch. 10).

Ethnocentrism was more marked in ancient Egypt. The land of Ptah was compact, united and more homogeneous than the lands of Sumer and Akkad. There was greater emphasis on divine election of the 'god-king', notably in the political propaganda of New Kingdom Pharaohs like Tutmosis III, Hatshepsut and Horemhab.⁸ There was correspondingly less stress on the community's election, with or without moral conditions. At the same time, the characteristic Egyptian sense of cultural superiority to aliens, those who lived outside 'the land' (of Egypt), was accentuated after the Theban Pharaohs had driven out the Asiatic Hyksos dynasty in the sixteenth century B.C. Once again, however, the sense of election rose and fell with the monarchy and the state, though it lingered on into Hellenistic and Roman epochs.⁹

We cannot be sure, but a clear-cut theology of communal election in the ancient world seems to have originated in ancient Israel, though the forms of that relationship owed much to Near Eastern, especially Hittite, models. The central Israelite belief was that the sole God, the Lord of the universe, is working out His purpose for all His creatures, and has chosen a particular people to bring salvation to humanity. God's favour, however, is conditional on the fulfilment by the chosen of detailed moral and ritual codes. 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore

I will punish you for all your iniquities'. Amos's prophetic judgement is unequivocal.¹⁰ Later prophets, responding to the social and geopolitical position of Israel, hemmed in between Egypt and Assyria, elaborated on the moral dimensions of divine election. God's promise to Abraham that 'in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed' is transformed by the Second Isaiah into the belief that Israel, the suffering servant, is chastised in order to bring salvation to all peoples. God uses Israel's enemies, the Assyrians and Babylonians, to redeem a purified Israel and thereby the world; while the Exodus from Egypt and the Covenant at Sinai are part of God's redemptive plan for humanity as a whole.¹¹

Such a conception imposes a heavy burden on the chosen. They are continually required to live up to strict moral standards. Backslidings are liable to severe punishment. This affords great scope for prophets, judges, sages and other moral crusaders to warn their kinsmen and thereby periodically to reaffirm the distinctive qualities and unique destiny of the community. Later, this close relationship with God, with its inescapable moral demands on the community, became the social and psychological main-spring of Jewish survival in their long diaspora.¹²

Ideas of ethnic election, dynastic and communal, can be found among several other peoples of the ancient Near East. Here I can only mention a few. Among the Persians, the belief in ethnic chosenness has surfaced in various guises during their long history. The great Achaemenid kings, Cyrus and Darius, inherited the idea of the monarch's divine election from earlier empires and reserved for themselves the characteristic virtues of the Medes and Persians: truth, order and justice. Cyrus records how he 'constantly sought after order and equity for the black-headed people [of Babylon]' whom Marduk made him conquer; while Darius's rock inscriptions at Behistun emphasize the wisdom of living according to the precepts of the great Persian god, Ahura-Mazda, and dwell on the special mission of a Persian king to his many subjects (Dentan 1983: 86, 89-94).

Such themes were taken up much later by the Sassanid Persian rulers of Iran. The Zoroastrian temple religion was encouraged, and in the sixth century A.D. Chosroes I instigated a revival of old Persian symbols, myths and rituals. To this period, too, we can trace the origins of the *Book of Lords*, which recorded the exploits of the great Persian aristocratic families, chosen warriors defending Iran against the land of Tur'an. Though the Zoroastrian state religion ultimately failed to mould the Persians into a moral community, it did help to instil a sense of unique identity and destiny, which laid the basis for the New Persian cultural renaissance (Frye 1966: 239-61; Cambridge History of Iran 1983, 111/1, ch. 3B).

Much later, under the Safavid dynasty in the sixteenth century, the adoption of Islamic Shi'ite beliefs gave a new moral dimension to Persian identity. The present century has seen a fervent renewal of Shi'ite national-religious community and missionary destiny—in contrast to the abortive attempts of the Pahlavis to recreate ancient Aryan imperial traditions (Avery 1965; Keddie 1981, chs. 1-3).

Further west, a powerful myth of election emerged in the mountain kingdom of Armenia after its conversion to Orthodox Christianity by St. Gregory in A.D. 301. The Romans and Byzantines contended for several centuries with the Persian Sassanid monarchs for control of Armenia, which finally lost its chance of independence after the disastrous battle of Avarayr in A.D. 451, despite a brief revival under the Bagratids in the ninth century. In this respect, Armenia resembled the Judean kingdoms, from which its rulers and nobles claimed descent. Both stood at the strategic crossroads of warring empires, and both peoples were spurred by political adversity to form a moral community and reinterpret their historical destinies in spiritual terms. The growing theological rift with Byzantine Orthodoxy, especially after the Council of Dvin (A.D. 554), and Armenian pride in being the 'first Christian nation', cemented their belief in ethnic election and divine mission, a belief that the Armenian clergy nurtured throughout the Armenian diaspora.¹³

Yet another Christian realm whose legitimacy rested on a dynastic myth of election was the Ethiopian kingdom of Aksum and its successors. The Aksumite kings may have adopted their Monophysite form of Christianity in the fourth century from Coptic sources, but it retained many Judaic features, brought perhaps from the southern Arab kingdoms. Successive Ethiopian kingdoms on the Abyssinian plateau derived their legitimacy from the symbolism of the Lion of Judah and the claim to royal descent from Solomon and the Queen of Sheba through Menelik. In the so-called 'Solomonic' dynasty from the thirteenth century, the ruling Christian Amhara nobles began to participate in this royal myth of election, which inspired a cultural revival and mobilized the community for resistance to Muslim invaders and the Falashas.¹⁴

We need not dwell at length on the powerful myths of election that have surfaced periodically among the Arabs and their kingdoms, notably during the Islamic conquests and in the period of the Crusades. The fact that Islam, like Christianity, is a world-religion, has not prevented the emergence of narrower ethnic myths within its domain. In some ways, Islamic allegiance has added a crusading fervour. Particularly among the Arabs, it has stimulated a pride in their language, culture and achievements and

a sense of election and collective destiny that continue to exert a powerful influence on Middle Eastern politics to this day.¹⁵

Myths of election also helped to sustain ethnic communities in Europe. The ancient Greek encounter with the Persian empire had produced a heightened ethnocentrism, a sense of moral and cultural superiority to the surrounding 'barbarians', even a pan-Hellenic ideology—though, unlike the foundation myths of the Romans, it never succeeded in uniting the Greek city-states into a moral or political community. Only after the adoption of Orthodox Christianity in the Roman East, did Hellenism gradually acquire a moral dimension. The Byzantine Christian ideal was essentially dynastic and universal; yet it slowly became centred on the Greek-speaking inhabitants of an empire which by the ninth century had lost its western and eastern provinces, and which came to adopt Greek as its language of state in place of Latin and foster a classical Greek revival (Baynes and Moss 1969, ch. 1.). Much later, especially after the Crusader sack of Constantinople in A.D. 1204, a defensive Byzantine Hellenic population became even more convinced of its elective status and imperial mission—as if the destiny of the world hung on the correct liturgical observance of the only true Christian doctrine in the only genuine Christian empire (Sherrard 1959; Armstrong 1982: 178–81).

When that empire was at last extinguished in A.D. 1453, the same dream found a home further north and fed the burgeoning imperial ambitions of the Muscovite Russian state. The realm of the Russian Tsars became the sole bastion of Orthodoxy in an heretical world, the Third Rome, proclaimed by the Orthodox Russian clergy in the early sixteenth century. In the words of one of their leaders, Joseph of Volokolamsk monastery: 'In piety, the Russian land now surpasses all others'. From Ivan the Terrible on, the Tsar was elevated into a redeemer-figure, a 'father' to his chosen people in holy 'mother Russia'. By the nineteenth century, Slavophiles came to regard the Russian peasant community as the repository of truth, purity and wisdom—a religious conception that fed Tolstoyan and populist ideals and one that persists to this day in the writings of some neo-Russian nationalists.¹⁶

Similar myths can be found further west. They emerged, for example, in the Frankish kingdom in the eighth century, which the reigning Pope Paul likened to a 'new kingdom of David', occupying a place like that of the people of Israel. Similar language was used much later by Pope Boniface at the end of the thirteenth century, when he stated that '... the kingdom of France is a peculiar people chosen by the Lord to carry out the orders of heaven'—a status and mission that Joan of Arc, and many French leaders after her, have fought to retain and execute.¹⁷

Similar beliefs could be found in contemporary Scotland, in the language of the Declaration of Arbroath of 1320, in the growing sense of Swiss Confederation from 1291, among the defeated Welsh and Irish, in Hussite Bohemia, in Elizabethan England, in Calvinist Holland and, across the ocean, in the American colonies and Catholic Mexico.¹⁸

In all these instances, myths of ethnic election have helped to mobilize communities and ensure their survival over long periods. Because the ethnic myth is a dramatic tale that links the present with a communal past, and one that is widely believed, it helps to draw the members into a distinctive community, conferring on them a special aura, that of 'the elect'. Through its symbolism, it strives to unify different classes and regions, spreading ethnic culture outwards from the urban centres and the specialist strata, who guard the traditions, thereby creating a more participant society (Kirk 1973; cf. Tudor 1972 and Thompson 1985).

Myths of ethnic election may also strengthen a community's attachment to its historic territory. By regarding the homeland as God-given, it ties the elect to a particular terrain. Only the sacred land and the sanctified soil are fit for the elect, and they can only be redeemed in the land where their fathers and mothers lived, their heroes fought and their saints prayed. To be worthy of forefathers who laid down their lives in these holy mountains and by the banks of these sacred rivers, must we not return to the ancient virtues and forsaken ways? The Swiss, who recall the heroism of Sempach and Morgarten, who extol the shining purity of the Jungfrau, who to this day re-enact the drama of William Tell, have they not converted an egalitarian myth of chosenness into the basis of their state and society, the condition of their continued freedom and prosperity? (Kohn 1957; Thüer 1970).

Finally, myths of ethnic election can incite a community to expansion and war. The conviction of possessing the only true faith, and a higher morality and civilization, has inspired and justified many a missionary movement and imperialist drive to those who 'live in darkness'—be it medieval Armenians seeking converts in the Caucasus, Arabs engaged in righteous *jihad*, or Western nations imposing white 'civilization' on Asians and Africans.¹⁹

PATTERNS OF ETHNIC SURVIVAL

In pre-modern eras, myths of ethnic chosenness spread to most areas of the world: to the Americas, Southern Asia, the Far East and Africa, as

well as to Europe and the Middle East. Yet the belief in ethnic election has operated in different ways. Here I shall briefly distinguish four patterns of ethnic persistence and four ways in which myths of election help to sustain ethnic communities.

1. I call the first pattern *imperial-dynastic*. The myth of election is attached to the ruling house and dynasty, from which the community tends to take its main symbols and culture, and with which it is always associated. Thus, the Norman myths, within Normandy, were elaborated by clerics and chroniclers around the exploits of the ruling dukes from Rollo in A.D. 913 onwards. The chroniclers assumed that the Norman community shared in the special status and glory of its ruling house as a *regnum*, a kingdom of common customs and descent (Davis 1976; cf. Reynolds 1984, ch. 8).

This conjunction of dynasty, land and people was repeated on a grander scale in the later Western kingdoms of France, England and Spain. In all three, myths of election centred on the ruling house, with coronation and anointing ceremonies underlining the semi-divine status of the monarch. Over the centuries the kingdom and its people came to share in this elective status, as John of Gaunt's eulogy of England, 'This other Eden, demi-paradise', reminds us; until the point where the people themselves become the elect as citizens of a modern nation.²⁰ Poland illustrates clearly this process of transfer. In the medieval and Renaissance periods, the Polish myth of election was attached to the kingdom and its Catholic rulers. With the decline of the dynasty and the dissolution of the state in the late-eighteenth century, the people gradually became the focus of collective redemption. Sections of the nineteenth-century Polish intelligentsia, notably the great poet Adam Mickiewicz, interpreted Poland's role as that of a 'suffering Christ' among the nations, soon to rise again—while the Polish Catholic Church remained sufficiently close to the people to furnish an ethnic resource into this century. So, Poland avoided the fate of those aristocratic *ethnies*, where royal defeat and destruction of the state entailed the demise of the community itself, as occurred in Burgundy or ancient Assyria; instead, Poland was transformed after 1918 into a citizen-nation (Halecki 1955; Davies 1982).

2. A second pattern of ethnic survival, the *communal-demotic*, attaches the myth directly to the people in their sacred land. In these cases the community has usually been conquered and is struggling to preserve its former rights and way of life, claiming that its members are the original inhabitants and their culture is the vernacular. That was the claim of Celtic communities in Wales and Ireland. The Welsh myth of election pictured the community as the lost tribes of Israel, a latterday chosen people, whose

original form of Christianity had been transplanted to ancient Britain by Joseph of Aramathea. Together with the Welsh language, folk poetry and the medieval bardic contests, these beliefs helped to nurture a sense of unique Welsh identity, especially after the English conquest and the incorporation of Wales.²¹

Ireland exhibited a similar mixture of pagan and Christian motifs in its election myths. The Irish 'golden age' was variously located in the pagan Celtic era of the High Kings of Tara, and the heroes of the Ulster cycle of ancient sagas; or in the great epoch of Irish monastic learning, art and missionary activity after St. Patrick's conversion of Ireland in the fifth century. The latter period, especially, furnished rich materials for later Irish myths of election, as literary scholars, archaeologists and poets in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries envisaged the national restoration of an original Irish community in its *insula sacra*, its sacred island home (Sheehy 1980; Hutchinson 1987).

3. The third pattern is that of the *emigrant-colonist*. Again the myth is attached to the people; but this time to a people on the move. They have left or fled their old homelands and are bent on building new communities in new homelands, often with little regard for the indigenous inhabitants. The elect are the immigrants and their descendants. Theirs is a settler community and mission. They carry with them their values, memories and traditions, regarding themselves as chosen by God for a providential destiny that will abolish the old order and inaugurate a new society.

The prototype here is the biblical exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt across the Red Sea. It has served as a model of their destiny for Anglo-Saxon tribes crossing the Channel into Britain, after the Roman legions had been withdrawn, the land of milk and honey being replaced by England's green and pleasant land (Howe 1989). Many centuries later another crossing, this time of an ocean by the Pilgrim Fathers fleeing religious oppression, became part of the foundation charter of the new American homeland, with its promise of freedom in a new Jerusalem.²²

4. A final pattern, that of *diaspora-restoration*, also attached the myth of election to a community on the move; only this time it was to one moving in a reverse direction, back to the old homeland. The return of the community to its ancestral home from which it had been exiled became the precondition of collective redemption. Zionism is the classic instance, with its secular fulfilment of ancient Jewish religious aspirations. Yet we meet the same pattern among Armenians yearning to return to Mount Ararat, among eighteenth-century diaspora Greeks longing for a

restoration of Hellas, among Liberians, and other Black Americans intent on returning to Africa, and latterly among some communities deported by Stalin to distant parts of the Soviet Union. In each of these cases, as the great Greek educator, Adamantios Korais, so clearly realized, the restoration of a diaspora to its ancestral home involved not merely the physical return of a people, but also its spiritual regeneration through education and political mobilization.²³

These four patterns of ethnic persistence and renewal do not pretend to be exhaustive. However, they reveal the importance of beliefs in chosenness for ethnic survival. They also show the different ways in which such beliefs operate. Sometimes they fuel expansion, sometimes popular revolt, at still other times mass migration and movements of restoration. They also expose the community to different risks: the ossification of the ethnic community through overdependence on the state, popular instability and extremism, dissipation of communal energy through schism or assimilation. These dangers are familiar to ethnic leaders. In each generation priests, scribes, prophets, bards, mandarins; even nobles, have warned the people of these dangers, and by prescribing remedies for communal ills have actively cultivated the sense of ethnic identity and destiny.

Each of these patterns also reveals certain key factors in ethnic survival. *Warfare* and a warrior ethos are generally prominent in the dynastic-imperial pattern. The elect consist of righteous warriors under their redeemer-princes and faithful caliphs, and ethnic chosenness is borne on the spears and shields of missionary knights such as the Hungarian or Catalan nobility. As with the battles of the ancient Israelites against the Philistines, memories of victory and defeat became incorporated into the sacred history of a chosen people and its warrior-deity.²⁴

Popular revolt stands at the heart of the communal-demotic pattern. There is no simple fate of passive endurance, but rather the ideal of a purified people, mobilized in defence of its heritage. Vernacular mobilization is the leitmotif of survival among Irish and Basques, Czechs and Georgians, Kurds and Sikhs, and many more communities that have drawn on their native languages, traditions, symbols and memories for comfort and inspiration (Anderson 1983, ch. 5; cf. Pech 1976; Smith 1989).

Wandering has become the dominant theme of both emigrant and diaspora patterns. For the first, it is a migration to the promised land, with a providential destiny that excludes indigenous peoples and slaves. For the diaspora type, long exile evokes a fervent nostalgia, an ardent desire to recover an original home exclusive to the chosen community.²⁵

FROM ETHNIC SURVIVAL TO NATIONAL LIBERATION

Even such a brief survey as this reveals how widespread has been the sense of ethnic identity as a source of social and political solidarity throughout recorded history. Particular ethnic communities may have formed and dissolved over the centuries, but ethnicity has been a recurrent feature of culture and social organization in every continent in pre-modern epochs. So, how have ethnic communities fared in the modern world, and what role do myths of ethnic election play today?

It is tempting to think that, in a secular era of rationality and materialism, such myths, like ethnicity itself, are outmoded and irrelevant. Such a view would be misleading and singularly myopic. Not only does traditional religion continue to play a major part in the lives of many people in the contemporary world; ethnic attachments remain as potent today as at any period in the past, and are, if anything, becoming more widespread and intense.

Yet what of the earlier myths of chosenness? Are they not now at best instruments of mobilization, cynical political devices by which a Nasser or Nkrumah, a Gandhi or de Gaulle, can manipulate mass emotions for partisan political ends? There lies the rub. It is no accident that the names of these charismatic figures conjure up images of nationalism in their respective countries. For in the language and symbolism of modern nationalism we find the contemporary equivalent of the old beliefs in ethnic election.

Nationalism may be defined as a *doctrine of autonomy, unity and identity for a group whose members conceive it to be an actual or potential nation*. Through its symbols and ceremonies, it legitimates the unique cultures and diverse experiences of each ethnic community and makes them the measure of political life. For nationalists, the nation is a *body of citizens bound by shared memories and a common culture, occupying a compact territory with a unified economy and identical rights and duties*. In nationalist mythology, each nation has a distinctive past and unique destiny, answering to its 'true nature'. The patriot's sacred duty is to recover the nation's authentic past and repossess its homeland. That is the only way to rediscover 'our' inner freedoms and realize our 'true selves' (Smith 1971/83, ch. 7; 1973; Connor 1978).

The twofold influence of Rousseau and Herder, the return to untrammelled nature and the rediscovery of authentic history, is evident here. So too is the continuity with pre-modern myths of ethnic election. Nationalism has secularized and universalized the old religious beliefs in chosen peoples. Thus, in olden times, the Hellenic community was chosen by God

as the vessel and vehicle of true Christian Orthodoxy under its priest-king in Constantinople. Today the Greeks can see themselves as a beacon of liberty and reason, the *fons et origo* of Western civilization, and the original home of democracy. That is why their unique culture values have to be preserved, and why the language and culture of Sophocles and Plato must be cultivated in the hearts and minds of successive generations of Greeks.²⁶

Myths of ethnic chosenness not only underpin peoples and cultures; they also provide charters and title-deeds of sacred homelands. So, where there is more than one title-deed to the same territory, the probability of ethnic conflicts and nationalist wars is greatly increased. The closer the association between unique people and historic homeland, the more exclusive becomes the nationalism of embattled communities, whether in the Balkans or the Middle East, India or the Caucasus. Economic grievances and state interference may exacerbate such antagonisms, but the roots of conflict must be sought in the underlying patterns of long-term ethnic survival in particular areas and in their sustaining myths of election. If all are chosen, what chance compromise, what price peace? Even a cursory glance at the modern world reveals the continuing power of these ethnic beliefs. Imperial national states were fortified in their sense of invincible superiority by modern nationalism, and we were soon treated to the unedifying spectacle of national imperialisms claiming the right to civilize so-called 'primitive peoples'. For the many subordinated popular *ethnies*, nationalism has offered a political panacea. From the Bretons and Finns to the Kurds and Somalis, it has sought to revitalize their myths, politicize their vernacular cultures, mobilize their peoples and turn them into political actors. Even in immigrant and diaspora societies, nationalism has reinforced old myths of chosenness and given them new political meanings (Smith 1991, ch. 6).

CONCLUSION

In this way nationalism, though a modern and initially secular ideology, has breathed new life into ancient myths and old beliefs. It has strengthened existing myths of ethnic chosenness and kindled new ones wherever ethnic groups have begun to crystallize and demand recognition. We do not have to look to the consequences of industrialization, the inequalities of capitalism or the cold oppression of bureaucracy, nor even to the hopes of democracy, important though these may often be, to explain why ethnic antagonisms are so intense and nationalist conflicts so frequent.

Whether in Spain or Sri Lanka, the Horn of Africa or the Caucasus, the Baltic states or Kurdistan, the forms and intensity of these struggles derive in large part from the history of ethnic relations in each of these areas, and from the underlying patterns of ethnic survival and belief that I have attempted to trace.

To grasp the forms and intensity of these conflicts, we need knowledge and understanding of each community's *ethno-history*, the shared memories and beliefs of the members of particular *ethnies*, and of the cultural activity of the community's intelligentsia. Most of all, we need to explore the continuing impact of ethnic myths, symbols and traditions in popular consciousness, and the way they continue to condition attitudes and behaviour to immigrants, minorities and outsiders, even in the most apparently rationalist and pragmatic societies.

The study of ethnic survival and its beliefs is a vast and relatively virgin terrain for research. I have only touched on one corner of this terrain, and have explored briefly only one of several necessary conditions of ethnic survival. Research in this field is essential if we are to begin to understand, and so perhaps to ameliorate, the many social and political problems in this area. For to imagine that we can address such deep-rooted problems by often *ad hoc* economic or political means is to ignore at our peril the underlying conditions of such conflicts.

By the same token, to imagine that nationalism's day is drawing to its end is to close our eyes to the continuing impact of older ethnic structures and beliefs, which modern nationalism has revitalized and which contemporary global forces are actually spreading and recycling (Hobsbawm 1990, ch. 6; cf. Smith 1990).

Since the roots of modern nations and nationalism lie so deep in the history of chosen peoples, it is premature to invoke the owl of Minerva, even in the West. When the prospect of European unification is invoked to suggest the imminent supersession of nationalism, we should recall the tale of Samson, whose strength ebbed when his hair was shorn, only to return in greater force when it grew again. Let us hope that we shall show more understanding and greater foresight than the Philistines.

Notes

1. For an attempt to locate several of these movements in an action and meaning frame of reference in the Western world, see Melucci (1989).

2. For an original analysis of the large literature on the chances of ethnic survival of immigrant white ethnics in the United States, see Gans (1979).
3. For the importance of ancestry myths, see Schermerhorn (1970). For the difficulties of delimiting *ethnicities* from other collective identities such as religion and class, see Armstrong (1982), to whose pioneering work in this field I am much indebted.
4. For a fuller discussion of the features of *ethnicities*, see Smith (1986, ch. 2); for the term *ethnicities*, see Heraud (1963).
5. I know of no attempt to address this issue in *comparative* terms, except Armstrong (1982). For some comparative analyses of 'nation-formation', see Bendix (1964), Deutsch (1966), and Seton-Watson (1977).
6. For Weber's phrase, see Weber (1978, III, ch. 3, p. 926). For the Swiss case, see Steinberg (1976). For a discussion of myths of the 'golden age', see Smith (1984a).
7. This is the burden of the priestly book of Deuteronomy, especially chapter 30; see Seltzer (1980, I, ch. 2).
8. On this royal propaganda, see Van Seters (1983, ch. 5, esp. pp. 172-81), who quotes Hatshepsut's cliff temple inscription in Middle Egypt: 'I have raised up that which had gone to pieces formerly, since the Asiatics were in the midst of Avaris in the Northland. They ruled without Re...' (p. 174).
9. For the expulsion of the Hyksos from Egypt c. 1580 B.C., see Trigger *et al.* (1983, pp. 149-60; 173-4). For a comparison with Mesopotamian conceptions of divine kingship, see Frankfort (1948, pp. 5-12; 299-312).
10. Amos 3:2; but cf. the more 'universalistic' outlook at Amos 9:7, which likens Israel to the Ethiopians, Philistines and Syrians in God's eyes; cf. also Hosea 11:1, for the idea of Israel as God's child.
11. See, for example, Isaiah 41:8-10; 43:1-21; 49:14-18; also Jeremiah 2:1-3; 4:1-4; and 31 *passim*; Hosea 11:13-14. See on this Zeitlin (1984, chs. 7-8).
12. See the classic study of Jewish messianism by Klausner (1956); cf. R. J. Werblowski: 'Messianism in Jewish history', in Ben-Sasson and Ettinger (1971, pp. 30-45), and Yerushalmi (1983).
13. For the early history of Christian Armenia, see Lang (1980, chs. 7-8); for the Jewish links, see Armstrong (1982, ch. 7). For the evolution of Armenian Christianity, see Atiya (1968, pp. 315-28).
14. On the Solomonic tradition in the *Kebrä Nagast* ('Glory of the Kings'), the Ethiopian national epic, see Edward Ullendorff: 'The Queen of Sheba in Ethiopian tradition', in James B. Pritchard (1974; pp. 104-14); and cf. Ullendorff (1968) for more details, and Kessler (1985) for the Falashas and Jewish elements in Ethiopian Christianity.
15. On these Arab dimensions of Islam, see Carmichael (1967) and B. Lewis (1970). For the modern period, see Sharabi (1970); for medieval Islamic identities, see Armstrong (1982, ch. 3).
16. For the medieval Russian beliefs, see M. Cherniavsky: 'Russia', in Ranum (1975; pp. 18-43), and Pipes (1977, ch. 9). For nineteenth-century Slavophile ideals, see Thaden (1964); for recent neo-Russian expressions among the Orthodox

- and the nationalists, including *Pamyat* and *Veche*, see Dimitry Pospelovsky: 'The "Russian Orientation" and the Orthodox Church: from the early Slavophiles to the "Neo-Slavophiles" in the USSR', in Ramet (1989, pp. 81-108).
17. See Armstrong (1982, pp. 152-9) and Bloch (1961, II, pp. 431-7). For St. Joan, see Warner (1983). For a recent critical analysis of French myths of election, in Third Republic (and later) history texts, see Citron (1988).
 18. For the text and background of the Declaration of Arbroath, see Duncan (1970); for the Swiss beliefs, see Kohn (1957). For a more general discussion, see Smith (1984a).
 19. For a clear example of western cultural imperialism, that of the French in West Africa, see Lewis (1965). For a similar, if more aloof, imperialism in China, see Dikötter (1990).
 20. For French myths of dynastic election, see Kantorowicz (1951) and Armstrong (1982, pp. 152-9). For English-British myths, see Kohn (1940), MacDougall (1982) and Mason (1985).
 21. For Welsh myths, see Williams (1985) and P. Morgan: 'From a death to a view: the hunt for the Welsh past in the romantic period', in Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983).
 22. See Tuveson (1968) and O'Brien (1988) for American puritan providentialism. We meet the same sentiments in early settlement Australia, which 'is truly a land flowing with milk and honey', according to Barron Field's *Geographical Memoirs* of 1825 (cited in Smith 1960, p. 185).
 23. See the analysis of Korais in Kedourie (1971, Introduction). For the birth of Zionism, see Vital (1975); for Armenian diaspora nationalism, see Nalbandian (1963) and Walker (1980); for back-to-Africa movements, including Garveyism, among American Blacks, see Draper (1970).
 24. For Christian and Muslim warrior myths, see Armstrong (1982, ch. 3); for Israelite beliefs, see M. Weinfeld, 'Divine intervention in war in ancient Israel and in the ancient Near East', in Tadmor and Weinfeld (1986; pp. 121-7); more generally, see Smith (1981).
 25. For such immigrant nationalisms, see Seton-Watson (1977, ch. 5); and compare the contemporary protests of Aborigines, American Indians and Mohawks.
 26. For Rousseau's influence, see Cohler (1970); and for that of Herder, Berlin (1976). For modern Greek myths, see Kitromilides (1979) and Carras (1983).

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