

Globalization, Heterogeneity and the Making of National Culture: Cultural Complexity in Northern Belize, Central America

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Abstract:

Using the strength of anthropological inquiry and of historical research I will explore the complexity of cultural and social processes in a regional setting in Northern Belize which includes both a small town and its rural surroundings.

Belize as a whole, independent from Britain only since 1981, is characterized today by a culturally and racially pluralistic society, a liberal-democratic political system, and an increasingly pervasive influence of the United States. These features can be attributed to the following historical processes:

1. the colonial past - Spanish and British - accounts for its culturally heterogeneous population composed of various ethnic groups which contribute to highly complex cultural processes and patterns of social, economic and political interaction;
2. the postcolonial situation is that of a nation in 'the making' engaged in the 'nationalization of culture', absorbing in this process both elements from local 'folk' cultures and from the transnational cultural apparatus;
3. the country's particular insertion into the world economy and politics is that of a Third World country, depending heavily on the United States and being exposed to the effects of an increasing globalization (e.g. transnational migration, presence of foreign media and tourism).

Both the official nationalism and most of recent scholarly assessments of the issue invoke the model of cultural pluralism that acknowledges the value of the diverse cultural heritages that constitute Belize. However, the recent economic recession and problems related to migration - Belizeans seeking labor opportunities in the United States and the influx of people from neighboring Central American countries - seem to endanger the peaceful living together of different racial-ethnic categories. My central aim is to analyze the status of the different interest groups involved in these processes and to account for their capacity to 'live with difference' (STUART HALL). By looking at how 'real people do real things', I expect to be able to account for the complex interplay between local, national and global contexts in shaping present-day social and cultural processes in Belize and also for the contributions of these contexts to the making of Belizean national identity and national culture.

This general aim builds on answers to the following still preliminary list of questions: (1) What characterizes past, present and future relationships among people of different ethnic categories? What is the role of authority relations (domination) and nominal and virtual dimensions of ethnic (and other social) identities? Will the cultural and political apparatus promoted by the new state emphasize or de-emphasize ethnic boundaries, ethnic conflicts, and social unrest? And in what particular contexts? (2) What are the patterns of accommodation, reorganization and recycling in the production of old and new forms of identification? What is the status of the local and the global in the making of national culture in terms of autonomy and dependency? What are the different interest groups involved in this process and what are their claims at stake? (3) How do recent transformations manifest themselves in cultural praxis? What is their impact on the ongoing handling of meanings and meaningful forms by a variety of actors and in different social organizational frameworks?

The recent growth of intolerance, the rise of fundamentalism, the turmoil over ethnic diversity in Third World and in Western countries - related to a great extent to the more or less violent redefinition of the status of the nation-state in a global context - is evidence for our constant grapple with an understanding of such forces on the empirical and conceptual levels and invites to explore both the nature and causes of these forces. It is on this background that the proposed case study, adopting a local (microscopic) perspective on nation-building, ethnic relations and the production of national culture in Belize, wants to add to our understanding of the complexity of present-day social and cultural processes under the conditions of globalization and will contribute towards the elaboration of anthropological frameworks which relate the global, the national and the local aspects of cultural processes in a comprehensive way. Moreover, the study wants to contribute to the scholarly understanding of Belizean culture and society and seeks, through exchange and collaboration, to make this knowledge available to Belizeans themselves.