

**Jack D. ELLER, *From Culture, to Ethnicity, to Conflict: An Anthropological Perspective on International Ethnic Conflicts***; Ann Arbor, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 1999, 368 pp, ISBN 0-472-08538-7

**Book Review by Patty Zakaria\***

In *“From Culture, to Ethnicity, to Conflict: An Anthropological Perspective on International Ethnic Conflicts”*, Jack D. Eller explores the violent Sri Lankan, Kurdish, Rwandan and Burundian, and Bosnian ethnic conflicts and to a lesser degree of violence the Quebec conflict through comprehensive case study analysis, where Eller attempts to explore the nature of ethnicity and its development. Throughout the book Eller seeks to develop an understanding of ethnicity and the role ethnicity plays in violent conflict by asserting that scholars have misunderstood ethnicity and the role it plays in conflict, thus Eller seeks to correct this misunderstanding in the literature. Eller analyzes culture and the corresponding conflicts that followed from culture, where Eller argued that ethnicity is a product of tradition, value system, and history as well as of contemporary circumstances and interest in society. In that light, Eller’s purpose is to illustrate that ethnic groups are not fighting about culture, rather with culture itself, where culture is used as a tool in conflict. Eller attempts to illustrate that culture is transformed into ethnicity, and in turn ethnicity is transformed into conflict as the title of the book suggests, in that end Eller suggests that ethnicity does not necessarily lead to conflict in society; rather in certain situations conflict occurs out of ethnicity. Eller clarifies that ethnicity is an indefinable term because each ethnic group

around the world is defined with different factors, where several factors are used by a particular society to create a critical division between them and the others. Eller points out that several scholars view ethnicity in terms of religious differences such as the case of Northern Ireland and in terms of linguistic differences, such as the case of Quebec; however, Eller argues that this is not a sufficient condition for ethnic identity. From this perspective, Eller is arguing that differences in society are not a necessary sufficient condition for the creation of an ethnic identity, rather Eller argues that human intervention, passions, state’s public policies, and modernity are the necessary conditions for the creation of ethnic identity. Eller’s notion of ethnicity can best be seen in the Quebec case, with the Quiet Revolution in the 1970s, where the Quebecois ethnic identity began to take shape as result of urbanization and modernity in the province.

Moving on from ethnicity, Eller examines nationalism, where Eller draws a conclusion that nationalism occurs among an ethnic group when they begin to believe that a nation is essential and a reality, in turn leading people to start assembling their ethnic identity and shared historical experiences in national terms. From this perspective, nationalism transforms a submissive group into an ethno political group. This was evident with the first ‘intifada’ where Palestinians were a non-nationalistic ethnic

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group, however, as a result of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and the occupation of the West Bank as well as Gaza Strip, many Palestinians and most noteworthy Yasser Arafat had turned passive categories of the Palestinian culture traits into an active ethno political force in the region. On the whole, cultural traits transform into ethnicity when a group begins to acknowledge differences between and others as well as employ it in a specific way; in turn ethnicity is transformed into nationalism when an ethnic group begins to mobilize behind the idea of a nation; thereby, becoming a nationalistic group. Only with the idea of a nation, Eller argues that a group moves towards becoming nationalistic group. In addition, Eller puts forward the idea that nationalism is not a constant entity in society, rather nationalism changes with time and circumstances as well as changes in ethnicity itself. This perspective about nationalism is most evident in the Quebec conflict in Canada, where the French-Canadian nationalism in post-WWII was based on provincial autonomy from the federal government; however, with the forces of modernization, urbanization, and industrialization French nationalism flourishes, where Francophone's no longer view themselves as French-Canadian, but rather as Quebecois, in order to identify themselves with the provinces of Quebec, instead of identifying with Canada and the pan-Canadian francophone diasporas. This is very interesting and significant point that Eller illustrates in the book because nationalism changes as the identity and the needs of the ethnic group change in

accordance with the current political, social, and economic conditions. On the other hand the book has overlooked the fact that some nationalistic ethnic groups may only seek to end injustice inflicted upon them by their counterparts in society, as opposed to establishing their own independent state.

*From Culture, to Ethnicity, to Conflict: An Anthropological Perspective on International Ethnic Conflicts*, Eller illustrates that the characteristics used to define ethnicity cannot be freely applied to all groups since group perception of what their ethnicity encompasses vary significantly. Further, Eller points out that once a group becomes self-conscious of their difference within society, this realization leads to the initiation of group mobilization, from this viewpoint a group is then considered a nationalistic group as opposed to a mere ethnic group within society. This was evident in Sri Lanka when both the Sinhalese and the Tamils were aware of their differences and had established their own nationalistic group, wherein each nationalistic group seeks to control the island. Taken as a whole, Eller's *From Culture, to Ethnicity, to Conflict: An Anthropological Perspective on International Ethnic Conflicts*, offers an insightful and extensive understanding of ethnicity and conflict, by arguing that ethnicity and conflict have developed out of modern social condition and circumstances, as opposed to primordial dynamics. The move away from primordial understanding sheds light into why once dormant groups become politically active as in the cases presented by Eller.