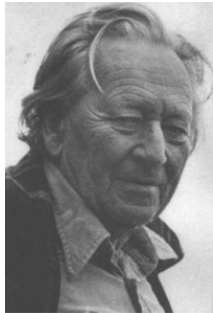


# BATESON AND THE NORTH SEA ETHNICITY PARADIGM

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Early beta version prepared for the non-AAA Bateson symposium at Berkeley, 19 November 2004. The American Anthropological Association meeting scheduled to take place in San Francisco at that time was cancelled due to a major hotel strike. Some of the panels, including ours, decided to go ahead anyway, find accommodation in hotels which were not affected by the strike, and book a seminar room at Berkeley. Thanks to everybody, and especially the Bateson family, for making the event possible! A later version of this article was published in *Ethnologie Française*.

The influence of Gregory Bateson's thinking on Scandinavian anthropology has been very considerable. Social anthropology in Denmark, Sweden and Norway attracts many hundred new students every year and is highly visible in the public sphere, especially in Norway. Since the 1970s, all of them have been exposed to at least two or three of Bateson's central articles, and many have drawn on some of his ideas in their own work — the concept of recursive systems, so brilliantly developed in Peter Harries-Jones' monograph about Bateson's ecological thinking; the idea of schismogenesis; the systemic analysis of dependence and autonomy; double-bind to be certain, and more recently, the Jungian *pleroma*—*creatura* distinction. Norwegian anthropologists who have received decisive influences from Bateson work in as diverse areas as the anthropology of work and organisations, migration and minority issues, Russian and American concepts of personhood, family counseling, and the whaling controversy.

The affinity of Scandinavian anthropologists with Batesonian ideas may partly be explained through a shared concern with ecological questions and (what is

now known as) sustainability. However, Bateson's impact has not been most pronounced in the realm of ecological anthropology strictly speaking, but in the unlikely field of ethnicity research. Bateson's impact on what I propose to call the North Sea ethnicity paradigm has nonetheless only partly been acknowledged explicitly. What I propose to do in this brief presentation is to unpack and demonstrate the importance of Bateson's system theory for a school of research which has been decisive for later developments in European and possibly global studies of ethnic relations.

In order to do this properly, it is necessary to abandon conventional national and regional classifications of research schools. The three Scandinavian countries, and Finland could also be included, have distinct academic histories, and sociocultural anthropology has slightly different priorities and identities in each country: Contemporary Swedish anthropology grew out of global explorations, European ethnology and more recent Anglo-American influences; Danish anthropology has a strong historical connection to ethnographic studies of Greenland and has been equally shaped by American and British anthropology; while Finnish anthropology has a dual, recent heritage in sociology and ethnology. The main current of Norwegian anthropology, by contrast, has since the late 1950s virtually been a branch of British social anthropology. Most Norwegian anthropologists can be considered matrilineal nephews and nieces of British social anthropologists anyway, with Fredrik Barth playing the part of the mother's brother.

The school of ethnicity research to be considered here, although it is often identified with Barth during his Bergen years (1960–1974), definitely forms part of what we might call a North Sea anthropology. Its defining traits are the prevalence of social over cultural phenomena, an emphasis on politics and issues concerning social integration and the tension between agency and

structure. These were some of the main concerns of British anthropologists like Evans-Pritchard, Gluckman, Firth and Leach, and in its anti-structural functionalist Norwegian version, taught in a diluted version to students even today, agency was given priority over structure, change over stability.

A major theoretical breakthrough of this school, consisting of little more than a handful of adepts in the mid-1960s, was the development of a new, systemic and relational approach to the study of ethnic relations. I have earlier argued that there is an unacknowledged and probably unconscious structuralist influence on this model of ethnicity; with Batesonian systemic thinking, the situation is the opposite: it was only after the theory had been developed in its first and classic incarnation that its main proponents discovered the convergence with Bateson's thought, began to quote him and use him in their teaching.

The North Sea perspective on ethnicity is usually associated with Barth's (1969) introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, a book which radically questioned assumptions about ethnicity which had formerly been widespread. Barth and his associates rejected explanations which had cultural differences at their core, and concentrated instead on the social boundaries that kept ethnic groups apart. Instead of cultural differences as such, it was the *social communication of cultural differences* that was the basic fact of ethnicity. Ethnicity was thus re-conceptualised as relational. Moreover, this group of researchers were keenly interested in the ways the content of an ethnic relation, and its social relevance, shifted with changing circumstances. Ethnicity was thus also seen as situational. Although an ethnic identity had an imperative aspect, its practical social significance was open to, as Barth had it, situational manipulation; in the words of others, the dynamics of the overall social system.

Barth's Introduction was in part a powerful text, and it has been extremely influential. However, a look at the intellectual ecology in which it was developed indicates that it was deeply influenced by his colleague Harald Eidheim's research on Norwegian-Sami ethnicity, and I now turn to an examination of Eidheim's work — quantitatively modest, largely forgotten in the English-speaking world, but fundamental for later developments in Norwegian research on ethnicity, be it studies of indigenous peoples such as the Sami in the Scandinavian north, relationships between Norwegians and immigrants, or plural societies elsewhere. His work also resonates with Bateson's thinking in important ways.

*Aspects of the Lappish Minority Situation*, a slim book consisting of five short articles, was published in 1971. This work was based on long-term fieldwork in Sami areas from the late 1950s to the early 1960s, but not in the core areas of inland Finnmark, where Sami identity was unquestioned and linked with reindeer herding, transhumance, language and cultural notions and practices which clearly set them apart from ethnic Scandinavians. Instead, he worked in a area where Sami identity was marginal and precarious, where local Sami were always bilingual and sometimes even monolingual in Norwegian, where there had been a considerable degree of what we would today call cultural hybridisation, and where there were few visible markers of Saminess. Many, perhaps most North Norwegian have a mixed ancestry, although it has until recently been common, among the majority, to undercommunicate their partial Sami origins.

The articles, which had previously been published in journals and anthologies during the 1960s, looked at political entrepreneurship, practices of a symbiotic kind between Norwegians and Sami, and ways in which ethnic distinctiveness was being communicated. In the last two of these articles,

Eidheim began to develop what would later become his semiotic perspective on ethnic relations. 'When ethnic identity is a social stigma' describes the hierarchically defined processes of signification whereby ethnic identity was conferred on self and others in an ethnically mixed community, while 'Assimilation, ethnic incorporation and the problem of identity management' distinguished between different kinds of signification engaged in by Sami in order to position themselves vis-à-vis ethnic Norwegians.

It should be pointed out that the influence from Bateson was not visible at this stage. Eidheim's sources of inspiration were, in the 1960s, ecological models, transactionalism and Goffman's sociology on roles and role management. At the time he wrote the articles about stigma and ethnic incorporation, he had begun to develop these strands of inspiration into an ecological semiotics. He began to see interethnic relations as a kind of ecological system where selective pressures and the dynamics of interaction led to a great deal of flexibility and situational shifts in the expression and importance of ethnic identity, where vacant 'ecological niches' could be occupied by political entrepreneurs and so on.

Before the publication of *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, published a year after *Aspects*, Eidheim had read *Naven*, a book he found it difficult to make sense of, and some of Bateson's work in psychiatry and communication. It was nevertheless only with the publication of *Steps* that Eidheim recognised the affinities between his and Bateson's thinking. Some of the things they had in common were the emphasis on relationship, the willingness to apply analogies from ecological thinking on communication, a concern with feedback loops and, later, negative feedback; and an interest in the relationships between form and substance, process and structure. Both also wrote in a very economic style, sometimes frustratingly economic.

As a teacher in later years, Eidheim never ceased pointing out that ethnicity could only exist as a relationship. To speak of say, Sami ethnicity was thus absurd. It would have to be Sami-Norwegian, or Sami-Finnish, or Sami-Russian to make sense, since ethnicity is an irreducible aspect of a relationship. Bateson helped him to sharpen his own thinking, adding concepts and new theoretical horizons. By the time I began my studies in the early 1980s, Eidheim's system theory and Bateson's epistemology were hardly distinguishable. In the Oslo and Bergen anthropology departments, this perspective was as foundational for the anthropology students as anything by say, Geertz or Lévi-Strauss.

But let us take a step back, in order to trace the roots of the convergence between Eidheim's ethnicity research and Bateson's systemic thinking. 'When ethnic identity is a social stigma' begins like this:

The problem of delimiting ethnic groups as contrasting cultural units, and of defining ethnic borders, has occupied many anthropologists, in particular many of the cultural anthropological school. the distribution of cultural and other 'objective' traits has usually been the empirical evidence on which their approaches have been built. Analyses of such data may provide us with a statistical and distributive picture (if it is possible to agree on a definition of a *trait*) and may show how the concentration of traits correlates with named groups. However, if ethnic groups should not happen to coincide with contrasting economic systems or with firm and enduring political groups, there will always be the problem of 'transitional zones', i.e. where such criteria give ill-defined ethnic boundaries. Yet in many such areas, people themselves apparently have no difficulties in ascribing ethnic membership, i.e. we might find a high degree of 'homogeneity' (rather insignificant distribution of objective traits) but still indications of ethnic diversity, expressed in native theory and also articulated in the routine of interpersonal behaviour. (Eidheim 1971: 50)

The puzzle he sets forth to resolve is how it can be, in a coastal society where the cultural differences between Sami and Norwegians are almost negligible, ethnic contrasts and boundaries continue to play an important part in the ongoing categorisation of others and patterns of interaction. The answer is that the reproduction of mutual stereotypes continuously reinforced in casual interaction, as well as the reproduction of ethnically delineated backstages (informal spheres of communication), creates firm boundaries based not on cultural differences per se, but on the socially sanctioned communication of cultural differences. These stereotypes and their accompanying patterns of interaction thus become 'the difference that make a difference', that is really useful information not only for the researcher, but also for the locals.

In the next and final article, 'Assimilation, ethnic incorporation and the problem of identity management', Eidheim takes this perspective a step further. He contrasts assimilation, or Norwegianisation as it is usually called in these areas, with a strengthened emphasis on ethnic identity and nascent ethnopolitical consciousness. The dilemma faced by the Sami in the 1960s was that they had full citizen rights as Norwegians but no special rights as Sami. As a result, their cultural identity was precarious and vulnerable, and the easy way out for most would seem to become culturally Norwegianised, which was a real option in the coastal areas if not on the tundra. Assimilation could be observed through the gradual 'de-stigmatisation' of entire communities, which gradually removed every trace of Sami identity and erased memories of their history. Incorporation, the analytically more interesting strategy — certainly in the 1960s, before the rise of the global indigenous movement — required the development of what Eidheim called cultural idioms, that is standardised packages of culturally specific meanings. He distinguishes between two ways of applying such idioms to situations (1971: 4ff.): *dichotomisation* and *complementarisation*. Dichotomisation entails

contrasting: they are greedy, we are honest; they are lazy, we are hard-working; they are alienated, we are authentic, and so on.

Complementarisation, on the other hand, is a form of matching: They have their folk music and we have ours; they have national dress and so do we; they have a proud history, and we do too.

Eidheim's point is that in order for interaction to run smoothly both within and between the ethnic groups, which is crucial for a stable poly-ethnic society to endure, both complementarisation and dichotomisation are necessary communicative devices. Complementarisation facilitates the establishment of interethnic relations based on equality, and dichotomisation strengthens the symbolic community of Sami.

Now this rings familiar to anyone who remembers Bateson's metalogue about outlines and William Blake, where both of them — Blake and Bateson — seemed to be unable to make up their mind as to whether the people who drew outlines were wise or mad.

The combined effects of Eidheim's and Bateson's teaching about difference, pattern, process and relationship have been profound on Norwegian anthropology and on what I call the North Sea ethnicity paradigm. Among the most prominent adepts I would include A. P. Cohen, whose *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (Cohen 1985), inspired by Barth and Eidheim, ranks among the finest and clearest expositions of a relational view of ethnicity, where a main argument is that metaphors transcend internal divisions and create cohesion.

In Norwegian anthropology, it seemed for a while as if Bateson's influence was everywhere, leading to a semiotic and processual perspective on social life in general, and on ethnic relations in particular. In the 1990s, it reached a point



where my colleagues and I played with the idea of imposing a ban on the phrase 'a difference that makes a difference' because it was so overused that it had lost its meaning. Of course, all our graduate students knew that they did not have five fingers on each hand, but four relationships between fingers. My own M. Phil. dissertation from 1987, called 'Communicating cultural difference and identity' and which analysed interethnic relationships and attempts to integrate at a higher systemic level (the national) in Mauritius, was saturated with the Eidheim-Bateson perspective, and began with two quotations; one by Nietzsche on the habit of seeing contrasts where there are in fact differences in degree, and this passage from *Mind and Nature*:

It takes at least two somethings to create a difference. (...)

There is a profound and unanswerable question about the nature of those 'at least two' things that between them generate a difference which becomes information by making a difference. Clearly each alone is — for the mind and perception — a non-entity, a non-being. Not different from being, and not different from non-being. An unknowable, a *Ding an sich*, a sound from one hand clapping.

(Bateson 1978: 78)

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In the longer version of this essay [published in *Ethnologie Française* in 2008], I trace the impact of Bateson's thinking through other leading Norwegian anthropologists, such as Jan Petter Blom (formalism, communication), Reidar Grønhaug (ecology, recursive systems), Tord Larsen (epistemology), Trond Thuen (Sami studies) and — more recently — Arild Hovland (contemporary Sami revitalisation) and Finn Sivert Nielsen (ecological semiotics). The connections with British ethnicity research were

also described more fully. It might moreover be interesting, in the context of Norwegian thought more generally, to compare Bateson to a leading Norwegian philosopher, Peter Wessel Zapffe. Bateson (1904–80) and Zapffe (1899-1990) were contemporaries, unaware of each other, and influenced by some of the same current ideas in their youth — evolutionary science, Darwinist and anti-Darwinist, ecology, and Romantic philosophy and poetry. Zapffe's main treatise, *Om det tragiske* (On tragedy, 1942), sees man as 'over-equipped' in ecological and evolutionary terms: In addition to all the other needs he shares with other organisms, man is also equipped with a need for a meaning in life, which can only be achieved through self-delusion. An active climber, Zapffe was, like Bateson, deeply skeptical of industrial civilization and could be described as a pantheistic atheist. This philosophy resonates with many other aspects of Norwegian culture. But the full version of this will have to wait.

Finally, to some of you it may have come as a surprise that I haven't discussed Bateson's early article 'Culture contact and schismogenesis', one of his few texts which explicitly discusses ethnicity. But as you know, the genius of Bateson lies in his universality. So this article, and the notion of schismogenesis more generally, has scarcely influenced Scandinavian ethnicity research, but it has instead inspired studies of household viability among marginal farmer—fishermen (Rudie 1970), the reintroduction of predators in Norwegian forests (Brox 2003), the discourse on racism and anti-racism (Brox 1991) and various other topics.

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