

Anatomy of Alterity: Instrumental Identities Among the San in Zimbabwe

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Abstract:

This is a study on identity politics as bases for alterity. The term 'alterity' is here used to mean the state of being regarded, or regarding oneself as the 'Other'. The term therefore carries subordinate status implications. We assume and seek to show that alterity is a complex process, hence our metaphorical use of the term 'anatomy'. The study focuses on the economically and socially marginal San, an autochthonous ethnic group in Western Zimbabwe. Primarily, it seeks to show that ethnic identity is a social construct that dominant and subordinate groups use in their interaction. In sociology, we are aware that labelling suggests the contours of power in social relationships. We go beyond this structuralist position to argue that identity is subject to time, place and context and subordinate groups use their 'given' identities instrumentally to access vantage points, in the case of the San to be identifiable to local and external benefactors. This expediency is an effective weapon of the weak; it averts unnecessary and dangerous confrontation and keeps them as prime candidates for outside help. In other contexts, the young San in particular shed off their identity and adopt that of the dominant groups in a bid to level off the playing field of life's opportunities. We also show that such stratagems are not unique to subordinate groups; regardless of structural position, people instrumentally use their identity to improve their life chances. A key argument of the article is that ethnicity is a transitional identity employed and dispensed with when convenient.