

# Ethnogenesis: The Case of British Indians in the Caribbean

RUBEN GOWRICHARN

*Tilburg School of Humanities, Tilburg University, the Netherlands*

## INTRODUCTION

Ethnogenesis refers to the transformation of a collection of individuals into an ethnic group that believes in a common history; in this sense, it is the process that eventually leads to formation of an ethnic group. Although references to ethnogenesis are common in the literature on ethnicity, most studies take the presence of ethnic groups for granted and only mention their salience or revival. There are two distinct types of ethnogenesis. In the first, which pertains to ethnic groups who claim indigeneity, “internal” (for example, demographics) or “external” (for example, government intervention) forces have facilitated the production of new identities. In the process, people organize themselves into distinct groups, as in the cases of the Indians of North America and the Aboriginals of Australia (Roosens 1998; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992; Nagel 1994). This first type includes ethnogenesis in non-Western colonies (Kurien 1994; Nagata 1981).

This paper deals with a second type of ethnogenesis, which relates to immigrant groups, and results in various kinds of new ethnicities (Hall 1992; Yancey, Ericksen, and Juliani 1976; Conzen et al. 1992). It has been described most vividly by Jonathan Sarna, who eloquently details the process as a transition from “immigrant to ethnics” (1978). He observes that immigrants in the United States maintained close ties with their native villages and regions. Sarna’s argument is based on American immigrants in general, but he refers repeatedly to Germans, Jew, Italians, and Chinese. Although each of these immigrants groups was at first quite socially fragmented with regard to origin, language, religion, and identity, they eventually achieved a pronounced social and cultural unity. Other authors have also hinted at this process (e.g., Handlin 1951), although Sarna probably offers the clearest and most succinct description of ethnic formations in the New World. Ethnic change and group formation, incidentally, rule out any association with essentialism and homogeneity (cf. Wimmer 2009).

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Most accounts of this subject confuse ethnogenesis with the resilience of ethnicity, and describe the “emergence” of an ethnic group as a response to external circumstances. In circumstantial approaches, ethnicity is presented as a dependent variable—ethnic groups strengthen social cohesion as they respond instrumentally to external circumstances, striving to maximize their interests and utility (Cornell and Hartmann 2007: 61–63). This study takes a more primordial perspective, analyzing group cohesion as generated from internal rather than external forces. Moreover, I argue that a necessary precondition for the occurrence of groupism is a social category (a collection of people who interact) as a quasi-group, that is, a group of individuals that share some similarities vis-à-vis other groups. This often-overlooked precondition enables the rise of an ethnic ideology, the establishment of ethnic institutions, and the emergence of leadership, all of which lead eventually to ethnic groupism. Given this primordial perspective and the assumption of a quasi-group, the “formation of the ethnic group” requires actors that forge a unity, which is manifested in collective taste (including ethnic pride), communal networks, ethnic institutions, and leadership.

The subjects of this paper are British Indian indentured laborers, who refer to themselves as “Hindustanis,” in Suriname, a plantation society on the northeast coast of South America. This society was exploited with black West African slaves until 1863. British Indian and Javanese indentured laborers were imported from 1863–1916 and 1891–1940, respectively. Thus, British Indians immigrated to Suriname over almost half a century. Despite their small numbers, politically and socially weak positions, and geographical dispersion over a vast area, British Indian immigrants developed into an ethnic group. The reproduction of their cultural institutions occurred in a frontier area, in a situation where this process was, almost by definition, incomplete (Billington 1967). By implication, these institutions were unfinished or frail and thus did not foster group formation.

Considering these conditions, one would expect British Indians to have assimilated culturally and physically with other ethnic groups in the colony. This is what in fact happened in some Caribbean countries that experienced the post-slavery immigration of British Indian indentured laborers, such as Jamaica, Guadeloupe, and Martinique (Singaravélou 1990; Shepherd 1993; Ramdin 2000). In these nations, the immigrants mixed physically with the erstwhile population of slaves. However, the emergence and perpetuation of ethnic groups, such as occurred among the Surinamese British Indians, contradict the view, often taken for granted in Western social science, that assimilation is a precondition for incorporation into a receiving society (Gordon 1964; Gans 1994; Alba and Nee 2003).

I adopt Suriname as my principle case since ethnic plurality there survived Dutch colonialism. As novelist V. S. Naipaul observed, “Surinam has come out of Dutch rule as the only true cosmopolitan territory in the West Indian region.

... In Surinam, diverse cultures, modified but still distinct, exist side by side” (1962: 213). This implies that, of all the countries in the Caribbean, ethnogenesis has been most successful in Suriname. This success makes it the perfect case from which to extract the variables that govern ethnogenesis. Methodologically, these variables function as sensitizing concepts that “suggest directions along which to look” (Blumer 1954: 7). It is possible that a single case might be happenstance, and I will therefore substantiate my argument by comparing Suriname with two other Caribbean plantation societies: (1) Guyana, which although differing in size and settlement patterns displays an outcome similar to that in Suriname; and (2) Jamaica, which while similar to Suriname in its number of immigrants and settlement pattern, manifests the opposite outcome.

In what follows I establish three related propositions: First, The debate between the so-called “circumstantialists” and “primordialists” suggests that these perspectives can be used interchangeably, depending on the scholarly preference of the researcher. However, between the two perspectives a “primacy” holds in favor of the primordial perspective. Second, this primordial perspective must be redefined, since processes of ethnic group formation always incorporate “external” elements, thus changing and adapting to specific social and physical ecologies. Consequently, an ethnic group is constituted by the contents of the ethnicity that function as “boundaries.” Third, the emergence of primordial (though adjusted) ethnicity is not a “natural” process, but rather requires actors that shape it. The initiatives of ethnic leaders are crucial in this regard.

#### ETHNOGENESIS IN THE LITERATURE

The concept of “ethnogenesis” presupposes the notion of the ethnic group, since the formation of such an entity ends at some point in time. This section examines two issues that are regularly discussed in the ethnicity literature: one is the definition of “ethnicity” (Fenton 2003), and the second is the question of whether ethnicity is primordial or circumstantial. Both have compelling theoretical implications related to the dynamics of ethnicity-in-being.

#### *Previous Approaches*

The unconditional acceptance of ethnic groups can be traced back to Max Weber’s definition (1978: 389) of them as “those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important for group formation; conversely, it does not matter whether an objective blood relationship exists.” For Weber, ethnic identity is assumed, since it is the feature differing most markedly from that of a kinship group. In his definition, the word “or” indicates that each of these elements is, by itself, sufficient for the formation of an ethnic group.

Banton points out that Weber “neglected to investigate the processes by which sentiments of identification were reinforced or undermined” (2007: 32), and other authors have similarly failed to explain the problematic relationship between the genesis and the ontology of ethnic groups. For example, Furnivall (1939) describes plural society as a unity made up of various ethnic groups that are internally homogeneous and delineated. This neglect of ethnogenesis is also present in the work of theorists of plural societies in the Caribbean. The omission is remarkable since the plural society depends on successful ethnogenesis. Van Lier (1949) assumed that the imported individuals automatically constituted a group, as did Smith (1965), who devoted a chapter to community organization in rural Jamaica without discussing the ethnogenesis of the peasants. Later works on Caribbean societies make the same omission (Lowenthal 1972; Barrow and Reddock 2001).

Geertz is more explicit: For him, ethnic groups exist because of “primordial sentiments” that result from “assumed primordial givens,” such as kinship, birth into a specific religious community, fluency in a specific language, or adherence to certain customs and manners (1967: 199). These “assumed givens” imply that the presence of the ethnic group is seen as a given and, consequently, that ethnogenesis is not an issue. More recently, Brubaker (2004: 47) has suggested that ethnic groups are distinguished by commonality, connectedness, and a feeling of belonging, but these descriptive features tell us nothing of the origins of such groups.

The origin and perpetuation of ethnic communities has been studied from various perspectives, such as nationalism based on ethnicity (Gellner 1983), the realization of institutional completeness (Breton 1964), the establishment of ethnic group boundaries (Barth 1969), primordial sentiments (Geertz 1967), the invention of traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992), and the emergence of new ethnicities (Hall 1992; Eriksen 2002). But most of these discussions are about ethnic change and not ethnogenesis. Even one of the most authoritative books on ethnic clashes, Horowitz’s *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (1985) does not venture beyond a clarifying description of assimilation and differentiation, and the same holds true for Roosens’ study of ethnogenesis (1998).

Most historical accounts of ethnogenesis do not go beyond descriptions of the similarities within groups. For example, Gonzalez (1988) described the Garifuna in Central America, Boyd (2010) explored the aesthetics of Afro-Americans in a Latin Hispanic reality, and Hill (1996) edited a collection about the fate of small groups in the Americas, but none of them raised the question of how to frame theoretically the process of ethnogenesis. The very concept of ethnogenesis is loosely and disparately used. One notable exception is Leman, who asked, “whether ethnicity can be divided in categories, each with a set of specific varieties” (2000: 10). If one responds affirmatively, as Weber’s definition implies one should, then ethnogenesis ought to display a variety of forms and characteristics that can be captured only on a more abstract theoretical level.

With regard to the British Indians in the Caribbean, ethnogenesis is often defined as the “retention of culture.” This line of thinking is an extension of Herskovits’ (1930) understanding of the retention of Negro culture, despite slavery. He claimed that African roots were still present in African American culture, especially in the Caribbean and Brazil, and that it influenced white culture in domains such as music, dance, speech, and dress. This view assumed a uniform African culture. Latter-day scholars have adopted the same approach with regard to British Indians in the Caribbean (Erich 1971; Shepherd 1993; Garner 2008; Ramdin 2000; de Kruijf 2006). In both cases—the retention of “African survivals,” and British Indianness—ethnogenesis is absent.

Yet another approach argues that an upsurge in ethnicity is a response to global or local circumstances external to a group (see Cornell and Hartmann 2007 for an overview of such cases). For instance, Kurien (1994) offers a model that supposedly explains the relation between colonialism and ethnogenesis in Kerala (India), portraying changes in ethnicity as the results of interventions by various foreign rulers. Yancey, Ericksen, and Juliani (1976) also describe the emergence and development of ethnicity in American cities as a variable that is affected by changing industrial and transportation technologies, reinforced identifications, and social networks. These conditions are urban and related to concentrated populations and functional dependence. Nagel (1994) depicts various ethnic-construction processes as interactions that lead to the emergence of identities and group boundaries. Conzen et al. (1992: 4–5) interpret ethnicity as “a process of construction or invention which incorporates, adapts, and amplifies pre-existing communal solidarities, cultural attributes, and historical memories.”

The revival of ethnicity has also been interpreted as an outcome of modernization. This line of thinking emphasizes that ethnic revival is a feature of modern society, regardless of whether it is globally or locally associated with mobilization, cohesion, solidarity, or regional ethnification (Hansen 1999; Nielsen 1985; Olzak 1983; Borhek 1970). A similar treatment of the subject can be found in textbooks on ethnicity (Jenkins 2008; Fenton 2003; Cornell and Hartman 2007). In all cases, the presence of ethnic groups is simply presumed.

Attempts have been made to encapsulate the factors that foster ethnicity. Clarke, Peach, and Vertovec (1990: 5–6), writing on British Indian indentured laborers, propose four factor categories that are the result of adaptation: the process of migration and the characteristics of the establishment; the cultural composition of the immigrant population; their position in the social and political structure; and community development. They derive these categories from a wide variety of circumstances and peoples. Cornell and Hartmann (2007: 205, 245) offer an overview of the external and internal conditions that foster ethnic identities. In neither account is ethnogenesis deeply probed, although both briefly touch on it. These overviews are sensitive to a range of possibilities, but are unhelpful in determining the forces governing ethnogenesis.

### *Two Representations of Ethnicity*

Theoretically, ethnogenesis represents the transformation of a social category into an ethnic group. The former concept implies minimal or no internal networks or group consciousness, while the latter presupposes individuals that define themselves as members of a collectivity through bonding mechanisms and feelings of distinctiveness. It is necessary to specify properly the appearance of a social group. To this end, I present two dominant representations of ethnicity: the circumstantialist and the primordial. This categorization may seem outdated, but it is useful to us here because in each representation the elements that make up ethnogenesis, as well as the specific features of an ethnic group, differ in ways that are important to my analysis.

### *Circumstantialist Shaping of Ethnicity*

Many scholars have emphasized the constructive nature of ethnic resilience, pointing to the malleability, fluidity, and even the supposedly temporal character of ethnic identities (e.g., Conzen et al. 1992; Nagel 1994; Cornell and Hartmann 2007). To highlight the features of ethnic resilience, I will use Sarna's approach, which is remarkably clear and concise. According to him, ethnicization is a result of ascription and adversity. Ascription refers to the categorization set by outsiders and accepted by the media, the public at large, and ultimately the immigrants themselves (1978: 372). These external actors are the determining factors in the process of ethnicization. In most cases, migrants have a self-definition that is based on their village or region of origin. Outsiders cannot cope with the great complexity of "village identities," and they create new schemes of classification based on their relation to the immigrant experience. Ascribed identity and self-definition converge in the course of the adjustment process: "The immigrants ... become ethnics" (ibid.: 373).

Ascription does not explain why immigrants are open to influences from the outside or why they accept these new definitions. The explication lies in "the immigrant response to adversity. Ethnic unity, ascribed by outsiders, [is] accepted as part of the defense against prejudice and hostility" (ibid.: 374). Sarna bases his argument on the examples of the defensive organizations of German Catholics and Jews and on the emergence of Chinese and Italian "urban villages" in the United States. In these cases, ethnic unity was not only created by outsiders but also pursued as a social defense by the new ethnic group. In this unification process, the immigrants created festivals, heroes, and ethnic foods as symbols of their desire to stimulate ethnic solidarity and self-consciousness.

Effective ascription automatically implies the dominance of outsider definitions. According to Sarna (ibid.: 375), outsiders are "the school, the church, the polity, the press, and the benevolent societies." In his analysis, ascription and adversity are both effects that originate outside the group and variables

that generate ethnicity. Cornell and Hartmann (2007: 244) endorse this position, arguing, “Context is more likely to overwhelm groups than the reverse—although certainly the reverse can happen.” This position presupposes a difference in power, communication, and interaction between the ethnic group and the outside world. Therefore, the effects of ascription should be less obvious in those places, such as rural areas, where groups are geographically segregated or socially isolated, and external factors should be less determinative of ethnogenesis.

Adversity also requires specification. While Sarna does not designate the causes of adversity, Scott (1990) speaks of “opposition”—economic, political, social, and religious, or combinations thereof—that is positively related to ethnic solidarity. The greater the opposition, the greater is the ethnic solidarity. In this relationship, primordial symbols are an intervening variable. Opposition, then, “does not lead directly to ethnic solidarity, but operates indirectly through the psychological mechanism of primordial sentiments” (Scott 1990: 163). This reasoning excludes the possibility that ethnic solidarity may arise in the absence of opposition. As is the case with Sarna, Scott believes that ethnicity is primarily reactive and lacks an autonomous existence and development.

One special variation of constructivism in ethnicity studies is expressed in the proposition that “the ethnic *boundary* ... defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses” (Barth 1969: 15). The phrase has been much quoted, but neither the content of the “stuff” nor the concept of “boundary” have been specified, either in a later publication by Barth (1994) that addresses this issue or in writings of other scholars (see Wimmer 2008). The distinction between “stuff” and “boundary” remains unclear. One may take the “boundary” as a demarcation of identity in the external contact with other groups. Indeed, many models do so (e.g., Barth 1969). However, if this interpretation is correct, then one can argue that the “stuff,” which may be ethnic institutions, networks, or traditions, simultaneously constitutes the “boundary,” or that if the “stuff” fails to function as such, then the ethnic group will dissolve.

### *Primordial Shaping of Ethnicity*

Weber states that the “similarity and contrast of physical type and custom, regardless whether they are biologically inherited or culturally transmitted, are subject to the same conditions of group life, in origin as well as in effectiveness, and identical in their potential for group formation” (1978: 387–88). This perspective was later adopted by Horowitz (1985) and Roosens (1998) with reference to family resemblance.

The notions of primordialism and family resemblance are similar. The former idea dates back to Shils (1957: 142), who argued that society is held together by primordial affinities (among others), which he describes as a certain ineffable significance attributed to blood ties. Geertz “translated” these ties to the field of ethnicity, speaking of primordial ties as “assumed

givens” that can “have an ineffable, and at times overpowering, coerciveness in and of themselves ... by virtue of some unaccountable absolute importance attributed to the very tie itself” (1967: 199). These primordial loyalties are not restricted to blood relations; they also encompass being born into a specific religious community, speaking a particular language, or following certain customs and manners—we should not restrict the concept of “family ties” to its literal meaning.

Barth (1969: 15) claims that ethnic groups are defined by boundaries rather than by the “stuff” they enclose. In response, Roosens, who argues that origins play a decisive role in defining groups (1998: 188), points out that a socio-cultural boundary can only express an ethnic identity that already exists, and acquires an ethnicity only in reference to its origin. This identity, which he labels a “kinship and family metaphor,” is something the actors sense as “tangible and real,” a binding element that is found in ethnic groups in Western countries (*ibid.*: 191). However, Nagata (1981) argues that not all features of a group are primordial ties. Religion and language convey different meanings than do race, kinship, descent, birth, or territorial origin. The primordial function may be variable, but “once a cultural attribute or behavior is accepted (by its bearers) to be carried by biological inheritance and to be acquired only by birth, it is primordialized” (*ibid.*: 94).

The “primordialization of ethnicity” is a concept that has been adopted in recent research. An increasing number of authors emphasize the incorporation of external elements into the “primordial ontology” (Suny 2001; Fenton 2003; Brubaker 2004; Snajder 2007; Cornell and Hartmann 2007: 93–94). From this viewpoint, primordialism is “constructed” by incorporating external elements, as has been the case with many nationalist projects (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992; Suny 2001). The implications of this position are unclear: if we say that primordialism is constructed, this implies the existence of something “unconstructed” or “genuinely” primordial. If we assume that culture, or ethnicity for that matter is never “pure” but always a heterogeneous historical product that is never free from external elements, then the distinction is untenable. Alternatively, if there is a different type of primordialism vis-à-vis “genuine” primordialism, then it should be rejected for the same reason. The only logical conclusion is that primordial elements are variable and differ according to ethnic groups, irrespective of their origins.

That said, an actor’s choice to adopt external cultural elements in institutions such as family, religion, or language is never entirely random. In a recent defense of primordialism against constructivism, Bayer argued that assumed kinship is not completely arbitrary because “individuals cannot choose their parents or reconstruct another language as [their] mother tongue later in their lives” (2009: 1643). Primary socialization takes place within the group and includes identification and self-labeling. The outside world may have less flattering labels for



the category in question, but the members of the ethnic group are not defenseless because they have developed their own identities.

The ethnicity literature contains three mutually re-enforcing categories of primordial forces that account for ethnic group formation: ethnic institutions, communal networks, and group identities. Ethnic institutions are familial structures, language, religion, recreation and social life, and behaviors that underlie group-specific values such as the pursuit of harmony or social progress. Communal networks are the connecting relations between co-ethnics and between persons and ethnic institutions (Cornell and Hartmann 2007: 89–91; Horowitz 1985; Roosens 1998; Sarna 1978). These structures reflect ethnic identity or consciousness and are “cemented” by collective tastes, including ethnically specific features such as partner choice, music, language, food, and aesthetics (Bourdieu 1984; see also Hoetink 1967; and Isaacs 1975). This “becoming” of an ethnic group can be described in terms of the creation of an identity, a compass by which people can navigate the social world (Hale 2004). Together, they constitute the “stuff” of the “ethnic community” and enable a social cohesion of the ethnic group that would be otherwise impossible.

In the next section I will show how ethnic institutions, networks, and an ethnic consciousness emerged among the British Indians in Suriname, thus establishing the primordial position. I will also explore the alternative option, namely that group formation among the British Indians was brought about by circumstantial factors.

#### ETHNOGENESIS IN SURINAME

From 1873 to 1916, thirty-four thousand British Indian indentured laborers were brought to Suriname by the Dutch colonial government to fulfill five-year labor contracts. At the expiration of their tenure the immigrants were allowed the following options: to return to British India, to renew their contracts, or to settle as agriculturalists in the colony. Approximately 11,690 chose to leave Suriname, resulting in an immigration surplus of 21,500. By 1921, the Creole population (consisting of the former slave population, their descendants, and all people mixed with them), the Hindustani population, and the Javanese made up, respectively, 50 percent, 28 percent, and 17 percent of the total Surinamese population of 112,300 people. By 1950, these percentages were 41, 35, and 20 (Census 1972: 4). The remainder oscillated at about 4 or 5 percent of the overall population.

#### *Immigration and Settlement*

During the first few decades of British Indian immigration, the government emphasized providing labor for the plantations. A related and secondary policy goal was to expand the small population of laborers in order to increase the work force. To this end, the government established settlements near the plantations. After 1895, the government’s stress shifted to settling immigrants

TABLE 1.

*Number of Immigrants within and outside of Small-Scale Agricultural Settlements in Suriname*

Year	Within Settlements		Outside of Settlements	
	Immigrants	Non-Immigrants	Immigrants	Non-Immigrants
1906	3,104	1,827	2,954	9,260
1910	5,633	3,477	8,853	11,365
1915	9,692	3,226	7,569	12,489
1920	11,449	3,538	10,729	10,036
1925	14,177	3,534	17,254	10,275
1930	16,561	2,895	21,982	10,333
1935	21,643	3,128	29,373	14,562

Source of data: colonial annual reports, statistical appendices.

as small-scale farmers (Heilbron 1982), and the colonial administration expanded opportunities to obtain long-term land leases. Subsequently, a growing number of immigrants began to live outside of the already established settlements. This trend started very early, as Table 1 shows.

The Indian immigrants came mainly for the northeastern region of British India—over 90 percent came from either the United Provinces, Bihar, Bengal, or Oudh. From this we know that the migrants had divergent manners and customs. Over 70 percent were between twenty and forty years old, and 14 percent between ten and twenty (Bhagwanbali 1996: 135). Some 27 percent were women, of whom less than one-third were older than ten. An estimated 20–35 percent of the immigrants traveled in family groups (*ibid.*: 94–96). Data collected by De Klerk (1953: 111–12) indicates a great variety of castes, professional groups, languages, and lifestyles. Muslims made up about 20 percent of the immigrants, the rest being Hindus.

These diverse origins, attachments, and orientations inhibited ethnic unity (see Sarna 1978), which was also hampered by the pattern of settlement. Immigration extended over almost half a century and involved the continual arrival of small numbers of immigrants. From 1873 to 1916, sixty-four ships transported laborers in groups ranging from 299 to 825 persons (De Klerk 1953: 71–73). The arrivals were distributed over a vast area, spread over three days travel time east and west of the arrival depot, and thus found themselves culturally isolated. Considering their sundry geographical, social, religious, linguistic, and cultural origins, we must ask how these tiny numbers of dispersed immigrants came to form a single ethnic community.

*Ethnic Institutions*

The Indian immigrants to Suriname initially were an “interactive quasi-group,” a collection of people that “possesses a degree of organization, but is nevertheless not a group” (Mayer 1966: 97). Because they were related in terms of their cultural heritage, it is fair to assume that they possessed some “tacit ethnicity” (Fenton 2003), that is, the potential to become an ethnic group. Therefore, at the outset they were not completely different from each other—as were Chinese and former black slaves—but rather shared somatically and culturally related features. As I argued earlier, the establishment of primordial institutions is difficult to explain without this quasi-group property and its related “tacit” ethnicity.

The ethnic group evolved in three stages: The first was the emergence of small, predominantly cultural communities on the plantations. The second involved the social and economic expansion of the British Indians beyond the plantations—that is, the formation of interest groups. In the final stage they achieved political representation. Let me summarize each of these in turn.

*Plantation Communities*

The emergence of small cultural groups of Indians on the plantations was preceded by the formation of social networks. The first contacts were established at the embarkation depots of Calcutta, the port from which British Indian indentured laborers departed for Suriname. During the course of the three-month journey, new contacts were made and old ones reestablished. Social networks were also formed during the compulsory stay in depots upon arrival in Suriname (Bhagwanbali 1996). Men who made the journey together assumed a kinship and called each other *jahaji bhai* (traveler brother); these connections continued to develop in Suriname long after arrival. Often, the traveler brothers promised their children to each other in marriage, strengthening their assumed family bond (Gautam 1999).

The formation of families probably formed a bottleneck during the early years of settlement. Assuming that demographic reproduction took place only within the British Indian community, the founding of families could only have taken place on a small scale since women accounted for only 27 percent of the population (Bhagwanbali 1996: 96). The number of endogamous families must have been, on average, about half of the population, unless women were recruited from the neighboring British colony of Guyana, which had an older immigration tradition. Later a balance of men and women was restored when mainly men returned to India (Lamur 1973). This repatriation facilitated the reproduction of the joint family, albeit on a limited scale (Speckmann 1963). Thus, assumed and real kinship resulted from the establishment of endogamous families, the most primordial institution.

There are no indications that the formation of families involved women from other ethnic groups. The black laborers (former slaves and their descendants, who were distinct from “light skinned Creoles”) were the major group on the plantations in the initial stages of immigration. This group gradually withdrew from plantations and settled as cacao farmers or found employment in the expanding gold and balata sectors; from 1873 to 1910, their numbers on the plantations decreased from 10,604 to 1,737, whereas the number of Asian immigrants (British Indians and Javanese) increased from 4,229 to 14,813 (Hoeft 1998: 128).

To interact, immigrants had to share a common language. Gautam (1999) describes two linguistic processes that occurred simultaneously in Surinam. The first is *koineization*, whereby interaction between speakers of different dialects leads to the emergence of a new language; in Suriname, this new language later became known as “Sarnami Hindustani.” Sarnami became the informal *community language* that was spoken at home and at work. The second process involved the use of Hindi or Sanskrit during religious or formal meetings, which resulted in a diglossic situation within the British Indian community.

Apart from language and family formation, the “dismantling” of caste-related rituals and ceremonies was an important precondition for unity, since it enabled more or less homogeneous religious representations and practices (De Klerk 1953: 170; Bihari 1974; Van der Burg and van der Veer 1986). The wide geographical distribution of immigrants meant the complex character of the caste system could not be maintained. Other factors preventing reproduction of the caste structure were the relatively small number of people in each region; that plantation authorities’ distributed services and goods via the market or other ethnic groups (especially Chinese shopkeepers) rather than through caste channels; the impossibility of maintaining caste endogamy; and the waning of proscriptions regarding purity and food. The caste system’s collapse and the “simplification” of local Hinduism increased social equality and cultural homogeneity.

Religious rituals and feasts were re-established on the plantations. In 1929, the Surinaamsche Islamitische Vereeniging (Surinam Islamic Association) was born. In keeping with the “simplification” or erosion of local Hinduism, the followers of Sanatan Dharm—the largest Hindu movement—that same year established their own association, the Sanatan Dharma. One year later, others formed the Arya Samaj, a monotheistic reform movement that rejected the caste system. Thus it can be said that religion was a crucial factor in the formation of the British Indian community. Nannan Panday, the president of the Sanatan Dharm, outlined for me the pivotal role of pandits in shaping group cohesion: “These men were not only the binding links between families, but they also taught their co-ethnics about the culture of their country of origin.

They wove, so to speak, the community together. The same role was played by the Muslim clergy” (interview, 21 Apr. 2011; see also Bihari 1974).

To understand of the ethnogenesis of British Indians in Suriname we must take into account the connections that immigrants maintained with their country of origin. Family contact was the dominant type of transnational communication between the immigrants and British India. Remittances of money to relatives at home and the writing of letters, as reported in the colony’s annual reports (*Koloniaal Verslag*) of 1895–1939, are indicators of these relations. This form of transnationalism was specific to the first generation of migrants (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc 1994: 79–85). Transnational relations were fostered in three ways: the immigrants’ political identification with India, the impact of visiting religious clergy and other scholars, and the influence of politicians who visited the British Caribbean and occasionally frequented Suriname (see Samaroo 1987). In these ways, the relationship between Suriname’s Indian laborers and their homeland became institutionalized as part of daily community life. The bond was also reflected in foodstuffs and spices imported from India, religious artifacts, traditional Indian clothing, musical instruments, and so forth.

Initially, it was difficult for plantation laborers to maintain social contacts and attend rituals and feasts outside of their own plantations or settlements. Connecting roads were few and poorly maintained. Freedom of movement was also limited contractually, and social contacts and activities were concentrated on the plantations. After the First World War, few Indian laborers were under contract since the plantation sector had declined and the Indian nationalist movement had succeeded in arresting the indentured system. The resulting freedom of movement allowed increased traffic between different plantations and thereby strengthened social networks within the larger British Indian community. With the steady decline of the plantation sector, the British Indians increasingly settled as peasants (Gowricharn 1991). By this time they had established ethnic institutions, including endogenous families, a common language, shared religious and cultural practices, and social networks.

### *Social and Economic Mobility*

The economic prosperity of the British Indians contributed to the expansion of their social networks and the strengthening of their community. The prosperity was achieved because British Indians owned land with irrigation and drainage facilities, and they became the rice producers of Suriname. The First World War isolated the country from the world market and stalled food imports, but the rice growers profited from a domestic food shortage and production increased by over 200 percent (Heilbron 1982: 279). Although the British Indians mainly produced rice, most of their farms were mixed enterprises, producing also vegetables, (beet) roots, wheat, milk, and eggs. Their acquired wealth was apparent

in the increasing numbers of British Indian landowners (De Klerk 1953: 199–200).

On 31 December 1918, the Colonial Savings Bank (Spaarbank) had 8,583 depositors, out of a total colonial population of 118,777. The number of British Indian depositors, from an overall Asian population (including Javanese) of 35,131, was 2,708; that is, they made up almost one-third of the bank's depositors. Company ownership was yet another indicator of prosperity: from 1939 to 1950, British Indians owned one-third of the registered companies in the capital city of Paramaribo and 85 percent of the companies in Suriname, the country's most important district (Gowricharn 1991: 128).

As prosperity and geographical mobility increased, community life further expanded. This was expressed, *inter alia*, through attendance at special events such as birthday celebrations, weddings, funerals, and religious meetings. New forms of music, song, and dance emerged, and simultaneously, social intercourse, manners, and customs changed; people regularly celebrated a number of festivals "imported" from India, such as Diwali, Holi, and Tadjia. Other culture-specific practices such as wearing traditional clothing and jewelry and cooking traditional dishes were largely maintained (De Klerk 1953: 211–15; Sukul 1947: 81–83; Ketwaru 1998). Association life started early and was especially manifested in a flourishing sports club at which mainly cricket and, to a lesser extent, football, were popular. The clubs were named after the great men of India such as Rabindranath, Gandhi, Azaad, and Nehru (De Klerk 1953: 203; see Sukul 1947). All these developments expressed growing ethnic social networks, "groupness," and feelings of belonging.

### *Political Representation*

From the last quarter of the nineteenth century to the second half of the twentieth, the administrative class in Suriname, as in most colonies in the Caribbean, consisted of light-skinned Creoles. They propagated Westernization and opposed the immigrants' wishes to preserve their own culture. This resulted in conflicts between the administrative elite and the nascent British Indian elite. The latter was entrenched in the Surinaamsche Immigranten Vereeniging (Suriname Immigrant Association), established in 1910, which pressed a number of issues strongly associated with group cohesiveness. Three of these issues are important to us since Indians in the British colonies raised similar ones.

The first is the establishment of so-called "coolie schools" on some plantations between 1890 and 1906. These were a compromise between the desire to educate British Indian children and their temporary stay in the colony. As more immigrants permanently settled in the colony, these schools were considered superfluous, and from 1907 to 1929 non-graduate British Indian teachers were given the option to teach children studying in district schools, to

prepare them for education in the Dutch language (De Klerk 1953: 129–30). The implementation of this scheme was controversial: The Surinaamsche Immigranten Vereeniging continued to strive for education in Hindi, the native language, but met stiff opposition from the Roman Catholic Church and the Education Inspection. In 1929, the administration abolished the formal teaching of Hindi (Hoeft 1998: 174–75), and since then the education of children in Hindi has been a private matter.

Another issue, similar to that in play in the British colonies, was the long-standing request of the nascent British Indian elite for the legal recognition of Hindu and Muslim ritual marriages, which the administrative elite denied. But in 1933, when Governor Kielstra, a professor of colonial economics at the University of Wageningen and a former colonial civil servant in Indonesia, assumed office, he broke with the former assimilation policy and declared that small-scale producers should be allowed to retain and follow their own cultural practices. Governor Kielstra favored the British Indians' request and, against the wishes of the Koloniale Staten (colonial parliament), in 1940 he pushed through a bill that recognize their ritual marriages (Ramsoedh 1990).

In addition to issues concerning education and marriages, another was the influence that new immigrant groups would have on political decisions. Members of the Koloniale Staten were elected on the basis of census suffrage, according to which active and passive political rights depended on economic wealth and educational levels. In 1936, the constitution was revised to enable the governor to nominate five of the Staten's thirteen members, and Kielstra nominated representatives of the Asian immigrant groups. In the end, the governor lost his fight with the administrative elite and was retired, but his decisions remained unaltered.

In December of 1941, the Dutch queen promised the colonies more autonomy in their post-war domestic affairs. Although her message was primarily directed at the Indonesian nationalists to prevent their collaboration with the Japanese, universal suffrage was introduced in Suriname (Dew 1978: 68–73). The British Indians established their own political party, the Verenigde Hindostaanse Partij (United Hindustani Party, VHP), which remains one of Suriname's major parties today (Sedney 2010). These developments were the culmination of the process of ethnogenesis in the country—the British Indians had become a full-fledged, politically mature ethnic group.

### *Ascription, Prejudice, and Hostility*

Primordialism and circumstantialism are governed by different sets of variables, which, while they do interact, constitute distinct conceptual and historical phenomena. According to the circumstantialist approach, ethnogenesis is a response to external forces such as classifications and definitions of groups by outsiders, or threatening circumstances that drive individuals to form groups of their own. If an ascription by outsiders is inspired by prejudice or hostility (see

Sarna 1978), it may be either resisted or accepted. If it is accepted, the ethnic group will be either fundamentally changed or dissolved. If the ascription is resisted, the ethnic group will strengthen itself as an oppositional force. The ethnic group in question may also have a strong self-definition, a countervailing classification that can accompany resistance (see Scott 1990). For outsiders to effectively ascribe an identity to a group requires two conditions: there must be communication (that is, interaction) between the groups, and there must be a power imbalance that enables the outsiders to impose social categories.

I follow the view of Jenkins (2008: 61–66), who emphasizes that the interaction between insiders and outsiders takes place at both formal and informal levels and in different domains. In the case of Suriname, at the formal level labels were ascribed by the colonial state. British Indians were referred to in official documents and on official occasions as “British Indians” (*Brits Indiërs* in Dutch). This label was not considered offensive since the British Indians themselves used it, though in Sarnami Hindustani or Hindi they called themselves “Hindustanis.” Thus, in terms of language and labels, there were no discrepancies between the colonial ruler and the British Indians.

At the informal level, the British Indians interacted with the remaining black laborers on the plantations. This relationship requires some elaboration in order to determine whether ethnogenesis had reactive elements. Most British Indian laborers came from northeastern India and shared many phenotypical similarities with Caucasians, so they looked very different from black laborers, a phenomenon that Hoetink (1967: 153) typified as “somatic distance.” One way in which somatic differences were expressed was in the cultural stereotypes of the indentured and black laborers (Hoefte 1998: 102–4), and they were one facet of a mutual dislike. Drawing on unpublished colonial reports, De Klerk (1953: 221–24) states that British Indians disliked black Creoles due to their skin color, and also thought that they had loose morals. Conversely, these Creoles looked down on the coolies as intruders and more distant from Western culture. They thought the British Indians lacked any sense of community and were untruthful and unreliable. Holding such interracial stereotypes was a characteristic of groups within the laboring class and the peasantry.

The scale of these antagonisms is unclear, as is their impact on group formation, but the latter was probably negligible. Socialization on the plantations took place in small ethnic communities held together by physical resemblance, and common descent, language, religion, and taste. Somatic distance and ethnic cultures demarcated the two groups, and they interacted still less after most black laborers moved to other areas and economic sectors. Throughout the immigration period until after the Second World War, British Indian leaders officially rejected racial assimilation because their “*volkskracht* (people’s strength) [could] not be leveled to their advantage” (De Klerk 1953: 211). Nevertheless, some cultural assimilation did occur through formal education in Dutch, “adjusted” clothing, and new forms of social conduct.



## COMPARING SURINAME, GUYANA, AND JAMAICA

Theoretically, primordial ethnogenesis requires the presence of a quasi-group that allows for the establishment of ethnic institutions and related networks and ideologies. The Surinamese case fits these requirements. Before embarkation to Suriname, the British Indians had some social networks that developed, after arrival, into a kinship system. On the plantations, they fostered a language, reinstated their religion (Islam or Hinduism), and developed family structures. The increase in social and geographical mobility strengthened the community, as did transnational contacts. This ethnic group formation was accompanied by the political incorporation of the Indians in Suriname—that is, the appointment of Hindustani members to the colonial parliament—and by the granting of citizen status to the immigrants. In this way, primordial group formation and absorption into the new society went hand in hand.

This observation can be contradicted by adopting the circumstantialist perspective, which holds that ethnogenesis resulted from the imposition of an identity by outside forces and the emergence of a group feeling by opposition. Both require two preconditions if they are to have an overriding impact: social interaction and a power differential that enables the imposition of a classificatory label or other factors that impose an identity. Power disparities were typical of colonial societies, but despite the hierarchy that existed in Suriname the Hindostani's resisted successfully the attempt by the light-skinned creole administrative class to impose its assimilation ideal. The black agricultural laborers, for their part, could not enforce assimilation because they gradually migrated away from the plantations, which minimized their interactions with Indians. Since the two preconditions for “circumstantial ethnicity” were practically absent in Suriname, it can be said that the ethnogenesis of the British Indians there was predominantly primordial in nature.

I want to briefly compare Suriname with former British Guyana, where there was a similar ethnogenic outcome, and with Jamaica, where the outcome was exactly the opposite. Guyana and Jamaica are located in the same region as Suriname, both were British colonies, and both had plantation economies that imported indentured laborers from British India after the abolition of slavery in 1833.

My comparisons are based on the assumption that the same forces should, *ceteris paribus*, generate the same outcome. Since ethnogenesis was most successful in Suriname, I use it as a baseline from which to assess ethnogenic developments in Guyana and Jamaica. Both countries shared other common features with Suriname: their immigrants constituted a quasi-group with the same kind of shipmate-relationships and a sexual imbalance among the laborers (Bisnauth 2000; Shepherd 1993: 50–52). In Guyana, the immigrants were also divided by regional descent, into groups named after the two ports of embarkation of Madras and Calcutta. The immigrants in all three colonies were mainly

Hindus, although the type of Hinduism differed in each: they were followers of Vishnu in Suriname; both Vishnu and Shiva in Guyana, and their precise religious leanings in Jamaica were unclear. As in Suriname, a small proportion of the immigrants to Guyana and Jamaica were Muslims.

In Suriname, plantations could only be established along the coastal plain, which, according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (n.d.), encompassed 6,600 square miles. However, not all of this area was cultivated; many plantations were closed or employed no British Indians, and other areas were simply not planted. This (potential) area differed greatly from the 800 square miles (100 x 8 miles) of cultivable land in Guyana, all of which was conducive to Indian settlement (Ramdin 2000: 132). The island of Jamaica is 4,243 square miles in size, but most of it is uncultivable. Moreover, a map of Jamaica showing the estates employing British Indian laborers between 1879 and 1921 shows them to have been concentrated in two clusters of parishes, one in St. James and Westmoreland, the other in St. Mary, Portland, St. Thomas, and Clarendon (Shepherd 1993: 38). Some parishes in between these two clusters employed no British Indian laborers.

The Suriname “model” reveals that, apart from the presence of a quasi-group, the major variables determining ethnogenesis were the degree of interaction with the black population; endogenous families consolidation; establishment of religious institutions; development of a vernacular; feelings of groupness (expressed in community life); the levels of transnational contact with India, as expressed in religion, politics, and culture; the degree to which “ethnic heritage” was explicitly defended and assimilation resisted; and the presence of political leadership. If these variables determine the presence or absence of primordial ethnogenesis, then theoretically they should also have had a determining impact on the ethnogenesis of British Indians in Guyana and Jamaica, unless other factors can be discovered that override them. Table 2 summarizes the status of these variables in the three cases.

TABLE 2.  
*Variables Hypothesized to Determine Primordial Ethnogenesis*

	Suriname	British Guyana	Jamaica
Initial presence of a quasi-group	Present	Present	Present
Formation of endogenous families	Yes	Yes	Minimal
Foundation of religious organizations	1930	1934	1968
Development of a vernacular	Yes	Weak	Absent
Development of a feeling of groupness	Yes	Yes	Minimal
Maintenance of regular transnational contacts	Yes	Yes	Minimal
Defense of ethnic heritage	Yes	Yes	Yes
Level/pattern of interaction	Low	Mixed	High

The reconstitution of ethnic institutions in Guyana happened in slightly different circumstances than in Suriname. Guyana's population consists mainly of Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese (as the British Indians are called in most of the English-speaking Caribbean). From 1835 to 1917, 239,152 Indo-Guyanese immigrants arrived, of which 72,000 returned to India. In 1911, 126,343 Indians made up 42.7 percent of the total population, while the black population was 39 percent (Nath 1950: statistical appendices). In Guyana also, the caste system collapsed and this gave women (and lower-caste men) more freedom (Seecharan 2006: 291–92). According to Garner (2008: 53), the colonial government set a quota for women immigrants in order to encourage Indian men to settle with wives on land. Hindu and Muslim religious marriages were officially recognized in 1860 (*ibid.*: 55), much earlier than in Suriname (in 1940). Thus in Guyana consanguineous families were fostered by the presence of quasi-groups, government policies aimed at family formation, and the breakdown of the caste system. However, this process was hindered by a high rate of husbands murdering their wives (Mohapatra 1995).

After the abolition of slavery, the black population in Guyana migrated to “free villages,” and a significant number left the plantation sector to take up gold prospecting and peasant agriculture. By 1850, only a quarter of the black population remained on the plantations (Garner 2008: 47), but since many black peasants were forced to do seasonal work on them, the size of the black plantation population was unstable. Guyana's plantation sector, unlike Suriname's, contributed successfully to the economy until the late twentieth century (Adamson 1972). As a result, employment on the estates remained sizeable, and this led to rivalry between black and Indian laborers. In this way, the labor supply, job competition, and labor strikes characterized the settlement history of British Indians in Guyana. By 1911, there were 60,707 Indians on the plantations, and only 10,215 “others” (Mandle 1973: 21). The ethnogenesis of this section of the Indo-Guyanese population differed from that of Suriname, since it was subjected to external (competitive) forces.

Outside of the plantation sector, the majority of the British Indians settled as peasants, involved mainly in rice production and processing. Land reform arrived after several crises in sugar production in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, and reform led to a rise in landownership among Indians and the emergence of Indian villages. From 1881 to 1911, the Indo-Guyanese peasant population almost doubled to sixty-three thousand (Ramdin 2000: 68). The percentage of Indians living in villages increased from 46 percent in 1911 to 56 percent in 1946, and they were concentrated in the counties of Essequibo, Demerara, and Berbice. During this period, the Indian urban population remained stable at less than 6 percent. The Guyanese agricultural labor class and peasantry consisted primarily of Indians since most blacks had migrated

to the towns (Garner 2008: 61). The Indo-Guyanese population resided in two demographic clusters—those on plantations, and those in villages.

As in Suriname, in Guyana a uniformity of religious practices and organizations developed along with a local community life (de Kruijf 2006: 68, 73–75), manifest in common rituals and beliefs, and the establishment of temples and mosques. For example, in 1860–1890, the number of temples increased from two to thirty-three, and there were twenty-nine mosques (Vertovec 1996: 117). At the national level, Hindus in 1934 organized themselves in the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha (ibid.: 122). Hindu festivals were celebrated extensively both on the plantations and in the agrarian communities (Ramdin 2000: 187–93). In all cases, however, “celebrations were both a demonstration of difference, icons of Indianness, and binding agents. Yet, even then, they were West Indian mutations rather than carbon copies of the Indian happenings” (de Kruijf 2006: 69).

For the Indo-Guyanese, the transnational impact was much more interwoven with the process of ethnogenesis than in Suriname. Seecharan (2011) details the process through which “mother India” was constructed in the everyday lives of the Indo-Guyanese from 1890–1930. Although this process was determined mostly by local circumstances, it was also shaped by the enthusiasm of British intellectuals for India and the rise of Indian nationalism. Transnational connections also linked several Dutch- and French-speaking Indian communities in the Caribbean. Samaroo (1987) notes several different connections: the arrival of new immigrants who could tell of developments at home; exchanges of letters; visits by Hindu and Muslim scholars; Caribbean Indian journalists, intellectuals, and politicians supporting the agitation in India; the impact of Indian movies (starting in the late 1930s); and increasing numbers of Caribbean Indians traveling to India for study, religious training, business, and, most of all, to visit ancestral places. Both Samaroo and Seecharan argue that visits to the Caribbean by Indian politicians and religious scholars empowered local communities and helped shape their identities.

Apart from agriculture, Indians were involved in other pursuits that included petty shop trade, huckstering, money lending, and landownership. Their participation in the educational system increased rapidly, to the point where between 1930 and 1950 Indians were over-represented among lawyers (Garner 2008: 77). As in Suriname, social and geographical mobility enabled the expansion of local ethnic networks.

A markedly different set of conditions in Guyana produced ethnic leadership that was active, highly politicized, and more economically and less culturally oriented than that in Suriname. One of the most powerful conditions in Guyana was the ethnic division along sectorial lines: while Indians worked as laborers on the plantations and in rice production, and as peasants, most blacks were urban dwellers who held government jobs. As a result, “unions developed into the mouthpieces of entire communities, platforms on which

the discord and antipathy of ethnic collectivities were expressed and propagated. Hence, they became the vehicles of rivalry, early expressions of organized ethnic competition ... to cater to ethno specific needs..." (de Kruijf 2006: 78). Grassroots organizations in Guyana included social and religious organizations and trade unions in which Indo-Guyanese participated. These were forerunners of the later political parties (Premdas 1996: 46–49). Politically, Indians were represented predominantly by these mass organizations.

Starting in the second decade of the twentieth century, a number of organizations were established to promote Indo-Guyanese interests, the most notable being the British East Indian Organization and the East Indian Young Men's Society League (Ramdin 2000: 183–87). Their leaders were educated and politically inclined, and included members of the Canadian Presbyterian Church. They regretted the loss of Hindi as a language, but considered it "imperative for Indian children to learn English, as it was indispensable to their success in the colony" (Seecharan 2011: 327–28). Education in Hindi was never an important part of the formation of the Indo-Guyanese identity as it was in Suriname.

Both on the plantations and in the villages, the Indo-Guyanese managed to establish all of the primordial institutions summarized in Table 2. However, this process differed from that in Suriname in three respects: First, the size of the population and the degree of its concentration were much higher. Second, the Indo-Guyanese had a more demanding leadership, one that emerged primarily from the labor struggles on the plantations. Finally, the ethnogenesis there was influenced by ethnic competition on the plantations, which induced a closure of boundaries.

The situation in Jamaica was markedly different from Suriname and Guyana. Between 1845 and 1916, thirty-seven thousand Indian indentured laborers immigrated to Jamaica, of which 38 percent returned to India. Women made up 22–30 percent of the workforce (Shepherd 2006: 309). In 1943, just 1.4 percent of the Jamaican population was immigrants. Perhaps the small size of the Indian population explains the lesser attention paid to it by scholars; according to Shepherd, "Existing published works tend to marginalize the history of Indians in Jamaica" (1993: 14). Despite the scarcity of relevant literature, it is possible to describe the major developmental features of the Indian community.

The small number of Indians in Jamaica appears to be the consequence of the steady contraction of the plantation system, which resulted in an often-interrupted supply of laborers and relatively high costs of immigration (Erllich 1971: 176; Shepherd 1993: 82). In Suriname and Guyana, Indians were initially part of the plantation labor force but later became peasants, owing to the availability of land. In Jamaica, by contrast, access to land was severely limited. Much land was abandoned as too mountainous and arid to support agriculture, and financial constraints prevented most Indians from acquiring cultivable plots (Shepherd 1993: ch. 4). Indians were in no position

to compete for land with the substantially larger black population that had settled down in freehold villages, and consequently few adopted a peasant status (Erlich 1989). Until the 1940s, the majority of the Indians remained a minor part of an agricultural laboring class dominated by blacks.

Indians in Jamaica were severely constrained in forming primordial institutions. Their wide dispersal is said to have undermined the formation of endogenous families. They “shared the general reluctance to have close social relations with the Afro-Caribbeans, but in the absence of strong community networks and religious institutions to reinforce such norms, Indian males more frequently chose partners from the Afro-Caribbean population than did Indians in Trinidad or Guyana, where such unions were very rare” (Shepherd 1993: 209). Under these conditions, the use of Indian languages in Jamaica also faded away. This was just one part of a general loss of Indian culture and assimilation with Afro-Creole norms, which were equated with Christian education and vice versa. What did survive of Indian culture was mostly in the forms of cuisine, musical instruments, and traditional dances (*ibid.*: 206–7).

On the religious front, Indians were in Jamaica considered inferior and faced severe pressures to convert to Christianity. The Scottish Presbyterians and Quakers, in particular, waged a cultural war against the alleged heathenish and pagan Indian religions, and from 1911–1943 the Indian Christian population increased from 29 to 80 percent (*ibid.*: 166). This high conversion rate was likely an outcome of the weak development of Hindu and Muslim religious practices in Jamaica. By 1943, institutionalized forms of Hinduism and Islam were still absent. Unlike British Guyana and Trinidad (see Samaroo 1987), no Hindu or Muslim missionaries were active in Jamaica, where national Hindu and Muslim religious organizations were not founded until 1968 and 1950, respectively (Shepherd 2006: 309). Furthermore, the Indian nationalist movement had much less impact on Indians in Jamaica than on those in British Guyana and Trinidad.

Initially, Indian parents in Jamaica were disinclined to send their children to school, especially children who were physically fit and able to work. Later, schools were seen as agencies of de-Indianization. Until 1934, the majority of the Indian children remained outside the school system since few special Indian schools existed and parents did not want their children to receive the Christian religious instruction provided in conventional educational institutions. Indian organizations requested special schools, but the government refused them. The dearth of education severely limited Indian upward social (and geographical) mobility. After the 1940s, Indians started to attend schools in substantial numbers, but they had to go to mixed public schools (Shepherd 1993: ch. 6). Small sections of the Indian population left the plantations and moved to urban areas, most settling in the capital of Kingston, or became involved in other rural activities such as farming, market gardening, domestic work, or shop keeping.

In Jamaica there were few community organizations through which to maintain an ethnic identity. Shepherd claims that in contrast to Guyana and Trinidad, “there is little evidence ... of any grass-root leadership amongst the Indian working class, either during the period of indenture or thereafter...” (ibid.: 234). The first organizations to promote Indian culture in Jamaica were founded between 1930 and 1940 (in 1930, 1937, and 1940), but they had little political impact (Shepherd 2004). The Indo-Jamaican community might have relied on the protection of the Indian government, which after 1920 began paying heed to Indian consciousness in the colonies, but the Jamaican government opposed any intervention. For all of these reasons, Indo-Jamaicans were left politically unprotected against the oppressive government and churches (ibid.).

On many occasions Jamaica’s Indian organizations pressed for actions that would facilitate the retention of their culture, including (1) special facilities for Indian land acquisition, (2) institution of Indian schools, (3) that the Indian government institute a special agent in the West Indies, (4) that Hindu and Muslim pundits and *maulvis* be appointed as marriage officers, (5) proper religious disposal of Indian dead, and (6) institution of traditional Indian judicial practices. The Government of India and global Hindu organizations backed them in some of these requests, but on every occasion the Jamaican government, refused them, insisting, “The Indians comprised a minority in the population and could not be accorded special benefits over and above those accorded to other sections of the population” (Shepherd 1993: 18). The Afro-Jamaican population supported the government’s stance.

As a result, Indians in Jamaica had no significant leaders. Their number was small and they carried little political weight, for several reasons: Community formation was hampered by exogenous marriages, the extinction of Indian languages, and the demise of customs. Religious organizations were established decades later in Jamaica than in Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad. No Indian middle class emerged. Above all, powerful institutions—namely the churches and the state—pressed Indians to assimilate and blocked transnational political and religious forces that might have helped them. Although the ethnic elite did eventually respond to local concerns, this response came much later than in other Indo-Caribbean communities, and was comparatively weak.

Ethnogenesis in Jamaica failed because the Indo-Jamaicans failed to establish primordial institutions or develop communal networks, and they lacked political leadership or clout. However, the literature on ethnogenesis in Jamaica provides two different explanations for the assimilation of the British Indians there. Erlich states, “The adaptive patterns of village settlements, as in the Trinidadian experience, does not appear to have been an option available in Jamaica. On the other hand, the geographical distribution of the plantation system in Jamaica so differed from that of Guyana that it did not permit sizeable concentrations of Indians to develop...” (1971: 177).

From Erlich's perspective, then, the final outcome of ethnogenesis was determined by concentration and ecological conditions rather than population size. The problem with this explanation is that it leaves the Indians themselves out of the process and gives weight only to external conditions. In Suriname, even though plantations were relatively far apart, Indians succeeded in forming ethnic groups. While it is true that density does sustain ethnic institutions, even small-sized communities could have expanded their scale by connecting with each other. Hence, Erlich's explanation, based merely on ecology and population density, is insufficient.

Shepherd (1993: 17) proposes a somewhat different explanation, that the assimilation of Indians in Jamaica was the outcome of missionary activities, the educational system, the small size and internal weakness of the Indian community, and its feeble economic base. Here, too, the tendency is to "exonerate" the principal agents involved (the Indian community) and attribute the outcome to external institutions. Even if the operation of these institutions is taken for granted, this explanation of Indo-Jamaican development is unconvincing. When we recall that a significant proportion of Indo-Jamaicans were Christians, it is difficult to reconcile this with people's resistance to sending their children to Christian schools. Further, the Suriname experience shows us that when opportunities for education in Hindi were restricted or denied, this in itself did not preclude successful ethnogenesis.

The same argument holds for the Jamaican government's rejection, then belated recognition of traditional religious marriages. Whether such marriages were formally recognized or not, they were in fact performed and part of the operative ethnic institutions. Only one variable remains that can explain the absence of ethnogenesis in Jamaica, and that is political representation. In Suriname, Indians were directly or indirectly (through Governor Kielstra) appointed to parliament, while in Guyana political representation was won mostly by strong ethnic mass organizations, but in Jamaica such organizations were weakly developed.

Two related elements put the Jamaican case into perspective. First, "ethnic pride" is a powerful bonding sentiment that refers to group members feeling that their group is better than other groups in terms of somatics or culture. Although this feeling of distinctiveness and superiority was definitely present among a small group of Indians in Jamaica (Erlich 1976), there are no indications that it was widespread, as it was in Suriname and Guyana. Second, expressions of groupness, and of distinctiveness—of a "collective" taste, for example—must be voiced and successfully defended by community leaders. This was hardly visible in Jamaica early on, and even much later, leaders' advocacy lacked enthusiasm. In sum, there is little evidence to support references to the Indo-Jamaicans as a "community."

Our comparison of processes of ethnogenesis in Suriname, Guyana, and Jamaica reveals that several factors are involved beyond the variables



summarized in [Table 2](#), and I want to highlight three of these. The first is the factor of economic positions. In Suriname, the Indian laborers settled down as peasants and were not involved in a lengthy competition with the black population for jobs, and so there was little “opposition” between them (Scott 1990). In Guyana, on the other hand, Indians were part of both the agricultural labor class and the peasantry. This double positioning generated continual competition between Indians and blacks, and grimmer racial stereotyping than was encountered in Suriname or Jamaica (Premdas 1996: 45). The economic interests of the Guyanese agricultural laborers and peasants also conflicted with those of the urban black population. In Jamaica, there was much less negative racial stereotyping, and when racial relations did deteriorate during the 1930s it was primarily due to job competition (Shepherd 2004). Although Indo-Jamaicans were rivals of blacks in the rural labor market, their numbers were too small to present any real threat to the black population.

The second factor is that of ecological circumstances. In Jamaica these were the location of the plantations, the subsequent distribution of the Indian population, and, less explicitly, the relative size of this population vis-à-vis that of blacks. The assumption is that Indian settlements were isolated from each other, and thus Indians had no choice but to assimilate. However, the same ecological situation characterized Suriname, at least from the start of immigration in 1873 to the eve of the First World War, and yet the Indians there managed to expand their ethnic networks and institutions beyond the confines of the plantations. In other words, social isolation was not an inevitable outcome of such a situation. In Guyana, the relatively high regional density of the Indian population alleviated the need to bring the community together, though there too, intra-community contacts were common (Bisnauth 2000, ch. 6).

The final factor that I want to call attention to is the political one, which here has two key facets. The first is the weak Indian leadership in Jamaica. While powerful institutions such as the churches and the state did limit the actions of Indians in Jamaica, it is remarkable the degree to which Indian leadership there remained predominantly cultural; one looks in vain for the sorts of economic, intellectual, or political leaders that emerged in Guyana. The Indo-Jamaican leadership was not only weak but also, because of its late emergence, feebly represented during crucial historical situations. Although attempts were made to defend Indian cultural heritage, they yielded no fruit.

This outcome was probably an effect of a factor that I think is important: differences between the Dutch and British colonizers. Thakur (1989: 116) argues, “The Dutch ... operated on the principle of cultural relativism as opposed to the British, whose ethnocentric approach imposed their cultural and institutional values upon their colonized peoples.” Thakur draws this characterization of Dutch colonialism from Indonesia, but aspects of it can be seen in Suriname’s less stringent assimilation policy and in Kielstra’s

social philosophy. In Guyana, a relatively strong Indian middle class led the community to successfully defend the Indian heritage against total Anglicization (Seecharan 2011, *passim*).

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have argued that a primordial perspective, though it incorporates “external” elements, retains a “primacy” over the circumstantial approach. By implication, an ethnic group is constituted “by the content of ethnicity that functions as ‘boundaries.’” But the emergence of (adjusted) primordial ethnicity is not a “natural” process, and requires actors that shape it. I have hypothesized that the ethnogenesis of the British Indians in Suriname was primordial in nature. The ethnic community could only be established through endogamy, religion, language, symbolic representations, and tastes. Ethnic institutions could be molded by favorable external circumstances, such as plentiful land, or the absence or smallness of impinging ethnic groups. One can argue that ethnic group formation in Suriname was successful because of such exceptional circumstances. The case of Guyana, although outcomes there were slightly different, suggests that this was not a matter of mere happenstance.

The Indo-Guyanese more successfully concentrated demographically than did their co-ethnics in Suriname. They built ethnic institutions, developed communal networks, and produced a strong leadership. Thus, the Indo-Guyanese experience is undoubtedly a case of primordial ethnogenesis. However, unlike Suriname, this did not happen in relative isolation. The British Indians in Guyana had to contend with ongoing job competition and derogatory treatment. This opposition spurred them to develop ethnic organizations that were stronger and more politicized than were Suriname’s community organizations. In this way, Guyanese ethnogenesis was primordial, but was influenced by circumstantial forces. Considering both the Surinamese and Guyanese cases together, it seems unlikely that primordial development there was a matter of coincidence. Both cases support the hypothesis that, with latent ethnicity as a precondition, the primary forces that shape ethnogenesis are the development of ethnic institutions, communal networks, and strong leadership.

Underlying the adopted hypothesis—that ethnogenesis is basically a primordial process—is the idea that primordialism and circumstantialism, if not separable, are at least distinguishable. Most studies have argued that processes of ethnification involve interactions of primordial and circumstantial forces. While this may generally be true, there are cases where such interaction is minimal or even absent. Recall that the circumstantial forces were compelling in Jamaica, significant but not decisive in Guyana, and practically absent in Suriname. Even if one agrees that ethnic institutions—or ethnic boundaries, for that matter—undergo alteration in the process of ethnic formation, these institutions nonetheless acquire a primacy that is necessary for a group to come into existence.

The Jamaican case illustrates the argument in a negative way: if the primacy of these institutions is lacking, then other groups will determine the outcome.

Finally, the claim that ethnicity is defined by boundaries cannot be sustained. The case of Guyana illustrates that it is precisely the “ethnic stuff”—ethnic institutions and all that goes with them—that enable primordial development, the formation of ethnic identities, and the establishment of group boundaries. In all three of the cases I have presented here, it appears that it is the “stuff” that functions as “boundaries.” Without it, there are no boundaries and the ethnic groups will tend to dissolve.

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Abstract: As a concept, ethnogenesis presupposes a category of individuals that are not a group becomes a group. Most accounts of ethnogenesis exhibit two features: they confuse ethnogenesis with the resilience of ethnicity, and they describe the “emergence” of ethnic groups as a response to external circumstances. This paper deviates from these perspectives by adopting a primordial approach, arguing that internal rather than external forces generate group cohesion. I establish three related propositions: First, while the debate between the so-called “circumstantialists” and “primordialists” suggests that these perspectives can be used interchangeably depending on scholarly preference, I argue that a “primacy” holds in favor of the primordial perspective. Second, I assert that this primordial perspective must be redefined, since ethnogenesis always incorporates “external” elements, thus changing and adapting to specific social and physical ecologies. Consequently, an ethnic group is constituted by the content of the ethnicity which functions as “boundaries.” Third, I contend that the emergence of primordial (though adjusted) ethnicity is not a “natural” process but instead requires actors that shape it, and that the initiatives of ethnic leaders are crucial in this regard. These propositions are established through a comparison of British Indians in the three former Caribbean plantation colonies of Suriname, Guyana, and Jamaica.