Cultural Contestation as a Tool for Examining Ethnic Conflict

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Cartoons of Mohammed in a Danish newspaper, the yearly visit of Japan’s prime minister to a Shinto shrine honoring the country’s war dead including World War II war criminals, displays of the Confederate battle flag over the capitol of South Carolina, and French schoolgirls wearing Islamic headscarves have all set off political conflicts and sometimes violence in recent years. Why is conflict so intense over these cultural expressions? Why do people invest so much emotional energy in these battles? What is at stake in these conflicts and what does winning or losing represent? The answer explored here is that this cultural contestation is about inclusion and exclusion from a society’s symbolic landscape and that such inclusion or exclusion tells us about the politics of acceptance, rejection and access to a society’s resources and opportunities.

For more than a decade, I have worked to analyze the dynamics of cultural contestation in ethnically and racially divided societies asking when such conflicts are part of polarization and escalation and when they provide opportunities for conflict mitigation and improved relationships (Ross 1997; 2001; 2007; forthcoming; forthcoming a; forthcoming b). This paper offers an overview of the key concepts I have found useful to explore cultural contestation, some of the cases I have found especially useful in developing my analysis, and key hypotheses about the role of cultural contestation in ethnic conflict.

The core of the argument behind this project is that while ethnic conflict is about clashing interests and incompatible identities, it is the former political scientists most often analyze and that too often the issue of cultural and identity contestation receives little or no serious attention. Yet, a good deal of intense conflict cannot be explained simply by reference to competition over material interests, and to address this imbalance I have tried to take identities seriously and not just as epiphenomena without making the claim that interests are unimportant. My goal here is develop this argument illuminating the contextual understandings that make conflict so emotionally intense using the concepts of cultural contestation, symbolic landscape, psychocultural narratives and dramas, and ritual and cultural performance. These tools give us a language with which to analyze the identity side of ethnic conflict to help understand why and how at certain times cultural expressions and enactments exacerbate conflict and why at others they serve as tools for mitigation. In these processes, we see how more inclusive symbols and rituals can draw former opponents into a new relationship while more exclusive ones harden the lines of differentiation. Ethnic conflicts are not one time events; nor are they unchanging. Rather, the within and between group meanings of events matter in great part when they alter the intersubjective understandings of local parties.

In my own work, I have examined conflicts such as Loyal Order parades in Northern Ireland, language use in Catalonia and Québec, control over the holy sites in Jerusalem, Muslim headscarves in French schools, challenges to, and changes in, the monuments, museums and memorials in post-Apartheid South Africa, and Confederate battle flag displays in the United States. These and many other recent conflicts are centered around questions concerning control over, and inclusion in and exclusion from a society’s symbolic landscape as represented in visual images, sacred sites, physical objects, words, music, images, media or sacred and solemn public celebrations. Examining the symbolic landscape draws our attention to how and when contending groups recognize each other, how they refer to each other in their in-group narratives, and how expressive culture is a tool in group conflicts to control the content of public representations that impacts on resource allocation. Representational battles that are played out through cultural expressions and enactments are hardly new; they are, however, understudied and under theorized among students of conflict in general and ethnic conflict in particular.

First, it presents an overview of the concepts of culture and cultural contestation. Second, it discusses the idea of a symbolic landscape, focusing on which groups and people are present and which are absent in it and how different groups in society are portrayed when they are present. Third, it explains the concepts of psychocultural narratives and psychocultural dramas as tools for the analysis of cultural contestation and collective memory. Fourth, it connects
narratives and dramas to rituals and cultural performances, suggesting important connections between cultural contestation and the politics of inclusion/exclusion.

**Two Brief Cases: France and South Africa**

Before introducing the key analytic terms, it probably useful to describe two of the cases I have written about to develop my argument that psychocultural expressions and enactments can have a major impact on the course of ethnic conflict. The central dynamic I focus on here is the extent to which those holding competing positions move to more inclusive or exclusive framing of the conflict in ways that either acknowledges or denies the core identity needs of the opposing side.¹ In neither case is the tendency towards polarization or mitigation anyway near total. For example, while tension in France between supporters of the right of schoolgirls to wear Islamic headscarves and opponents is high in no way has it produced the level of mutual denial or violence found in conflicts such as Israel-Palestine, Kashmir, or Sri Lanka. Likewise, while the changes in South Africa’s symbolic landscape and the mitigation of racial tension there is significant, there are still important manifestations of former white domination during apartheid and earlier that are plainly visible. An important reason to examine these cases is to emphasize both the change that has occurred in each over the past twenty years and to view conflict and its mitigation along a continuum and not as an all or nothing matter.

**Islamic headscarves in French schools.** The conflict over headscarves in schools first erupted in France in 1989 when three young girls were expelled from a middle school in Creuil, forty miles north of Paris. However, it is important to point out that the conflict involving the country’s Muslim residents, many of whom were France citizens, over issues of immigration and integration was hardly new and that there were marches, demonstrations and political demands made throughout the preceding decade—most of which emphasized Muslim demands for inclusion and integration. Although, an administrative court ruling supposedly settled the headscarf dispute in 1989, holding that such conflicts were to be handled locally and that wearing headscarves or other religious symbols was not necessarily a problem if they were not provocative, proselytizing, did not pressure other students or tools of propaganda. But the matter hardly went away.² On the contrary. While the original dispute was settled at the time, it was hardly resolved as the question morphed into additional political issues and periodic crises that have been at the center of French political life since then (Bowen 2007; Bowen 2004; Ross 1993b; 2007: Chapter 6). Fifteen years later, in 2004, France passed a law that outlawed all conspicuous religious signs in public schools including headscarves after an animated period of debate involving political speeches, a Presidential commissions, extensive media coverage and strong public expressions on the matter.

Why, one might ask did a conflict of great emotional intensity erupt over what a handful of young girls wore on their head in a country where dress codes are hardly rigid and where public nudity is often tolerated. My answer is that as in many cultural conflicts, the ostensible issue (headscarves here) in France is not the underlying source of the conflict. To put it another way, conflicts about headscarves are really about identity, belonging, inclusion and exclusion, and power in French society yet the discussion of it in homes, in workplaces and in the press

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¹ In discussing conflicts, it is rhetorically useful to act as if there are two clearly defined opposing parties. Empirically, this assumption is rarely accurate as most long-term conflicts involve multiple parties with multiple goals. In addition, it ignores important ways that groups we refer to with a single noun such as Israelis and Palestinians are internally diverse socially, politically and culturally.

² In this conflict, like many others, shifts in language took place over time. Originally called a headscarf (foulard), the word voile (veil) which has a more religious connotation increasingly was used over time. In addition, some people began to the Arabic words chador or hijab especially when referring to a full-length garment and not just a head covering.
rarely recognized that the headscarf was a symbolic expression of these deeper issues and the powerful fears underlying them. The dominant French narrative throughout the period emphasize ways that French culture was at risk and the refusal of French Muslims, most of whom are either North African immigrants or their descendents (Hargreaves 1995), to integrate as the majority demanded raised anxieties that fed xenophobic rhetoric and set up what were often arbitrary loyalty tests.  

For many, the debate has revolved around the French idea of laïcité, often imperfectly translated as secularism and is often mistakenly equated to the American idea of the separation of church and state. In contrast, for the French, laïcité means state neutrality with respect to religion and is rooted in the long struggle to curb the power of the Catholic Church going back to before the French Revolution. During the Third Republic (1870-1940) the French established a centralized state system of universal primary education that explicitly designated the schools as the responsibility of the state not the church. Unlike the Anglo-Saxon notion of civil society that protects citizens from a state that is too strong, the Republican idea is that there should be no strong intermediary groups between the citizen and the state, all citizens should be treated equally, and the expression of religion is a private matter that should be excluded from the schools, government offices, and other public spaces.

Interestingly, while only a few hundred schoolgirls wore headscarves and most French Muslims oppose the headscarf, the tone of the conflict has increased their sense of alienation and the discrimination directed at them. The violent outbursts in the large French suburban ghettos near Paris since 2005 provides ample evidence that legislation regarding school attire is hardly a meaningful response to ethnic relations in the country. One measure of its inadequacy is to consider the list of over two dozen proposals President Jacques Chirac’s Stasi Commission made in 2003 and to recognize that the headscarf law was the only one adopted or even seriously considered.

A way that many analyses including my own (e.g. Bowen 2007) have examined this conflict is to emphasize the clashing worldviews that have produced competing narratives about what the French nation has been, is, and should be. I have called these hard versus soft Republicanism with proponents of each position digging in their heels and refusing to acknowledge or engage each other in ways that could produce flexibility, creative problem-solving and social experimentation that would begin to address the complicated issues of the increasing diversity in France and other European societies. The lack of movement has meant that the mutually exclusive narratives and the control over public space, including the media, remains highly contested and those with more social power continue to emphasize ways that they expect and are willing to compel those with less power to conform to their demands.

South Africa: Memory and expanding the symbolic landscape

We have many expectations from the emotionally strong actions that are taken to

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3 There are also a good number from West Africa and Turkey.
4 Of course there are more than a few contradictions here was well such as the fact that the state maintains church buildings and in recent years has funded the construction of mosques (Ross 2007: 192-94).
5 There were proposals that would have increased the teaching of languages and courses with more historical content relevant to the Islamic world in schools, others to mark Muslim (and Jewish) holidays as well as social and economic proposals to improve the daily lives of France’s Muslims living in the suburban ghettos.
6 I have termed these hard versus soft Republicanism but these are not the only narratives relevant in this conflict (Ross 2007: Chapter 7). There are Muslim narratives as well and some of these differ by the country of origin. These accounts often emphasize France as colonizer and have a rarely express admiration for what the French have called their “civilizing mission.”
symbolize radical regime change. Think about the heads of statues sliced off in French churches at the time of the Revolution, the destruction of Lenin statues throughout the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s’ or the Taliban’s exploding the ancient Buddha of Bamiyan in Afghanistan in 2001. Given these dramatic cases, we might ask why after the fall of the venal apartheid regime in South Africa in 1994 was there no destruction of Afrikaner sacred sites, no wholesale renaming of cities, towns and streets, and no rapid effort to impose a new exclusivist narrative on the country? How and why did a state that symbolized intolerance to the world exhibit tolerance and inclusion despite widespread expectations that this would not occur?

South Africa’s symbolic landscape, like its government, was under white rule for centuries and the country’s black majority had few political rights and no social equality. Black protests from the early days brought little significant change and only more repression. While this is not the place to go into the story of 350 years of white rule, it is important to note that there was long-term high conflict among whites. It pitted the Afrikaners, the descendents from the early Dutch and other settlers opposed British rule, against the English speaking settlers. While tension was high far longer, the violence ended when the British secured control over the country in the early 20th century following the Second Boer War (1899-1902) and the establishment of the Union of South Africa. The Afrikaners mobilized culturally and politically and took power in the country in 1948 and created apartheid. Opponents of the regime were blacks as well as coloureds (mixed race), Asians, and a certain number of whites. Opposition led to repression and trials that sent the top leaders to jail or exile. More than a few observers felt that the white regime would end only through violence but despite scattered sabotage within the country, attacks from exiled military units, and domestic protest and violence, the Afrikaner led Nationalist Party remained in control and its security services were in danger of being defeated.

Yet change did occur and it was not violent as many expected. President F. W. de Klerk announced in late 1989 that the government would release most political prisoners including Nelson Mandela, allow exiled opponents to return, that the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party would be unbanned, and that the government planned to negotiate a transition to a power sharing and possibly majority rule regime. Incredibly this was accomplished by 1994 when the country held its first election in which all citizens were eligible to participate. Nelson Mandela was easily elected South Africa’s President and the ANC gained control of the Parliament. While Mandela had said that there would be no wholesale destruction of apartheid and colonial era monuments and memorials, that no new capital would be built, and that streets and cities would not be renamed wholesale, we still have to understand how this was actually accomplished.

Both inside and outside South Africa, people want to give Mandela full credit for the transition and indeed he made it clear, for example, that he would not support the destruction of sacred Afrikaner sites such as the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria, the Blood River Memorial, or the Paarl Language Monument near Cape Town. While there were countless gestures, statements and actions Mandela made that clearly mattered here, it is too simple however to say that Mandela is all that mattered. Indeed, there were a wide range of people from all races in South Africa who put a great deal of energy into thinking about and imagining what a multi-cultural, majority rule South Africa. At the same time, there was also vocal opposition from those on the right who opposed majority rule and for a time threatened violence and from those on the left who wanted more radical change. Finding a middle way was not just a political matter but one that required significant attention to cultural expressions and actions. In the end, South Africa used three parallel strategies with respect to its symbolic landscape: appropriation, modification, and addition (Ross 2007: Chapters 8-9).

Appropriation was relatively simple and meant that the new government moved into places that the former white regime had controlled and that symbolized its power, such as the Union Buildings in Pretoria and the Parliament in Cape Town. Modification meant that key
elements of a site’s meaning and presentation were changed. Obvious examples here are that universities, official museums, housing and employment look very different than they once did. At the universities, the composition of the student body is now multiracial, and museums present exhibits from all parts of society. Modification has also meant that the Voortrecker Monument Heritage site now welcomes visitors of all races and presents itself as more of a cultural than political site placing the Afrikaner experience in a larger historical context than it once did.

Addition meant developing new sites or sometimes radically changing old ones in symbolically and politically important ways. Examples include new museums that tell the story of the resistance to apartheid as in the Hector Peterson Museum in Soweto, the Apartheid Museum in Gold Reef City, or documenting the personal lives and fate of the more than 50,000 residents of District 6 in Cape Town who were displaced when the area was designated for destruction and redevelopment under the White Areas Act. For some, the radical transformation of two former prisons has been especially significant. Robben Island, long a prison for dissidents and the home of a Leper Colony, was Mandela’s home for over 25 years when he and other top ANC leaders not in exile were imprisoned there. Today it is the home of a museum that offers the uplifting story of resistance and ultimate triumph told in a particularly moving way that includes a visit inside the prison with a former prisoner who takes you to the cell where he was housed and graphically recounts his harrowing experiences. In an equally moving and creative gesture, Johannesburg’s notorious Old Fort Prison complex which also housed important regime opponents over the years has been transformed into Constitution Hill, the home of the country’s top court.

In South Africa there was a great deal of uncertainty about what the political transition would bring in terms of race and ethnic relations given the country’s past history. The political transition was an inclusive one, however, in ways that were very consistent with the local standing ANC positions. What interests me here is that this was strongly reinforced through inclusive cultural expressions and enactments on a variety of fronts. I have mentioned just a few of these in the above, but the point is that the consistency and magnitude of the messages and actions were clearly significant in the articulation of a vision of a new South Africa and a narrative intended to make space for people from all racial groups. Will that be sufficient to overcome the great inequalities that still exist in the country or to deal with its high rates of AIDS and insure long-term democratic stability? One would be foolish to offer a definitive answer at this time; we can say however that South Africa did teach us a number of lessons about the importance of inclusive cultural narratives and rituals in the democratic transition process.

CULTURE AND CULTURAL CONTESTATION

Culture has been an elusive concept with a wide range of shifting meanings and usages in the social sciences. As a result, it is sometimes proposed that the concept not be used altogether. However, rather than seeking to resolve the differences among scholars across fields, it is more useful here to be clear how we use culture and how it informs the analysis we offer. To do this, it is helpful to identify the core of our definition of culture as a system of shared meanings and meaning-making through semiotic practices (Geertz 1973a, 1973b; Schweder and LeVine 1984; Wedeen 2002).

For many years, anthropology emphasized culture as a set of traits that distinguished one cultural group from another (Kroeber and Kluckholm 1952). A major shift in how culture was understood occurred when, as D’Andrade (1984) observed, interest in cognition and cognitive framing came into prominence in the social sciences starting in the late 1960’s. He contended that the radical shift from the view of culture as behavior that could be understood within a stimulus-response framework to culture as a system of meaning is found in a number of fields. It gave rise to an emphasis on culture as a system of meaning that emphasizes how people make sense of the world in which they live and interpret the actions of others (D'Andrade 1984: 88;
Geertz 1973a, 1973b). It views culture as public, shared meanings while behaviors, institutions, objects, and social structures are understood not as culture itself but as culturally constituted phenomena (Ross forthcoming a; Spiro 1984). This view of culture is particularly useful for the examination of politics and ethnic conflict for it draws our attention to the competing identities and worldviews that clash and the importance of understanding groups’ fears, hopes and interpretations of their own actions and those of others. It also opens the door to a less static view of culture than the trait-based formulations and means that the contextual definition and redefinition of cultural meanings became a central problem for investigation.

Culture, from this perspective, is a worldview containing specific scripts that shape why and how individuals and groups behave as they do, and includes both cognitive and affective beliefs about social reality as well as assumptions about when, where, and how people in one’s culture and those in other cultures are likely to act in particular ways (Berger 1995; Chabal and Daloz 2006). For purposes of political analysis, I emphasize that shared understandings occur among people who also have a common (and almost invariably named) identity that distinguishes them from outsiders. Culture, in short, marks what people experience as “a distinctive way of life” characterized in the subjective we-feelings of cultural group members (and outsiders), and expressed though specific behaviors (customs and rituals) —both sacred and profane—which mark the daily, yearly, and life cycle rhythms of its members and reveal how people view past, present, and future events and understand choices they face (Berger 1995). Cultural metaphors and narratives have cognitive meanings that describe group experiences, high affective salience that emphasizes unique intragroup bonds that set one group’s experience apart from that of others, and scripts that direct action.

For Wedeen (2002) and others Geertz overemphasizes the integration of culture and fails to consider ways that it is both contested and never fully bounded. She contends therefore that culture should be approached as semiotic practices of meaning-making that emphasize what language and symbols do but also the effects of institutional arrangements, structures of domination and strategic interests (2002: 714). It “designates a way of looking at the world that requires an account of how symbols operate in practice, why meanings generate action, and why actions produce meanings when they do” (2002: 720) arguing that examining meaning-making practices helps us understand the politics of how particular meanings become authoritative.7

Often people have an image of culture as unified and monolithic. This is a serious mistake. It should be pointed out, however, that the fact that different individuals understand each other and share a common identity does not imply agreement that widely-held meanings are necessarily acceptable to all or that all share the same intensity of identification (Cohen 1991). To the contrary there are invariably intense intracultural differences and conflicts over meaning and identity, control over symbols and rituals, and the imposition of one interpretation rather than another on a situation (Ross 2007; Scott 1985). In this same vein, Laitin contends that culture highlights points of concern to be debated (1988: 589) and not just areas of agreement. Sharing a cultural identity does not mean that people are necessarily in agreement on specifics, only that they possess a similar understanding of how the world works.

Participating in a system of shared meanings is not the same as agreement on specific values or engagement in the same behaviors. As Levine argues, “Culture represents a consensus on a wide variety of meanings among members of an interacting community approximating that of the consensus on language among members of a speech-community” (1984: 68). However, this does not mean there is unity in thoughts, feelings, behavior and even conceptions of the social order. This point is crucial for it helps us understand that within cultural communities

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7 Others such as Bourdieu (1977), Foucault (1979), and Swidler (1986) also emphasize culture as practice referring to both meaning-making and political relationships that privilege certain actions and groups over others.
there is frequent intragroup conflict and competition such as one finds between religious and secular Jews in Israel, Hindu nationalists and socialists in India, and Republicans and Nationalists among Catholics in Northern Ireland. Because culture and its narratives offer in-group agreement about meaning but not necessarily about substance, conflict and its management is (at least) a two-level game, with one level focusing on within group differences and the second on what occurs between groups. Finally, it is crucial to recognize that what people who share a group identity believe is shared is often greater than what is actually shared, and is overestimated.

Cultures and cultural differences do not themselves cause conflict (Eller 1999; Posner 2004) but are the lenses through which the causes of conflict are refracted (Avruch and Black 1993: 133-134). As a result, cultural meanings and the emotions associated with them are not invariant within a group and intergroup interaction and contestation in turn affect them. For example, in the Middle East and South Asia there are sacred sites that different religious communities have at times shared, while at other times as conflict between groups has intensified, exclusive claims for their use has increased. Cultural conflicts are not just out there ready to happen as Kaplan’s (1993) “ancient hatreds” argument would have us believe. Rather, as conflicts evolve the intensity of emotions surrounding cultural expressions and enactments often changes—sometimes increasing and sometimes decreasing.

Culture is a mechanism for connecting people across time and space and provides powerful tools for expressing inclusion and exclusion in a community. While group conflicts invariably include differences over access to, or the allocation of, tangible resources such as land, government funds, or political positions, cultural contestation draws our attention to issues of identity, recognition, and inclusion and exclusion that quickly come into play when leaders and groups evoke cultural images that stir up deeply-held and clashing feelings. In these conflicts culture operates in what Eller (1999:48) describes as a code for authentic and alternative groupness, and as the basis of context-specific political claims.

Cultural contestation is conflict that is ostensibly about cultural expressions or enactments that becomes intense when it engages core group identity issues (Ross 2007). Often it is polarizing and emphasizes mutually exclusive, zero-sum options. Cultural contestation can rarely be resolved through reference to higher order authorities or a shared set of standards since typically these do not exist or are not accepted by all sides. As a result, politics rooted in cultural and identity claims easily moves to mutual denial in which each party simply ignores or denies the claims of the other and is fearful at times that even acknowledging their existence weakens their own claims (Kelman 1987). These conflicts often revolve around existential issues involving group recognition, acknowledgment, and legitimation that become embodied in objects, places, cultural expressions, and enactments and can be the focus of intense conflict at times.

Cultural contestation can be significant analytically and practically in that the narratives that emerge in conflicts often reveal the parties’ deepest fears and threats and can lead to a richer understanding of a conflict’s core issues. Such understandings can then offer guidance to those interested in conflict mitigation through the identification of central concerns that any settlement must address. In such situations, each side is wary of the other so that peacemaking and peacebuilding offer daunting challenges. Yet because cultural identities have been constructed, they can also be reconstructed as opponents develop more complex views of each other and come to realize that despite all that divides them, there are some important things they share and ways that their futures are interdependent. In this context, one-time opponents in search of peace discover new metaphors and images, build integrative narratives, and develop inclusive ritual expressions that communicate their shared past and linked future as we see in post-apartheid South Africa and more recently in Northern Ireland.
Symbolic landscape

A society’s symbolic landscape communicates social and political meanings through specific public images, physical objects, and other expressive representations. It includes public spaces and especially sacred sites that are not necessarily religious ones and other emotionally important and visible venues, as well as representations associated with a group’s identity found in the mass media, theater, school textbooks, music, literature, and public art. Symbolic landscapes reflect how people understand their world and others in it but they can also be significant shapers of these worlds when they establish and legitimate particular normative standards and power relations within and between groups. As Cosgrove observes:

The landscape idea represents a way of seeing—a way in which some Europeans have represented themselves and to others the world about them and their social relationships with it, and through which they have commented on social relations. Landscape is a way of seeing that has its own history, but a history that can only be understood as part of a wider history of economy and society…whose origins and implications extend well beyond the use and perception of land; that has its own techniques of expression, but techniques which it shares with other areas of cultural practice (Cosgrove 1998: 1).

Symbolic landscapes communicate inclusion and exclusion, hierarchy, and portray dominant and subordinate groups in particular ways. The meanings a symbolic landscape conveys invites us to ask: Who is present and who is absent in public representations? What are the qualities of those people and objects portrayed in it? Who controls the representations and to what extent are they contested? How is hierarchy portrayed and what qualities are associated with particular positions within a society’s hierarchy?

Inclusion and exclusion is often powerfully expressed through the restriction or expansion of a society’s symbolic landscape as the chapters that follow show. Exclusion of groups from the symbolic landscape is an explicit form of denial and assertion of power. In contrast, a more inclusive symbolic landscape is a powerful expression of societal inclusion that communicates a mutuality and shared stake in society. It renders the previously unseen visible, gives voice to those once voiceless, and can offer powerful messages to young people and help to reshape relations between groups as in post-apartheid South Africa, or to talk about what was previously kept invisible as in the conflict over marking the fact that George Washington’s housed his slaves in the nation’s capitol from when it was on what is now Independence Hall Mall in Philadelphia from 1790-1797. Inclusion offers acceptance and legitimation that can reflect and promote changes in intergroup relationships. Through inclusion, groups can more easily identify and help mourn past losses and express hopes and aspirations for a common future. As symbolic statements of acknowledgment, it is no wonder that particular sites and the representations they contain can become the source of intense controversy between groups but also within the previously socially invisible group. What stories do they choose to tell about themselves? How is this related to who can speak for the group? Who controls its narrative and the images associated with it? All of these issues provoke discussion that can be both thoughtful and heated as in the cases of the Holocaust Museum in Washington (Linenthal 2001a) and the District 6 Museum in Cape Town (Rassool and Prosalendis 2001; Soudien forthcoming).

There are hundreds of sites in the US that have only recently been excavated and made public that contain fragments from African-American individuals and communities that had previously been unmarked. Examples include cemeteries in New York, civil war burial sites in South Carolina and rural and urban settlements from which they had either been expelled or left. Only in recent years have the sites and the stories of the people who had lived on them become public.

There has been a particularly rich recent writing on the issue of landscape and memory in South Africa. For example, see Coombes (2003) and Rassool and Prosalendis (2001).
All groups have places that are sacred (Friedland and Hecht 1991) and these often are the most emotionally charged, treasured, and defended sites in the symbolic landscape especially when they are threatened in ways that are experienced as threats to the group itself. These places can be religious or secular and mark key events in a group’s past and are associated with emotionally significant victories or defeats, miracles, and the exploits of heroes (Levinson 1998). Sacred places containing relics linking a group’s past to its present and future are particularly powerful emotionally (Benvenisti 2000), and often there are restrictions on admitting outsiders to them. Sharing these sites with others is frequently hard to even imagine, let alone achieve, as we see in the conflict at Ayodhya (Davis 1996; forthcoming). The emotional power of sacred sites is precisely what makes demands for exclusive physical control over them so common and so strident and why loss of control over a site easily heightens a group’s vulnerability.

**Psychocultural narratives**

Psychocultural narratives are explanations for events—large and small—in the form of short, common sense accounts (stories) that often seem simple. However, the powerful images they contain, and the judgments they make about the motivations and actions of one’s own group and opponents, are emotionally powerful. Narratives are not always internally consistent. For example, group narratives often alternate between portraying one’s own group as especially strong and as especially vulnerable—and the same holds for the portrayal of the opponent (Kaufman 2001), as can be seen in the cases of Jews in Israel and Hindus in India.

Widely shared narratives meet a number of needs and people are especially likely to call upon them when they are disoriented and struggling to make sense of events in situations combining high uncertainty and high stress. In such contexts, group narratives and the familiar shared images they draw upon link people together providing reassurance, relieving anxiety and reinforcing within group worldviews. However, we should also note that within group narratives are never fully consistent, and that there is almost always variation in how members of an ingroup understand and react to any narrative. As a result, narratives are best understood as existing at different levels of generality with specific parts that can be added, discarded, rearranged, emphasized and deemphasized. All cultural traditions have access to multiple pre-existing narratives and images that provide support for diverse actions in anxious times. Narratives, therefore, are not made from whole cloth, but are grounded in selectively remembered, interpreted experiences and projections from them that resonate widely; yet there is no simple correspondence between narrative beliefs and action.

Psychocultural narratives matter because of the roles they play as reflectors, exacerbators or inhibiters, and causes of conflict. As reflectors, narratives tell us how those involved in a conflict understand it; and narratives can increase ingroup conformity where such reflections of the “real world” provide significant cues to ingroup members that make dissenting from a societal consensus potentially risky. For third parties, narratives can bring critical “hot spots” in a group’s narrative to the surface and identify each party’s central fears and concerns that must be addressed if a conflict is to move towards a constructive outcome (Volkan 1997). They also can reveal what each side needs to understand about the other since in many conflicts, one side has

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10 Group members easily feel a sacred site’s power and its vulnerability. When I was in Sri Lanka in 1994 I visited the ancient city at Anuradhapura. It houses beautiful buildings and there are thousands of monks in flowing saffron robes and ordinary people in this important Buddhist pilgrimage center that contains a sacred Bohlidi tree that is guarded day and night. It is said to have grown from a sapling from the tree under which the Buddha gained Enlightenment in 528 BC and was brought from India in the Third Century. The mood is calm and serene. A few years earlier a group of Tamil Tigers attacked Anuradhapura firing automatic weapons killing 180 people and wounding hundreds more. On my visit there I was told about the attack but instead of focusing on the dead and wounded, my host told said, “They tried to destroy our tree.” For him, destruction of the tree would have been a far more deadly attack on Sinhalese Buddhists than the mortal one that took place.
an incomplete, and often inaccurate, sense of what opponents need and what they think the conflict is about (Jervis 1976).

As exacerbaters or inhibitors of conflict, narratives emphasize differences or commonalities among the parties that variously support continuing hostility and escalation or moderation and deescalation in response to an opponent. Sometimes a dominant narrative leaves no room for negotiation as was the case of Franco’s national narrative that made regional languages incompatible with a Spanish identity and a unified Spain. However, following his death, the new government quickly endorsed a different way of thinking about being Spanish, that a person could have multiple identities, for example, as a Spanish citizen and a member of the Catalan or Basque nation. Whereas the first narrative about Spanish identity exacerbated conflict between the central government and Spain’s historic nationalities, the post-Franco narrative diminished it.

Narratives play a causal role in conflict when they frame cognitions and emotions in ways that structure the actions individuals and groups consider as plausible shaping what constitutes evidence and how it is to be used (Bates, de Figueiredo and Weingast 1998; Kaufman 2001). As Smith notes in writing about myths of ethnic descent, “By telling us who we are and whence we came, ethnic myths of descent direct our interests like Weber’s ‘switchmen’ and order our actions towards circumscribed but exalted goals” (Smith 1999: 88). When narratives portray no possible common ground between opponents, search for alternatives to fighting is unlikely. Thus there will be political pressures for leaders to pursue certain kinds of action, while other options will have already been eliminated from consideration. From this perspective, narratives do not force parties to take a particular action if for example they lack the capabilities or support, but narratives may be crucial in severely limiting the range of options taken seriously. Finally, at times it is useful to think about scripts within narratives that are particularly likely to be linked to action when they are linked to a specific situation (Peterson 2002; Peterson 2005)

Elsewhere I have expanded on ways that psychocultural narratives have a number of features that help in the analysis of cultural contestation (Ross 2007 Chapter 2). To explain the power of narratives, I discuss how they evoke past events as metaphors and lessons for the future; they emphasize collective memories; they are highly selective in terms of what is included and excluded; they identify group fears and threats to identity; they emphasize in-group conformity and externalization of responsibility; they evolve over time in response to changing events in any political context; they are not just verbal accounts but they are also enacted in a variety of ways; and group narratives are ethnocentric and filled with moral superiority claims. These features are not mutually exclusive; many have overlapping elements and considering connections among them helps spell out how narratives shape cultural contestation (Ross 2007).

Finally, in examining cultural contestation, it would be a mistake to not recognize that there is generally within-group diversity in any conflict. One reason is political difference concerning dangers to a group and who can best defend it. Another is that the linkage between events and narrative accounts of them is rarely direct. The generality of culture means that it can give rise to multiple narratives to cope with the same event or series of events. Linenthal (2001b) illustrates this idea especially well in his examination of how Oklahoma City residents, in particular, and Americans more generally, came to understand the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal building that killed 168 people. He describes three different, but not necessarily incompatible, narratives to explain the attack and responses to it. The progressive narrative emphasized renewal and recovery as people struggled to rebuild the city and their lives. The redemptive narrative put the horrific events in a religious context, emphasizing the struggle between good and evil and ultimate redemption. The toxic narrative stressed the ongoing disruption and insecurity in many lives after the bombing and the losses that could not be restored. Linenthal’s analysis shows how each of these narratives is deeply rooted in American
culture. They exist side by side, he argues, and many survivors and family members of victims could readily identify how each of the three reflected their own experiences and emotions at different times.¹¹

**Narratives as collective memories.** Ethnic groups commonly recount their narratives in a chronological fashion that blends key events, heroes, metaphors and moral lessons (Kaufman 2001). These recountings can be usefully thought of as collective memories that connect people across time and space that are products of social interaction and individual memory processes (Devine-Wright 2003: 11). Collective memories, as Halbwachs (1980) and others have pointed out, are selective and what is emphasized is facilitated through socially produced mnemonic devices such as physical objects that serve as repositories of group memories. Social memory for Pierre Nora is at odds with history and “takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects” (1989: 9). However, it should be noted that what Nora (1989) terms *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) are best understood as not only physical sites of memory for they are more than simply physical locations that hold memories but can be thought of as images and expressions as well. For Connerton too collective social memory is clearly different from the more specific activity of historical reconstruction, which is more dependent upon evidence than is social memory (1989: 13-14). He argues that:

> We may say, more generally, that we all come to know each other by asking for accounts, by giving accounts, by believing or disbelieving stories about each other’s pasts and identities... We situate the agent’s behavior with reference to its place in their life history; and we situate that behavior with references to its place in the history of the social settings to which they belong (Connerton 1989: 21).

Groups, from this perspective, remember many of the same events, battles, and heroes that a historian might consider important. However, the explanations for them, and how the two modes of understanding interpret their significance is generally highly divergent. In addition, while groups see collective memories as unchanging, objective accounts of a group’s history, it is clear not only that there are often major changes in emphasis and the specific events or people included in group narratives over several generations, but in addition, at any one time there is also variation in which memories are most salient across generations (Devine-Wright 2003: 13). Memories associated with historical events may often be far more recent and develop as political claim making a good deal after an event takes place. For example, the French did not celebrate Bastille Day until a century after 1789; the 1690 Battle of the Boyne in Northern Ireland that only became significant in the 19th century (Roe and Cairns 2003: 174); the 1838 Battle of Blood River in South Africa was unmarked for several decades after it took place (Thompson 1985: 164); and the close emotional between Jewish and Muslim identity and the holy sites in the old city of Jerusalem have dramatically increased the past century. All of these are examples that illustrate how the degree of emphasis on lessons and metaphors associated with particular events varies as collective memories evolve.

The objective manner in which collective memories are often recounted should not blind us to their emotional significance as links between the individual and the group as well as the past and present. Otherwise how could we explain the strong reactions people have to totally non-utilitarian physical objects such as remains of buildings, potsherds, and statues on the one hand or to pieces of cloth or household objects on the other?

¹¹ Linenthal (2001b: 81-108) discusses a fourth narrative that focuses on the role of trauma in the aftermath of the bombing. This account, he argues, dominated the response of health professionals and some government agencies. It was significant in medicalizing and individualizing responses to the events, and providing health care professionals with a standard, acceptable formula for treating those touched by them.
Connerton (1989) asks how collective memories are conveyed and sustained. While he sees a role for unconscious dynamics, his main emphasis is on social processes that make connections to the past that are useful in the present.

We experience our present world in a context which is causally connected with past events and objects... [and] We may say that our experiences of the present largely depend upon our knowledge of the past, and that our images of the past commonly serve to legitimate a present social order (Connerton 1989: 2-3).

For Connerton, the past matters because it shapes our present needs. My argument emphasizes the opposite relationship, namely that how we understand the past grows out of our present needs. However, like Connerton, I emphasize the role that social participation and especially ritual commemoration play in conveying and sustaining knowledge about the past, a topic considered in several chapters. For Connerton, commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices are important because they are performative and participation builds commitment to the group and to its core narrative. Like Halbwachs (1980) Connerton emphasizes that through group membership “individuals are able to acquire, to localize and to recall their memories” (1989: 36). Memories exist in relationships and because the group is interested in the memories that “provide individuals with frameworks within which their memories are localized and memories are localized by a kind of [group] mapping” (Connerton, 1989: 37).

Psychocultural dramas

Psychocultural dramas are conflicts that arise over competing, and apparently irresolvable, claims that engage the central elements of each group’s historical experience and contemporary identity (Ross 2007). Examples of them are found in most ethnic conflicts. The manifest focus of a psychocultural drama can be over the allocation of material resources, or can involve cultural differences over issues such as language, religion, social practices or music and popular culture. At a deeper level, psychocultural dramas are polarizing events about non-negotiable cultural claims, perceived threats, and/or rights that are connected to narratives and metaphors central to a group’s core identity. As psychocultural dramas unfold, they produce reactions that (a) are emotionally powerful, (b) clearly differentiate the parties in conflict, and (c) contain key elements of the larger conflict in which they are embedded. As psychocultural dramas unfold, their powerful emotional meanings link events across time and space increasing ingroup solidarity and outgroup hostility (LeVine and Campbell 1972; Volkan 1997). Through the lens of psychocultural dramas, the multiple levels of these conflicts come into clearer view revealing both barriers to, and opportunities for, their constructive management.

The idea of the psychocultural drama is adapted from Victor Turner’s (1957; 1974) concept of the social drama (Ross 2001a). The term psychocultural, rather than social, emphasizes the deeply rooted identity dynamics in conflicts that link large scale cultural processes through micro-level psychological mechanisms. The social dramas Turner analyzed are conflicts that are not ever fully resolved, but they are settled for a time when the conflict is redefined away from incompatible principles to the symbolic and ritual domain where disputants can emphasize shared concerns and superordinate goals. The social dramas Turner described took place in a society with shared core values. Yet despite shared values, conflict regularly arose over serious breaches in the social order where there is disagreement over the relative importance of the competing principles that groups or individuals invoke to support their divergent positions in the absence of a jural mechanism to choose among the competing principles (Turner 1957: 89-90).

12 Not all conflicts are psychocultural dramas. I exclude disputes that do not mobilize intense feelings and as those which do not divide a community on group lines.
“In a social drama it is not a crime [that constitutes the breach], though it may formally resemble one; it is in reality, a ‘symbolic trigger of confrontation or encounter’” (Turner 1974: 38). As a social drama unfolds, tensions mount and the conflict escalates as each side works vigorously to strengthen its position and to draw in new allies. New issues are easily interjected into expanding conflicts, including memories of past disputes and latent feelings of hostility that resurface as social dramas unfold. Social dramas that are especially difficult to resolve involve structural contradictions between norms that cannot be easily settled in the absence of centralized authorities able to render an authoritative and acceptable decision. Some remain stuck and are periodically replayed as in the case of Jerusalem’s holy sites and Black-White conflict in the U.S. Lacking an obvious solution or a sanctioned effective decision maker, Turner emphasized the importance of ritual mechanisms of redress especially when jural mechanisms such as a judicial system, an administrative process, or legislative process that the parties accept as legitimate either do not exist, or are inadequate because none of the competing principles is clearly more important any of the others. In such conflicts, the scope and intensity of disputes quickly escalates and the initial conflict grows into a crisis.

Turner suggests that redressive action through ritual can follow mobilization of the wider society, including many who had little involvement in the original dispute and the performance of reparatory rituals refocuses peoples’ emotional energy and situates the conflict in a context where disputants can emphasize shared norms and goals. It is not so much that the original conflict is resolved in any profound sense because the competing norms are still present. Rather, the emotional significance of differences diminishes as part of mutual acknowledgment so that people can find a “solution” that lowers tension as we see Mires’ analysis of the conflict over making visible the earlier presence of George Washington’s slaves on what is now the home of the Liberty Bell on Independence Mall (Mires forthcoming) or the recent efforts to change Loyalist murals in Belfast (Smithey forthcoming).

Turner posits that ritual is likely to be especially important as a mechanism of conflict mitigation in situations where structural conditions regularly give rise to hard-to-resolve conflict, a condition that is by no means limited to the specific communities he first studied. In many societies, for example, parties to such conflicts mark its termination with a ceremonial meal in which special foods are cooked and consumed together. In institutions such as courts or legislatures, decisions are taken and marked in a particular ritualistic fashion that separates the content of the outcome from the personalities of the parties. Turner’s observation, that the intensity of social dramas can be diffused through the transformation of disputes over competing interests into ritual actions emphasizing what the parties share, has important general implications for mitigation of cultural conflicts when it becomes possible for opponents to participate in mutual or joint ritual expression as we see in South Africa after apartheid.

In observing emerging psychocultural dramas such as the conflict in Ayodhya over the Muslim mosque that Hindu nationalists said was built over a former Hindu temple (Davis forthcoming), outsiders sometimes see leaders, such as the militant Hindu nationalists articulating particularly venomous narratives and accuse them of manipulating vulnerable populations by sowing hatred. While this is surely the case at times, it is not the entire story. First, these charges imply that leaders know that they are recounting lies. This is not necessarily the case and leaders often believe what they are saying for a number of reasons, most importantly for our purposes here is that the narrative they recount is one they have internalized for a long time. Second, because their account resonates so strongly with followers we should be asking why that is the case. The manipulation hypothesis suggests it is a matter of weakness and vulnerability, but there is good evidence that people often reject arguments that make little sense to them and are capable of resisting manipulation. So what is going on here? One possible

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13 Early mass media research found that on topics which people already had strong opinions, that media campaigns often had little effect on their opinions even when the media messages were very clear.
hypothesis is that the emotional plausibility of the leader’s account is sufficiently compelling by
meeting a need for clarity and nurturance in times of stress, uncertainty and high fear. Focusing
on the ‘buyers’ and not just the ‘sellers’ makes us recognize that the kernel of emotional truth in
leader appeals must be sufficiently strong for followers to respond positively to leaders.

**Ritual and performance in cultural contestation**

Psychocultural narratives and dramas are politically important because they evoke, build
and reinforce strong emotions that stake claims and mobilize actions in the name of the group. In
such mobilization, cultural expressions and enactments are concrete actions that increase shared
beliefs strengthening the emotional persuasiveness of political and social connectedness and
requiring the defense of the group. Political claims are particularly compelling when they draw
on culturally-rooted shared images, metaphors, significant events, and personalities that connect
in-group members across time and space. Through familiar and emotionally salient expressions,
connections within a community are created, strengthened, and differentiated from out-groups.
What is particularly important here is how convincing the imagined community becomes for
people when they see themselves at risk as, for example, in French fears for their culture in the
face of Muslim immigration (Bowen 2007).

Expressions of community can be highly abstract or concrete. As with all symbols, their
power lies not in their explicit content but in how they are perceived in various social and
political contexts. For example, flags and insignias are “mere” pieces of cloth” of particular
colors but when they represent a nation at risk they become a stimulus for the generation of
intense pride and in-group solidarity and attacks upon them easily motivate counter-action
including violence as Bryan points out in writing about insignias in Northern Ireland. Similarly,
music, language, parades or festivals, theatrical performances, and clothing are some of the many
ways that political identities are evoked, or group characteristics ascribed as Kibler
(forthcoming) examines in her analysis of media portrayals of American minorities. What is
important to realize is that it is frequently very ordinary objects or expressions become politically
powerful not because of their inherent qualities but because of the meanings people attribute to
them.

Ideas are emotionally powerful at times, however it is often only when people engage in
actions or activities intimately linked to them that their full power is reached. These actions can
be mundane or sacred, and often have a repetitive quality to them that enhances their emotional
power. Ritual enactments, sometimes assisted by ancient objects, make emotionally significant
connections between a group’s past and present experiences as individuals participate in specific,
often very ordinary, activities linking people across time and space. The demands on individual
participants vary from very modest to extremely heavy. Some participants do nothing more than
attend an event, or view it on television; others devote a great deal of time and personal resources
to it including suspending their daily routines to participate as people on pilgrimages do.

Rituals are behaviors whose central elements and the contexts in which they take place
are emotionally meaningful. Cultural performances as rituals communicate the core parts of a
group’s self-understood identity and history. Of particular interest here are those used to build or
bolster political narratives and claims based on them. As Connerton argues: Repetitive cultural

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14 Normally we think of people as performers, but Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) argues that objects in museums
presentations or public exhibitions, festivals, fairs, memorial and tourist sites perform as well. Performances, as
she analyzes them, simultaneously reflect and produce plausible accounts of a group’s past and present. This
view of heritage also stresses can also include its comodification.
rituals are a crucial way of creating and solidifying collective memories that are transmitted over time (Connerton 1989; Jarman 1997). Participation in a wide range of activities such as festivals and commemorative ceremonies are important in Connerton’s analysis in which he emphasizes that rites are not merely expressive; rites are not merely formal; and rites are not limited in their effect to ritual occasions (1989: 44). Rituals commemorate continuity and in so doing shape collective memory (Connerton 1989: 48). As noted above, invented rituals such as national holidays often begin long after the events they mark. In addition, “Ritual is not only an alternative way of expressing certain beliefs, but that certain things can be expressed only in ritual” (Connerton 1989: 54). Ritual has its own performative, formalized language encoded in postures, gestures and movements (Connerton 1989: 58-9).

States are keenly aware of the value of ritual performances that enhance their legitimacy and the political loyalty of their citizens, and all states have ceremonial occasions, which are moments of high ritual that assert the state’s power and legitimacy. State rituals mark occasions such as political transitions, national holidays, military victories, the deaths of leaders, and the achievements of past and present heroes. State rituals take many forms and vary along a number of dimensions such as their size, degree of organization, key participants, and the emotions they evoke. Some of these celebrations are planned in advance and follow a calendric cycle, while others are a response to unfolding events. These large-scale rituals involve elaborate pomp and ceremony, and often large numbers of people are present. However, not all ritual expressions of interest here are state organized or sanctioned. In addition, many cultural performances that are meaningful to one group are simply ignored by others. At other times, however, public cultural performances, such as Orange Order parades in Northern Ireland are politicized and provoke counter demonstrations and alternative rituals (Bryan 2000; Jarman 1997). For example, in Israel, Jewish Israelis celebrate the anniversary of Israel’s independence each May, while Palestinian Israelis publicly commemorate “Al Nakba,” the catastrophe, which places the same events in 1948 in an entirely different frame.

While there can be significant variation in the specifics of how celebrations are recounted and marked, a common feature is that they are occasions for retelling and enacting a group’s narrative. Participation in cultural celebrations is a crucial mechanism for maintaining powerful psychocultural narratives and the memories associated with them, and there are always many ways to participate ranging from observing a performance that includes festive and solemn elements to taking part in one that requires months or even years of preparation and can involve high cost and risk to participants. Some are solemn and controversial, while others are mundane and not problematic. Through involvement in enactments, the emotional salience of events is often reinforced in ways that are more powerful than in verbal accounts alone (Jarman 1997; Verba 1961). As a result, the narrative’s key metaphors and lessons become accessible for everyday political discourse and in periods of high stress, political leaders readily turn to its core images when they seek support for favored action strategies.

Conclusions

Cultural expressions and enactments often serve as flash points in ethnic conflict even though in many of these conflicts relatively little is at stake materially so that the parties’ deep emotional investment in the conflict requires explanation. While specific cases illustrate many of the points made so far, the larger challenge is to explain how analyzing cultural contestation accounts for how specific conflicts developed, escalated, and in some cases, were managed constructively. Such analyses would then communicate the complexity of culture revealing some of the mechanisms that make culturally rooted conflicts so difficult to settle.

A general point to reiterate is that culture frames conflict but this is not to argue that cultural differences cause it directly as the ‘ancient hatreds’ or ‘clash of civilizations’ arguments suggest (Huntington 1993; Kaplan’1993). Framing provides structure in ambiguous situations.
evoking specific scripts so that groups in conflict can explain what took place to themselves and to outsiders. Frames draw on core beliefs about the world and human behavior, past experiences, and specific assumptions about opponents’ motives to render an emotionally plausible account of a conflict that contains implicit or explicit assumptions of how to react to it. In some situations a single narrative emerges that is widely accepted as occurred in the US following the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington that were viewed as a terrorist action and compared to the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Many times, however, multiple narratives are present and there is considerable in-group contestation around competing accounts that is played out. For example, in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict there have been hard-line narratives on both sides that deny the legitimacy of the national aspirations of the other, and more accommodating narratives that offer mutual recognition and tout the viability of a two-state solution as in everyone’s self-interest.

At least four general hypotheses emerge. First, while contestation around cultural expressions takes many forms, these disputes are most intense when the participants’ core identities are threatened. Second, cultural expression itself does not cause intense conflict but rather whether or not conflict occurs depends upon how particular cultural acts are interpreted. While cultural expressions are reflections of what people believe, cultural worldviews are also important when they frame political conflicts and make some forms of action and discourse more or less likely in the eyes of group members. Third, culture serves as a tool for the articulation of political demands and mobilization. At the same time, while it is clear that some leaders use—and even manipulate—cultural expressions in their own interests, this is not always the case and there are many situations where leaders make culturally based appeals that represent their long-held, sincere positions that are not merely developed for instrumental reasons. Finally, while it is easy to focus on culture as a divisive force as seen in terms such as culture wars or the clash of civilizations, cultural expressions and rituals can also play as important role in peacemaking as disputants find ways to express what it is that they have in common not just what divides them.

If we return briefly to the two cases introduced at the outset—France and South Africa—we can see that they provide evidence consistent with each of these hypotheses. Where in France, threats to identity increased over time, in South Africa the new government went out of its way to emphasize that there was room in “the rainbow nation” for people from all racial and ethnic groups. In France whereas cultural expressions such as the headscarf were interpreted as a rejection of French identify, in South Africa interpretations often were benevolent—for example, it was often said that whites who remained in the country wanted to help build a new South Africa and space was made for Afrikaners, Zulus and others who “lost out” in the transition to express their cultural identities through festivals, sacred sites, and memorials to past events. In France the ultranationalist National Front and then politicians from the center-right and even the left mobilized supporters, especially in electoral campaigns, with cultural references suggesting they were defending the national identity against outsiders who threatened it. In South Africa, while ethnic and racial appeals certainly have not disappeared, they are far more muted than they might be as national leaders have built broad governing coalitions and have worked to insure that no cultural group feels excluded. Finally, while the daily worlds of France’s Muslims and non-Muslims as well as members of different racial groups are separated both geographically and culturally, in France there is little public effort to bridge the divide (for example, there has been almost no recruitment of France’s five million Muslims into either elected or appointed political positions; nor are there Muslims visible in the media), in South Africa, there are many public references to the shared future of the country, many visible activities involving members of different ethnic and racial groups, and many symbols and rituals

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15 It should not be forgotten, however, that when the World Trade Center was bombed in 1993, the event was treated as a criminal action, not a terrorist attack.
that communicate this message. In South Africa, the great divide is class not race. In France it is both ethnic (or racial) and class.

Cultural identities, from this perspective, are both barriers to, and opportunities for, the mitigation of ethnic conflict. Movement towards constructive conflict management in long-term intergroup conflicts is tied to the development of inclusive narratives, symbols, and rituals in contexts where mutually exclusive claims previously predominated. In this way, conflict articulated around cultural issues can offer an opportunity to reduce the intense emotions associated with contested identities and can serve as powerful vehicles for bringing former opponents into new institutional arrangements and at the same time for modifying a society’s symbolic landscape as has occurred in South Africa and to a lesser extent in Northern Ireland. Signed agreements between long-standing opponents are only one step in a peace process and their implementation requires attention to its implementation in domains beyond formal governmental institutions including more inclusive expressions and enactments that communicate a new relationship among previously opposing groups.
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