

INTRODUCTION

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191

The Ethnic Cultures of America

What is an Ethnic Group?

Ethnicity, as outlined by the Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups, is an immensely complex phenomenon. All of the groups treated in our calendar are characterized by some of the following features, although in combinations that vary considerably. These features may be: (a) Common geographic origin; (b) race; (c) language or dialect; (d) religious faith or faiths; (e) shared traditions, values or symbols; (f) literature, folklore, or music; (g) an internal sense of distinctiveness; (h) an external perception of distinctiveness.

The degree to which these features characterize any group varies considerably with the size and specific history of the group, especially the length of time it has been in the United States. Ethnic groups persist over long periods, but they also change, merge, and dissolve.

Ethnic Identification

Ethnic identification, even when ethnic heritage is unmixed or fully understood, is a matter of individual choice, ratified on a continuum from passive acquiescence to active participation, from denial to mild curiosity to passionate commitment. The fluid and situational nature of ethnicity makes precise estimates of the number of "ethnic" Americans impossible.

The ethnic origins of the American people are incredibly diverse and new elements of diversity are constantly being added. The capacity of the United States to absorb so many different peoples and to forge binding ties among them is no less incredible. The complex interplay between assimilation and pluralism is one of the central themes of American History and it will continue to be so long into the future. It is estimated that there are at least 100 ethnic groups in the United States. (Naturally it is impossible for us to show pictures of each of these groups in our calendar but we hope that we relate to you a representative sampling of many of them.)

There is a powerful cohesive force that makes the United States a "nation of nations," that restores luster to the motto on the seal of the United States: E Pluribus Unum. In 1792, when the motto was adopted, it referred to the union forged from thirteen separate colonies; subsequently, it has come to suggest the ties that bind the remarkable array of diverse peoples who have settled here. Philip Gleason in his essay on American identity stated:

"An American nationality does in fact exist. To affirm the existence of American nationality does not mean that all Americans are exactly alike or must become uniform in order to be real Americans. It simply means that a genuine national community does exist and that it has its own distinctive principle of unity, its own history, and its own appropriate sense of belonging."

All tendencies to underscore americanism and national unity were massively reinforced by the entry of the United States in World War II. In a country of sometimes overwhelming diversity, there is one thing most Americans have in common: a few generations ago, their families lived somewhere else.

Religion and Ethnicity

The mingling of religion with ethnicity has been common particularly in backgrounds with a history of social competition and conflict with others. People such as Irish Catholics, the Jews, the French Canadians, the Poles, the Amish and the Armenians and Greeks are ethno-religious groups. The Italian festa for a patron saint, the Jewish Bar Mitzvah, the Irish wake, the Methodist Church supper, the music of black gospel, and Peyotism of American Indians are only a few of the better known examples of religion with a specifically ethnic cast. The principle of Religious Freedom in this country is one of the achievements of American Civilization.