The links between ethnicity, identity and nationalism were deliberated at an international gathering in Grahamstown recently. PETER VALE gives his impressions.

The youth: alienation and arms are a lethal cocktail.

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Why has it become the fight to differ?

'I LOVE my country too much to be a nationalist,' wrote the existentialist philosopher, Albert Camus. Perhaps the Algerian-born Frenchman knew something which many have only recently recognised – a sense of local origin is important because it helps individuals understand rapid change.

Certainly the rise of local social movements in various parts of the world – the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia are the best examples – suggest that the nation-state, as we know it, is under some threat from below. But does this hankering – however it is dressed up – mean the re-emergence of ethnicity as a force in political mobilisation?

This question and the logic which underpins it, was at the core of a conference held (of all apropriate places) in the 1820 Monument in Grahamstown. Organised by Rhodes University's Institute of Social and Economic Research in conjunction with Natal University's Centre of Social and Development Studies, the conference was the third, and most ambitious, in a series to deliberate the links between ethnicity, identity and nationalism.

With close on 200 participants and some 70 papers from scattered disciplines to choose from, there was rich and political academic fare.

Expectedly some hoary old faithfuls returned: a South African academic who, by methodological sleight of hand, managed to show that ethnicity was played out during the old Union of South Africa only in cases when blacks delivered violence on other blacks. (Even this hard-bitten critic of social science had to carefully watch for the mirrors as he reached into the black box to draw these conclusions).

But these were the exceptions, most of the papers were of an extraordinary quality. This was not surprising since the gathering has taken two years to organise and drew participants from places as far afield as Barcelona, Berlin, Bordeaux, Brunel and Brighton. Africa was strongly represented with papers from Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Madagascar, Malawi, Namibia: not to mention, of course, many papers from South Africans.

Participants avoided defining ethnicity. But some argued that significant social barriers demarcated group from group and that these are as important as those which distinguish individual from individual. If these Chinese screens are to be called ethnicity, then fair enough.

In this guise, ethnicity is essentially benign and, as a result, its reassertion is of the now-you-see-difference-now-you-don't kind: in this understanding, the genie of ethnic destructiveness has not been released from the political bottle.

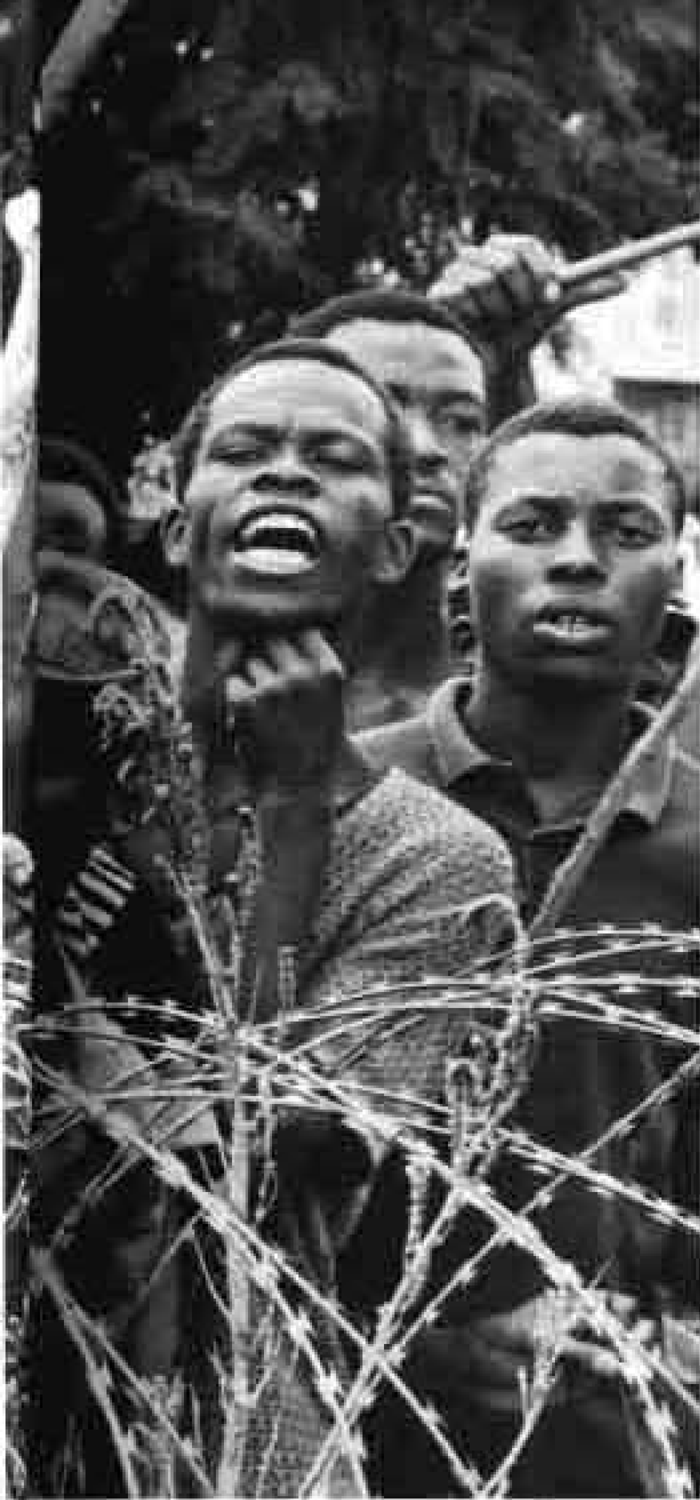
To accept that ethnicity is harmless is to accept that difference is learnt at one's mother's knee. There was plenty of evidence to support this proposition, although some researchers were not prepared to ask mothers what messages were passed on in the form of lullabies and children's games.

But is this so; is ethnicity benign and is difference merely harmless?

Look towards the Balkans and even closer to home, and it is obvious that the walls which separate group from group are not all benign: the killing fields of Natal and Bosnia tell a different tale to the one normally learnt in childhood slumber.

Why is it that the *right* to differ has become the *fight* to differ?

For this correspondent, the answer was provided in two fascinating presentations. The one was a study of Puerto Rican crack dealers in New York's Harlem; the other, a study of identity and warfare in south-western Ethiopia. Both papers were fine exam-



GUY ADAMS, Southlight

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ples of the ethnographer's craft: sensitive, insightful, conscious of wider conditioning circumstances.

In the Puerto Rican study, the sense of group and individual alienation of this immigrant community – a community who, paradoxically are US citizens – is simply astounding. Disaffection plays out in remorseless encounters with the establishment: each of these ends back in the belly of the underworld. Is it any surprise, then, that English is the language of the money-world, while Spanish is the language of the other? The message of the paper was simple, almost elegant: although the estrangement is acute, responses to it are astute.

The Ethiopian study drew backwards to correlate the rituals of the Mursi with the slow, but certain aquisition of the means to deliver death to their ancient foes, the Nyangatom (often known as Bume). The thrust of the argument is that the Mursi are keen to convert their means of killing from a World War II-vintage Mannlicher rifle to the Kalashnikov semi-automatic. This development follows a Nyangatom massacre of Mursi women and children.

This upgrade will certainly deliver more to the killing fields of south-western Ethiopia but, in the opinion of the paper's author, will probably not affect the sanctity of the ceremony which bloods the young for war.

Alienation and arms are a lethal cocktail because they permit, in the absence of a strong state, wanton destruction in the name of difference. Through this, the rituals of ethnicity feed downward spirals which sap the very soul of society: this is the terror of ethnicity mobilised in the cause of power.

'The search for understanding the world of human relations may have only just begun'

Not surprisingly in a week in which Peter Mokaba and Eugene Terre'Blanche both used inflammatory statements to pump up the expectations of their supporters, the future of South Africa was very much on the minds of conference delegates.

By all accounts, South Africa's black youth are deeply alienated from both the country's ageing establishment and from the very process which is seeking to bring change. This, and the country's self-mutilation – most of it by hand-gun or the notorious AK-47 – periodically focused the conference on what, if anything, could be done in this particular mixture of alienation and arms.

The very fact of difference in South Africa is certainly more obvious than elsewhere in the world. And, far more importantly, ethnicity is more explosive because these very differences – and other symbols of race – have been used by apartheid to secure power and privilege.

For some, the golden thread of non-racialism will protect South Africa through the torrent which currently rages. And the point was made during the same week that both Mokaba and Terre'Blanche retreated from the ethnic abyss. But to accept non-racialism is to accept difference: after all, for the Umlazi shack dweller, English is the language of the money world, while Zulu is the language of the other.

The challenge is, surely, to ensure that difference does not become the language of mobilisation. If it does, then selective political memory clicks into the discourse and ethnic identities become increasingly set in stone. This is the beginning of the horrendous experience which, in the memory of South Africans, is so close at hand.

But beyond South Africa's agony, there was a deeper yearning in Grahamstown: a yearning which goes to the very heart of what we – social scientists and others – think we know about the world.

In the countless efforts to avoid defining ethnicity but accepting that difference – even of the Chinese screen variety – was a fact of political life, some of the world's finest social scientists were strangely unable to express themselves in Grahamstown.

This, too, is not surprising.

The dynamic of recent changes has been nothing short of revolutionary; is it any wonder that it has taken some time for us to understand, let alone explain it. Before the collapse of state-centred communism, powerful conceptual ideas held sway. They were – or at least we thought they were – bridges to understanding the confusion we experienced about us, as bridges to the future.

But they failed to help understand change and its effects. If ethnicity is alive and living in every child how would we know it was there? How might an Australian anthropoligist explain why Ayers Rock, the Aboriginal shrine, was more sacred than the Sydney Cricket Ground? How might an armed white policeman suggest to a township youth that he should – in the interests of their common South Africanism – lay down his AK-47?

These are not the questions of the idle rich; they reach into the home of every person in a world which seems more certain of tragedy than it did before Berlin's notorious Wall crumbled.

The lesson of Grahamstown was that, in many ways, the search for both understanding and description of the world of human relations may have only just begun. Because the bridges which theory promised have turned to dust, new ways of understanding the world will have to be explored. And the words which have so easily dripped from our lips – ethnicity, identity, nationalism: the list is endless – these will have to be carefully weighed and even more carefully weighted.

As they set out on this work, however, social scientists might draw comfort from the fact that some timeless liturgies will continue no matter what. During the conference white-daubed Xhosa youth engaged in a circumcision ritual – which far predates the arrival of the first British settlers to the Eastern Cape – on the very Gunfire Hill upon which the monument to South Africa's English-speakers is situated.

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