

The rustic metaphor, “you can take the man from the bog but not the bog from the man” is meant to capture the difference between a primordial and a situationalist Hebridean. A primordialist has a strong emotional tie to the soil of a specific place and a strong sense of handing on an identity through tradition, custom and language. A situationalist is less fixed in his beliefs as to what makes for a strong sense of ethnic identity. He is more open to the possibility that a new culture can modify identity but yet preserve its essence. The primordialist may be unable to celebrate difference and may indeed refer to the new breed as being ‘plastic’. However, although difference may diminish, enhance or be neutral in its effect upon ethnic identity, the expectation is that ‘displaced’ Hebrideans who live abroad, and whether several generations removed, can feel a sense of ethnic identity which is every bit as strong.

Identity is a sense of sameness and continuity of self that is construed across time and in the context of ethnic identity, central to that sense of identity are that it is consistent with, for example, “how apparent is it from my traits that I am of Hebridean origin”; “how important is it for me to know I am of Hebridean origin, even if at times it is at some emotional cost to myself?”; and “ how much does being of Hebridean origin define who I would like to be?” Rootedness in an ethnic identity can be measured from value systems that underpin that identity and the personal outcome for the self is a sense of one’s own person as being separate but yet comparable with others.

The search for a coherent identity will involve a process of identification with some aspect of self that connects with both past and present and that indicates a degree of rootedness. This connection will be greater when the identity has some quality or strength that the person wishes to have. Once identity synthesis has been begun, a process of maintenance commences when the person becomes even more rooted in that identity. In summary, a Hebridean whether at home or abroad and whether first or fifth generation, is as 'Hebridean as he feels'. That this is evidently so is apparent from the Hebridean-ness that is felt every bit as strong in Cape Breton and North Virginia as it is in the Outer Hebrides today. This is evident not just in a sense of 'being' Hebridean but also in Island ways, traditions and philosophies of life.