

# **FLUID BOUNDARIES OF BELONGING: 'LOCALS' AND 'INCOMERS' IN THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS**

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## **ILLUMINATING THE SUBTLETY OF BELONGING IN NORTHERN SCOTLAND**

We build up our understanding of the nation through a myriad of small perceptions of everyday life.

(Bourdieu 1984)

National identity appears less important, in the everyday, than kinds of identities regarded as closer to home.

(Rapport 2006)

The Scottish Highlands have been described as the 'face' that Scotland shows the rest of the world (see Chapman 1978). David McCrone suggests that: 'the "Scotland" of our imaginations remains not only rural but largely Highland, replete with tartanry and clans. Ordinary Scotland does not figure much' (2001, p. 6). For the sake of tourist iconography, the heritage, culture, and location of 'Highland' people (whoever they might be) is recognizable world-wide. This article focuses on the 'ordinary' that 'does not figure much': everyday interactions of locals and incomers in the Sutherland region. If the Highlands are an image of Scotland, this article delves into what 'Scottishness' means in the Highlands. As villages and towns are increasingly populated by incomers from England, I explore how local/incomer encounters not only reveal but –

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crucially – *create* subtle identity negotiations. At a time when considerable work is produced on national identity (e.g. Bond and Rosie 2003; Kiely et al. 2001, 2005; McCrone 2001; Nairn 2000), such ethnographic material illuminates how people come to identify on local and national levels. This paper encourages a rethink of Highland life and a closer look at the nuances behind identity work.

### **THE RESEARCH: ETHNOGRAPHIC IMMERSION**

This article is based on four months of ethnographic research carried out in northern Scotland in 2003<sup>1</sup> as part of the MA in Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh. Essentially, 'participant observation is intense interaction with a group of people during which the researcher plunges into community activities as completely as possible' (Barfield 1997, p.348). A process of snowballing is essential in this context: I had twelve central participants (both locals and incomers) who provided in-depth narratives, and I had short conversations with their family and friends. I socialized with people daily, and my observations come from ceilidhs, gala weeks, hotel bars, and inside family homes. For a study of 'everyday' notions of kinship and belonging, this method provides access to those subtleties and nuances which appear in the negotiation of social life. Put simply, what people *claim* and what people *do* are not always the same thing.

The above comments by Bourdieu and by Rapport are thought-provoking and the ethnography provided here goes some way in demonstrating a subtle mixture of each: everyday settings reveal oscillations. On one hand, there are subtle flags of national identity in the most intimate settings, and, on the other hand, a 'Highland' identity is often prioritized over 'Scottish', 'English', or 'British' feelings.

### **DILUTING DIFFERENCE: ON PLAYING IDENTITY UP AND DOWN**

Spatialized identity is evident in Sutherland: 'state' identity (i.e. Britishness) is something attributed to 'others' (mainly 'the English'), 'national' identity (i.e.

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<sup>1</sup> *In this article, I am referring to two south-east Sutherland locations. They remain anonymous for reasons of confidentiality.*

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Scottishness) is an important unsaid, demonstrated by an indication of what one is *not* (e.g. British or English) and eclipsed often by a feeling of ‘Highland’ identity. Discussing the 2001 Census results, Kiely et al. comment that the findings – 77% chose ‘Scottish’ as their best identity, compared with the 16% who chose ‘British’ – ‘cannot provide information on what people *mean* by these categories, and what sort of decision-making process they use in *plumping* for one category over another’ (2005. p.166, my emphasis). In collecting vignettes from intimate social settings, I explored how, why, and when people think they belong in the Scottish Highlands.

On the east Sutherland coast, people talk about ‘doon Sooth’. Crucially, this *never* connotes ‘England’ and actually refers to those non-Highland and non-Island areas of Scotland. One man demonstrated a very local sense of identity. He pointed to a treasured painting of Dunrobin Castle:

I’m a purer Sutherland than most people in the town, you know. My parents were from different strands of the clan and I’ve only left the north twice. My wife was born in the next parish up and that made her a Caithness lassie, still a Sutherland by maiden name and by marriage, mind  
...

Genealogy was his reference point, but as my research developed, it became clear that genealogy is not exclusively constitutive of local belonging. Much of the time, ‘belonging’ is transformable: take the Sutherland people’s perception of me, for instance. They selectively accepted personal information that help me fit it, and discarded that which give me ‘distance’. Accident of birth placed me in Aberdeen, my maternal kin are from Sutherland, and my father was an English incomer. I left the north many years ago, and yet fully consider myself to be ‘Highland’. They tell me I *look* Highland; I ‘know the *craic*’<sup>2</sup>; and (for some) I possess my great-grandmother’s demeanour as a young woman. Sutherland *blood* is something that my face and behaviour reflect; *knowledge* of local humour helped me interact; and their recollection of my great-grandmother fitted me into their collective *memory*. Absence and my ‘English’ kinship links seemed incidental and forgotten. Claims which reveal identities might be difficult to substantiate when one is trying to fit in, but simultaneously, *concealing* is just as constitutive. This is a good example of the ‘eclipsing’ idea that anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (1988) has explored:

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<sup>2</sup> *Banter, local humour*

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elements of relationships are temporally and contextually concealed and revealed. Blood, shared knowledge, and memory are three themes that become 'transformable' in the shadows of everyday life, and ones which highlight ways of belonging.

Ideas of 'similarity' and 'distance' in terms of identity are hugely nuanced and manipulated to fit context in the Scottish Highlands. Often one's place depends on 'playing the game': knowing that certain things are done/said and how to do so is often crucial in a process of incorporation. A young woman told me how she had moved from England— where she felt 'staunchly English' – to Sutherland to live with her Scottish partner. She felt 'decidedly more British' in the Highlands because:

It wasn't an imagined place anymore. It was my real life. Locals began to phase me in. I was 'that incomer', then 'the English lassie', then finally, just known by my first name.

She recalls her arrival through a metaphor of emotional attachment: 'I fell in love with it all. I thought it was unrequited, but it just took them longer to fall in love with me!' (see also Jedrej and Nuttall 1996, p.129, and Masson 2006). The processual nature of narratives reflect how complicated boundaries actually are. They exist explicitly during imagined encounters with the unknown: this woman claimed her 'Englishness' *until* she moved to Scotland, where locals immediately placed her as 'English' until she was absorbed enough for national identity not to figure much in everyday life. While Kieley et al (2005, p.152) have accurately pointed out that incomers' playing-down of Englishness forms part of identity negotiation, in Sutherland at least, 'Englishness' and 'Scottishness' are neither dualistic nor particularly significant when people are gathered in kitchens over morning coffee, or at gala week, or marrying each other.

For this reason, I disagree when Tamara Kohn suggests (for a Hebridean island) that there exists a 'local-incomer continuum' to be proceeded along and, if negotiated incorrectly, one might 'fall off' (2003, p.153). The ethnographic findings here are more in line with Fiona Gill's conclusion that 'in some ways, "we" and "they" are one in the same, sharing one identity' (2005, p.96). Kohn's approach assumes a dualism and 'rules' of belonging: of course, relationships are far more nuanced than that.

## **THE BETWEENNESS OF BELONGING: OF CLAIMING IDENTITY AND BEING IDENTIFIED**

Living in Scotland for a lengthy period does seem to allow people not born in Scotland and with no Scottish parents to make claims to be Scottish. (Bond and Rosie 2006b)

I do not attempt to provide a positive gloss on ‘local-incomer’ interaction. Rather, I aim to point out how flexible such categories can be. The above comment by Bond and Rosie is thought provoking: the term ‘allow’ connotes two types of belonging. Firstly, there are those resources (such as residence, time, and commitment) which enable incomers to activate their belonging. Secondly, there is a resonant image of identification by others, in situations whereby locals, in a way, ‘allow’ belonging by accepting or rejecting incomers’ claims. The people I met clearly found identity matters rather awkward to express and hence some observation of *lived-out* belonging is fruitful (see also Paterson et al. 2004 on the difference between ‘claiming’ and ‘living’ identities) .

Recent research has pointed out that there are ‘degrees of Scottishness’ (Kiely et al. 2005, p.152). Crucially, it should be highlighted that not only do different people have different degrees of belonging, but that each individual has ‘eclipsing’ identities. For instance, in some contexts they will focus on genealogical ‘roots’, but at other times a sense of being in a place, and being committed to it, is at the forefront of belonging. In my fieldwork, physical presence was important: attending communal gatherings such as the kirk service or gala week and *not* talking about ‘belonging’ seems to be more constitutive than those locals who left and constantly claim ‘roots’. In this sense, I recognise from Sutherland that Kiely et al. (ibid.) are accurate to suggest that survey results cannot ‘tell the whole story about the praxis of “doing Scottishness”’ (2005, p.152).

The term ‘doing Scottishness’ connotes performativity – that is, a certain achievable status, the acted-out relationships, behaviours, and obligations deemed as being ‘Scottish’. ‘Doing Scottishness’ implies the potential for incorporation. However, this should not be misconstrued as a straightforward process. One ‘incomer’ in Sutherland told me that:

being an incomer, maybe I always will be, it’s like, how long’s a piece of string? I don’t know. We’ll just wait and see.

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Interestingly, local people appreciated this attitude: a new arrival who sits back, watches community life, learns how it happens, and *then* joins in seems more likely to be incorporated. The 'pushy' incomer who runs every committee and is seen to be 'taking over' often remains peripheral, sometimes shunned. The participation of incomers in 'local' affairs draws mixed responses.

Interestingly, one man spoke on behalf of 'most of the toon': 'Ach, I don't mind new faces. But what they really came for was our jobs and cheap housing – that's what most of the toon would tell you!'. This 'for me' and 'for most' attitude concerning the perception of incomers only struck me as thought-provoking when research found that individuals perceived themselves to be 'more accepting of incomers than most'. Bond and Rosie suggest that 'respondents tend to believe that people in general would have less inclusive views than they themselves hold' (2006a).

It is a fair point when Kiely et al. suggest that 'in contexts where people see their national identity as implicit ... it is more difficult to study how they construct for themselves and others a sense of national identity' (2001 p.34). This does not, however, mean that such contexts should be overlooked. What sorts of contexts and personal stories come to constitute an individual's sense of belonging? Sometimes, to spend time with that individual over a cup of tea and an afternoon of anecdotes helps the researcher read between the lines.

### **SENSES OF SELF<sup>3</sup>: WHEN ARE NATIONAL IDENTITIES IMPORTANT?**

Participant: Why do I belong here? I was born here, my children were born here. My parents were. I've been here forever, worked here.

KM: Do you think that incomers can feel that they belong here too, although they weren't born here?

Participant: How could they *not* belong?! They live here, bring up their children, work ... Just like me.

KM: Can they be Scottish?

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<sup>3</sup> See Bond and Rosie 2006a

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Participant: No! But then I don't say *I'm* 'Scottish' unless I'm abroad. So maybe they're 'English' only because they aren't in England. Funny that

...

The above conversation is typical of the opinions I encountered in the Highlands. Belonging through blood, children, and work; exasperation that I might suggest an Englishman as 'Scottish', and yet this woman finds the Englishman very similar to herself and does not self-identify on a broader national level. Being a daughter, being a mother, and living and working in the region constitute her belonging. In other words, the intimate level of her identity is tied with a predominantly localised territory.

This was a pervasive feeling amongst the people I met in northern Scotland. Certainly, some individuals were what Bond and Rosie term 'prioritized Scots' (2006a): examples include the lady laird at her ancestral seat, the former lord lieutenant of the county, and our 'I'm purer than the rest of the toon' man. A genealogical focus often seemed to promote references to a wider feeling of Scottishness. Most people are, however, 'background Scots' (ibid.). 'Scottishness' is important in Sutherland albeit in an indirect manner: locals were mainly baffled when I asked about their 'Britishness' and incomers from England mainly use 'British' so as not to appear *opposed* to the 'Scottish'. While national identity was not particularly discussed by my participants, the staunch declaration of what individuals are *not* became resonant.

Relatively speaking, then, localised identity is at the forefront of kinship talk and everyday belonging. National identity becomes *projected* identity: sentences often begin 'I'm Scottish abroad ...' or 'well, British would mean English, so I guess I'm Scottish'. This is not to suggest that national identity is insignificant in Highland Scotland: the notion that individuals often identify who they are by recognising who they are *not* is clear in this context. Phrases like 'not British', explaining the rest of Scotland as 'doon Sooth', and saying 'we're different up here' often give the impression that it is a way of side-stepping awkward identity questions. While attachment to local over national identity might seem obvious and widespread, some 'locals' understand localism in Highland Scotland as a particular kind due to its geographic location:

Participant: We're different up here, people think we're all Gaelic-speaking and quaint. We're not, but the rest of Scotland seems to think we are, so maybe that just makes us back out of the whole 'Scottish' idea.

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KM: How about British?

Participant: Ach, come on! 'British' means 'English', does it no'?. If you're asking me that, then I'm Scottish!

Short chats like these were full of intricacies, the ideas behind which people were evidently still working through ('funny that ...') as they responded to me. In a parlour, over a cup of tea, one woman wondered how contradictory her views might sound. I sensed that such ideas demonstrated exactly the complex business of belonging. I try to imagine these individuals responding to a survey about identity, how difficult they would find the articulation of belonging, and how challenging it would be for the researcher who tried to account for it. Crucially, I suggest we consider what is going on *behind* these local-incomer relationships.

### **'FRESH TALENT' AND 'NEW BLOOD': INTERPRETING ASSIMILATION**

All communities are changing and all are complex. ... Increasingly people have the capacity to manoeuvre between distinct areas of life and to be 'cross-cultural navigators'. What should be preserved, what jettisoned, what revised or reworked?

(Parekh Report 2000)

Parekh's findings on 'the future of multi-ethnic Britain' are thought-provoking for the ethnography presented here. The scenes I describe of Sutherland are not ones of racisms or ethnicity *per se* but about civic involvement and the complexities of cohesion. This close and pervading sense of shared place is apparent when locals worry that incomers will try to 'change everything' but simultaneously welcome the 'drive and incentive' that arrives with many newcomers. As one young student put it:

People here want stuff done, but they wait too long. Then someone arrives from England and does the job. They have get-up-and-go. Locals with that have got up and gone. Incomers get us to do things. Locals get irked for a bit, and then think about doing things differently. It gets them to pull up their socks.

David McCrone suggests that 'Scotland is an appropriate imagined community because it fits and makes sense of the social realities as people see and live

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them' (2001, p.52). The openness to social realities, such as incoming and emigrant populations and positive changes made in their encounters, is clear in Sutherland.

Occasional barriers are noticeable, such as one evening when a well-fortified old man was muttering something about job-stealing, 'wrecked heritage', and 'funny' accents. This is not, however, presented as anti-English sentiment, and often it is very quickly claimed as banter: one woman told me that 'he would say the same if someone from Aberdeen moved in'. What she seemed to be imparting was knowledge about difference: the Scots-English relationship need not be over-amplified, and that drunken mutterings about place and belonging are not demonstrative of local feeling.

I am inclined to agree with Tom Nairn's analysis: popular expectation would have it that the Scots and the English have an antagonistic relationship and that the Scots 'hate' the English. However, Nairn comments that 'the Scots appear to be going off the rails – that is, the rails of United Kingdom convention and expectation which all such critics (Scots and English) took for granted' (2000, p.207). They are 'failing to hate the English' (ibid.). Arguably, within the framework of the English as the 'intimate other' there is *closeness* through a long history of (both positive and negative) interaction rather than hostility.

Thus, claims of 'banter' often flag not separation but *sameness*. Here, I should stress that my participants spoke on two levels: about incomers in a general sense – which is when they were less accepting – and about *known* incomers with whom they had formed lasting relationships. It was not as severe as 'we hate the English except you, cos you're our pal' (McIntosh et al. 2004) but did reflect a dichotomy between the 'unknown' and the 'known'. The *idea* of 'incomers' was not popular due to a fear that small Highland communities might 'disintegrate' in the future. It is *fear* of loss – not *instances* of loss – that frames the incomer encounter. Strikingly, actual incomers did not pose much of a problem: they attend church with locals, most incoming children attend the local school, and some incomers marry local people. These instances of 'community life' and 'kinship' are often capable of eclipsing imagined differences.

Of course, it would be naïve to present 'inclusion' as the only outcome of local-incomer relationships. I encountered three cases in which incomer families had 'moved here because it's a good place to bring up your kids' and yet chose to home-school those children. This kind of self-exclusion caused

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offence to members of the local community, who thought the move both 'arrogant' and 'ironic'.

From this, it is particularly convincing when Kiely et al. assert that belonging is about 'demonstrable forms of commitment and contribution to the society' (2005, p.153). To fail to demonstrate commitment is to self-exclude, at which point incomers can fade into the periphery. One man, born and bred in a Sutherland village, said: 'There's some you don't see much of, and you notice that more than the incomers who are in the thick of everything'

Crucially, it seems that claims of belonging are not confined to individual agency but subject to the perception of others. The distinctiveness of 'being Highland' permeates everything to those who have practical (i.e. birth and blood links) and/or performative (residence and commitment) links there. It is both ascribed and achieved: being in the north, never missing gala week, and having an opinion about whether or not we should 'Topple the Mannie'<sup>4</sup> can make you 'one of us' just as much as the blood of a well-known Sutherland family running through your veins.

### **'OOT THEN IN...NEVER IN THEN OOT!': ON LOOKING TO THE FUTURE**

[this community is] imagined in terms of kinship, itself conceived as ... relatedness from the close to the distant. ... Strangers, affines, distant kin, cousins, and siblings are [at] different points.  
(Carsten 1991, p.324)

This area of Scotland is renowned for its hospitality: I was often told that 'once you are accepted in, that's you. You can be oot then in, but never in then oot!'. The consistency and commitment that people place on kinship-like relationships in the community should make us rethink the boundaries of 'family'.

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<sup>4</sup> *The imposing Ben Bhraggie statue of the Duke of Sutherland, instigator of the Sutherland Clearances, is a hotly-contested monument. Steering groups have, in print, tried to topple it for decades. Knowing the story, playing games to see which sibling spots 'him' first on the road north, and having a well-broadcasted opinion, is part of local identity work.*

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Sutherland people generally make an enthusiastic effort to socialize with ‘new people’. Some incomers found this a ‘good way into the community’ and then went head-first into proving their commitment, for instance by joining the Ben Bhraggie steering group or the church guild. When incomers are prepared to learn and then mimic local ways, distinctions are blurred, they gradually become less noticeably ‘new’.

Temporality seems key to understanding belonging: whether *forgetting* past difference or settling long enough to *create* similarity, time seemed embodied by the people I spoke to. Seeing and experiencing the same things created closeness and similarity. Therefore, I question why the resonant image of English incomers as ‘othered’ persists. Watson (2003, p.33) has suggested that the long-standing image of the English in Scotland remains because they are the perceived ‘significant other’. Such otherness leads McIntosh et al. to comment that the English in Scotland face a constant reminder of difference (2004, p.48). In the context of everyday Highland life, what happens when this ‘significant other’ becomes the ‘intimate other’? Local-incomer intermarriage and consequent children, and generally having children, is central to this notion. The markers are transient and we must account for this in order to illuminate the intimacy of identity.

### **INTIMATE OTHERS: ON BECOMING THROUGH INTERMARRIAGE AND PROCREATION**

Incomers in Sutherland often find themselves at the heart of town or village life by virtue of their own personal relationships: for instance, the woman mentioned above was only referred to by name and endearingly *after* she had moved in with her ‘local’ partner.

After fieldwork, I received an animated call explaining that an incoming couple’s marriage had ended because the wife had an affair with a local man. Strikingly, locals saw the affair as *anything* but adultery: they thought that her estranged husband should ‘go home’ because there was now ‘no real reason for him to stick around’. His wife, however, was welcome to stay because she was pregnant with a ‘local’ baby. This complicated kinship creation seemed to dilute difference. I wondered how the baby would change things: ‘well, she’s got a family to stay for now. I mind the father growing up next door to me, and now his bairn’ll do the same’. An adult’s belonging and sense of similarity is, therefore, often determined by marriage and/or having children (see Masson 2006).

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It is not only children born in a place who assist the 'fitting in' process: incoming children also have their effect. One three-year-old child – from England and who I met in Ross and Cromarty – had adopted a strong Highland accent and certain local sayings, much to the anthropologist's delight. I occasionally looked after her, and noticed that locals warmed to this little girl, commenting 'now *that's* Highland character!' Her parents, both from England, saw it as something of a 'party trick' but their daughter was not role-playing. She was acting-out the local relationships and characteristics that she had absorbed. Having absorbed far more than her parents, this child crossed potential boundaries on their behalf. Invitations to community gatherings and intimate dinner parties had, they said, increased when locals 'fell in love' with their daughter. When one local woman hugged this child as we chatted in a café, she commented with evident delight: 'we're all about our bairns here!'. She demonstrated that while adults might be referred to as 'local' and 'incomer', children are not.

Children have the potential to transform the status of adults and to generate social relationships. Where kinship research has previously found children to be 'points of transformation' between in-laws and between their households (see Carsten 1991, p.435), in Sutherland children are the transformation between wider social processes. Oppositions such as 'local' and 'not local', and 'past' and 'future' are blurred and mediated by the presence of children. It appears that children are not simply descendants but simultaneously the *agents* of belonging.

### **DESCENDED FROM WHOM?: ANCESTORS, CHILDREN, OR NO-ONE AT ALL?**

Angus Calder suggests that 'all people who live in Scotland by choice are *de facto* Scots' (2002, p.12). However, for social acceptance, 'living' in Scotland in the present day is often insubstantial to claim belonging: the popular perception in Sutherland is that incomers do not settle there for long. A demonstration that one will settle long-term, contribute to the future, and not simply fleetingly 'share territory', can often secure an individual's place. In this research, children can be the root of identity for their parents. Children, very generally, seemed to be formative of the group. When children are born, bred or both, into a society, one thing they certainly do is transform 'different' into 'similar'.

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I encountered this most significantly in the constant, animated activity within Highland houses: visiting, chatting quickly, and encouraging children to interact with adults – all pointed to an enjoyment of acted-out relationships. Ancestry was often a part of this, with photographs of past generations hanging on walls. The featured individuals often remained unidentified, but owners told me they knew they were ‘descended from *someone*’. This would exclude incomers, who in the Highland ancestral context are descended from no-one.

### **THE INFUSION OF NEW BLOOD**

I was often struck by how migrants with no blood link were actively incorporated by their social presence through a particularly familial metaphor: ‘new blood’. At a ceilidh, I was impressed that an elderly English man could dance a rather energetic Highland Scottish, and asked a ‘local’ lady what she made of him: ‘it’s good to have new people here, livens the place up a bit, the new blood’. ‘New blood’, the metaphor is striking. Here, new residents are explicitly linked to the production of children, new additions to the ‘community’, and when these incomers actually bear their children in the Highlands, the metaphor turns into reality.

When a pregnant English woman excitedly showed the picture from her ultrasound scan, it was another, more lasting, way in which she had become more similar to the ‘locals’ who congratulated her: no longer a stranger who might not stay, she would give birth here, bring up and educate her child here, and create a lasting link. Often, incomers will give their babies local first names that Kohn describes as ‘potent symbols of belonging which facilitate incorporation’ (2003, p.150). I encountered this with children called Riona, Mhairi, and Ruairidh. However, locals often perceive this as amusing, particularly when an incomer seems to be trying too hard: they point out the Gaelic origin and laugh, knowing that the incomer has assumed the name’s ‘accuracy’. Although sometimes English engagedness is not quite in keeping with a local idea, the sentiment is welcomed and progression towards future kinship is once again about the creation of similarity.

### **STRUCTURES OF KINSHIP AND PHYSICAL PRESENCE**

In the Highlands, even houses as structures have their own close genealogy: while family trees I was shown seemed to go no further back than three generations, houses too have close kinship. Looking at the past residents of

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houses over the last two centuries, it is not unusual to find that the house has been occupied by just two surnames. Families *do* leave and others *do* arrive, but they arrive in houses that are imbued with a kinship story, not of ancestral seats and genealogy, but of modern memory and community ties. Individuals in the town who seem to have no 'kinship' between them often reveal that their relatives have lived in one house at different times: a narrative such as 'aye, my granny was married oot o' that hoosie, and years on, my friend's mither was born there!' becomes common place. On one level, this shared intimacy and anecdote creates a type of kinship for these two women in the present day. Genealogy often appears as a hobby or as part of the tourist industry. It is not, for most, the only way of constituting kinship or belonging.

When I met a couple who had moved to the area and were having a house built, they told me 'you place it there, you move in, everything that happens is something you created'. There are all sorts of linkages between personhood and locality, and they have much to do with creativity and innovative ways of fitting in. Creating a house this way becomes like creating a child, a reference point *for the future* is created. In this sense, 'routes' turn into 'roots' and a claim to being 'Highland' is constructed.

This context leads to a consideration of being physically present in a place: what might we say about those people who are absent from the Scottish Highlands but stake a claim of genealogical identity there? Think of, for instance, Canadian descendents (resident in Canada) of the émigré community. Almost weekly during my fieldwork, letters appeared in the local Highland newspaper with headlines such as 'Canadian Scot searches for *local link*'. At once, genealogical links of belonging, and the search to activate those for the future, were presented as formative. However, no one I spoke to about these letters responded positively: 'yeah, like it means anything to have blood that's one-eighth Highland' was a common comment. I often wondered whether this meant that blood had to be 'stronger' (such as parentage) to retain meaning, or that blood links were not considered vital, but informants were not interested in discussing this further. Instead, when presented with a concern of genealogy and history, 'locals' perceived these Canadians as buying into a kind of tourist iconography, and they turned the page.

One woman spoke more favourably of an Englishman, resident in Scotland for fifteen years, who styled himself as a 'Highland Yorkshire man'. This explicit demonstration of identity fluidity seemed to make more sense to people I met: an individual has 'roots' and 'routes', and, more often than not, they would account for both differently according to context.

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Further, just because an individual is born in, say, Inverness, this does not automatically and invariably fit them in. So-called ‘incomers’ who have perhaps put in the commitment and dedication to the *place* might react to the returning ‘local’. It becomes a fascinating interaction. Watson (2003, p.83) points out the ‘structural invisibility’ of incomers. They gradually become assimilated and no longer stand out, whereas *leaving* makes a one-time local’s *absence* very visible indeed. Mewett has argued (for Lewis) that:

irrespective of where she went, the short-term or long-term migrant is still referred to as an exile. Emotive terms imply you had little option but to go, migration was about proving yourself. ... Though physically absent, the migrant retains a social presence. (1982, p.230)

The terms ‘home’ and ‘away’ become significant for the absentee who returns for a holiday. During research, I was often greeted with ‘that’s you back, then, how long’s it been since you were away?’ as though I had returned for good. On explaining that I’d be leaving for Edinburgh soon, the common reaction was a slightly dejected ‘Ach weel ...’, as though their attempt at re-incorporation had been futile. The returning local is often forced to reiterate her claim through *acting* a certain way, even if it is something as banal as unwillingly answering to a local nickname or reluctantly accepting a whisky on her return.

Such a blurring of boundaries encourages me to suggest a shift away from thinking of markers such as ‘local’ and ‘incomer’ as *dualistic*. These terms are used frequently in both academia and the everyday, and yet they hold very little meaning as soon as we delve into intimate settings of community life. When Jedrej and Nuttall comment that English incomers become ‘metonymic for the problem of social change’ (1996, p.129), I feel this issue is too easily glossed by overly-connoted terminology: indeed, some newcomers *are* pushy and some locals *do* talk about white settlers. However, it is crucial to bear in mind that while locals in Sutherland are indeed very cautious and worried by the ‘unknown’, this does not mean that they automatically exclude or dislike incomers when they come.

## **INCHOATE IDENTIFICATION, KNOWING, AND UNKNOWING: GOING AGAINST ‘OBVIOUS MARKERS’**

From what I encountered, knowledge in the Highlands seems to be about creation and re-creation. Belonging in this case rests on two different, but

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interconnected and fluid, attitudes to knowledge. One is concerned with birth, ancestry, and residence and the other with commitment and participation.

Tamara Kohn has suggested that 'obvious markers exist' (2003, p.145) and lists them as: kilt, clan, religion, language, and football. From my fieldwork experience, I disagree and find the term 'obvious marker' hugely problematic: to use it as a given is perhaps to miss the heart of the matter? To plump for the notion that the local-incomer encounter is a tense one denies the fluidity and creativity of everyday life. Tensions *do* occur, the idea of incomers *does* worry people, incomers often self-exclude: I do not deny such cases. However, by looking at the *negotiation* behind these relationships, we can go some way in understanding that processes of 'othering' can have as much to do with similarity as they do with difference. Terms of 'belonging' must be used carefully: it is about how people negotiate all sorts of relationships, and what goes on *behind* what Kohn calls 'obvious' (ibid.) scenes of Scottishness. McCrone has clearly commented that there is no powerful set of religious and/or linguistic cultural markers which define what it means to be a Scot (2002), which means that identity can be much more open and inclusive.

I suggest that the existing knowledge of this openness becomes embedded in the way individuals act towards others and perceive the world. The openness that individuals apply to identity is perhaps based on the adding-and-truncating nature of British kinship (see Edwards and Strathern 2000), whereby one can disown a blood relative and be close to so-called fictive relatives. Forgetting need not be a negative process: in fact, in this case, it is extremely creative. Individuals carefully construct narratives and present memories such that the shared 'here-and-now' and imagined future can consist of similarity and closeness.

This scenario is imbued with what anthropologist Marilyn Strathern has called 'constitutive knowledge' (1999, p.68). This indicates relationship-specific knowledge that is coupled with a sense of identity. 'It is a particular kind of knowledge: the information (and verification) on which it draws is constitutive in its consequences. Having found some formative information [be it genealogical or the art of fitting in], people acquire identity by that very discovery' (ibid.). The creativity behind this leads me to agree with Bauman's assertion that *identification* is significant here: 'a never-ending, always incomplete, unfinished, and open-ended activity in which we all, by necessity or by choice, are engaged' (2001, p.152).

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It should not be oversimplified: the subtlety of living out ‘belonging’ may speak loudest in this context, but simultaneously minds are – socially, politically, individually – laden with imagined pasts, futures, and communities. Perhaps this goes some way in illuminating why belonging has this fluidity of constantly manipulated markers. Crucially, identity selectively reveals and conceals itself at precisely those moments when no one seems to be watching. While perceptions of everyday life may seem so obvious as to be invisible, it is precisely here that we unravel how people work at identity matters.

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