

# THE Identity OF Nations



MONTSERRAT GUIBERNAU



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MONTSERRAT GUIBERNAU

polity

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# Introduction

In 2000 I visited Montreal and Quebec City to participate in a conference on nationalism. In the opening session, and after a staunch defence of the right of Quebecers to self-determination, a member of the audience challenged the speaker and claimed that all that rhetoric on partnership with Canada and democratic Quebec nationalism was false. He defined himself as an English Canadian feeling excluded within Quebec and fed up with Quebecers' recurrent demands for greater autonomy, 'when in truth', he argued, 'what they really want is independence'. He added: 'How could we possibly allow this? You are a mere province of Canada. Who do you think you are?' The speaker replied: 'We are a nation'. That triggered a lively debate in which mutual recriminations and arguments were employed to support antagonistic views, not only on the current status of Quebec and its eventual political future within Canada, but also on the cultural and public policy measures adopted by Canada to reinforce its national identity.

The views of Indian nations – called First Nations – living within the territory of Quebec were also represented in the debate. They came across strongly against Quebec nationalism and the granting of further devolution to the province, their main argument being that their ancestors had signed treaties with Canada in which their status as nations was recognized. Canada had to fulfil its duties towards them and not 'dump' them with the Quebecers, with whom they had never entered into any type of agreement. The atmosphere was tense, and the ideas and arguments being debated mattered a great deal to those defending them.

In a matter of seconds, at least four different nations with their own national identities had come to the fore. They were of different sizes and age and had different cultures, languages and traditions, and all of them were claiming their right over parts of the same territory. Thus Canada was confronted by Quebec's national demands, while simultaneously Quebec was being challenged by the existence of smaller nations, such as the Hurons and the Mohawk, claiming their rights over their own homelands currently included within Quebec's territory.

★   ★   ★

The complexity of the Canadian–Quebec–First Nations relationship brings to the fore territorial issues, but it also opens up questions about how to accommodate national diversity within a multinational democracy. From a cultural perspective, it raises concerns about the nature, components, strength and strategies employed in the construction of national identity; such concerns were further stressed by my own experience as a Catalan.

As an adolescent I witnessed the rise of democratic Catalan nationalism after Franco's death (1975). I observed the sanctioning of a democratic constitution in 1978 and a new statute of autonomy for Catalonia in 1979. I saw the transformation of a highly centralized, conservative and authoritarian regime into a decentralized, democratic and modern nation-state included in the European Union and NATO. At that moment, I was still unable to participate in the political process, but I remember vividly the tremendous optimism and excitement of people who, for the first time in over forty years of dictatorship, were able to vote in a free and democratic election and express their views on the constitution and the statute. People believed that the future was in their hands, that from then on they would have a voice and could make a difference. At school, our teachers were bringing newspaper articles and newly published books for us to learn about Catalonia's re-established political institutions, their background, the civil war and exile. Even more crucially, I remember a young teacher avidly learning herself and simultaneously teaching us about the ideas and practices of social democracy and political pluralism that neither she nor we had ever encountered previously.

Still today, when Catalans define themselves as a nation, they obtain a heated reaction from some Spaniards who, as the 1978 constitution declares, regard the constitution as 'based upon the indissoluble unity of the Spanish Nation, the common and indivisible patria of all Spaniards'.<sup>1</sup> Catalans reply that Catalonia has a distinct national identity and has constituted a nation since the Middle Ages – a time when Catalonia became a key power in the Mediterranean and enjoyed its own constitutions, independent government and laws. They regard the current lack of recognition of Catalonia as a nation as part of a legacy of years of oppression by the Castilian yoke. In the War of the Spanish Succession, Catalonia supported the cause of the Austrians against Philip V (Felipe V) of the Bourbon dynasty. The Treaty of Utrecht (1713) confirmed Philip V as king of Spain, and Catalonia was left alone to face the might of the Franco-Spanish armies. Catalonia maintained its rights and liberties until 1714, when, on 11 September, after a massive Franco-

Spanish attack that followed a siege of fourteen months, Barcelona surrendered. Philip V ordered the dissolution of the Catalan institutions and Catalonia was subject to a regime of occupation. Catalan was forbidden and Castilian (Spanish) was proclaimed as the official language.

As I was growing up in Barcelona, I became a spectator of the stark contrast between a peaceful and democratic Catalan nationalism and the recurring violence perpetrated by some sectors of the Basque nationalist movement. 'Why are the Basques prone to violence and the Catalans are not?' I have had this question thrown at me on innumerable occasions, and I must confess that I still do not have a clear-cut answer to it. The response invariably has to include some references to the different components of national identity, that is, to the historical experiences, influences, values and principles defining the nation in each case.

The symmetrical decentralization of Spain effected after 1978, and referred to as 'coffee for everyone', involved the division of Spain into seventeen autonomous communities, some of them with historical roots and a strong sense of identity – Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia – others artificially created where no sense of a separate identity had ever existed – La Rioja and Madrid among many others. One of the most striking consequences of Spanish devolution has been the emergence of distinct identities being constructed within the newly created autonomous communities – an indication that multilevel governance tends to favour the generation of multiple identities operating at different levels. Right now some define Andalucía as a nation and defend its right to self-determination. Of course, nations are not eternal, they are born, transformed, and some of them disappear. But when does a nation come into being? How do nations construct their identities? In what circumstances does a nation declare itself as a *demos*, that is, a community with the right to decide on its political future?

In Spain, transformations affecting national identity were not limited to a sub-state level. The victory of the PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers Party) in the 1982 general election initiated a dramatic transformation of the traditional definition of Spanish identity inherited from Francoism and defined primarily by its centralism, conservatism, Catholicism and anti-Europeanism and the pre-eminence of Castilian culture and language. The redefinition of Spanish identity was completed after the landslide victory in 2000 of the PP (Popular Party). Since then Spain has become an established democratic, modern, progressive (no less progressive than other European countries) nation-state, which is also decentralized, prosperous, pro-European, industrialized, secular, and enjoying a welfare system in constant development. In spite of this, it could be argued that Spanish identity still includes some

hindrances from the past, such as the passion for centralism and the predominance of Castile; however, no one could deny that Spain has dramatically transformed its identity. How do nations transform their identities? What strategies do they employ? Is there a core that remains constant within all national identities in spite of their dynamic advancement?

\*   \*   \*

It is just before 8 a.m. when I usually get off the train at Liverpool Street Station and take the 25 bus to the university. In a matter of seconds, the bus leaves the already busy streets of London's financial district ('the City'), with its combination of skyscrapers, old buildings and churches, sleepy cafes, posh restaurants and shops, and heads towards the heart of the area recently termed Londonistan.<sup>2</sup>

The racial, cultural and social diversity of Mile End Road is easily captured as I look through the window. The imposing silhouette of the East London Mosque on the right; a bit further, on the left-hand side, dozens of vendors are rapidly arranging their stalls in what in an hour's time will become a buzzing street market, evoking some memories of those of Lahore or Karachi. The range of produce available and the dress code of most vendors, clients and passers by reveal a profound mixture of origins and traditions. The bus gets busier at every stop: some English working-class people – only a couple today; a big Jamaican lady with her son; some Urdu-speaking young men; a quiet group of about six or seven young girls, with their blue uniforms and headscarves, heading to one of the single-faith schools in the neighbourhood; two men in their mid-twenties speaking in an Eastern European language, their hands toughened up by manual work; and myself, a white Southern European woman. I wonder how many nationalities, languages, religions and national identities fit into a single bus in one of the most heterogeneous areas of London.

My short trip to work reveals the great diversity present in most Western cities, a trend already expanding to the countryside. Immigration is not a novel phenomenon; it has been around for centuries, and London offers a very good example of it. But, suddenly, difference has acquired unprecedented relevance in some Western societies, now uneasy about the consequences of multiculturalism. Does it contribute to the reification of differences rather than to the construction of a cohesive society? To what extent does having a British passport ensure loyalty to the nation and solidarity towards fellow citizens? Is there a growing gap between citizenship and national identity? Is citizenship cherished solely as an entrance-card to a



prosperous labour market and mobility within the EU while loyalty and social commitments remain elsewhere?

The Britishness of the 7 July 2005 London bombers, rising tensions between some Asian and white youth in various locations, and the emergence of areas where people from different ethnic origins never mix are raising a certain degree of anxiety among significant sectors of the population. Trevor Phillips, head of the Commission for Racial Equality, has recently proclaimed that Britain is 'sleepwalking into segregation', with some districts 'on their way to becoming fully fledged ghettos – black holes into where no one goes without fear and trepidation and from which no one ever escapes undamaged.'<sup>3</sup> How do citizens of migrant origin define their national identity? Has Britishness, a concept strongly connected with the British Empire, been successfully redefined to embrace a wide range of peoples of various provenance? Are indigenous populations prepared fully to accept and regard as their own fellow citizens who are physically, culturally or religiously different from the majority?

\* \* \*

Reflection on the various experiences I have just mentioned triggered the project to write this book, with the aim of studying how the identity of Western nations is being transformed from below, from above and from within. The book examines the meaning and main pillars of national identity as well as the strategies employed by nation-states engaged in processes of nation-building before and after the current intensification of globalization processes. It studies bottom-up movements for recognition and self-determination organized by national minorities living within the boundaries of the nation-state. In particular, it focuses on the ways in which Western nations react to such demands and the consequences this may have on national identity and social cohesion.

At the same time, the book reflects on top-down pressure exerted by the construction of novel supranational political institutions, such as the EU, which actively seek to instil a shared sense of common identity among a diverse citizenry. A further source of transformation points at dramatic changes in attitudes, values and perceptions of ethnic and religious diversity by significant sectors of the indigenous population. This takes place at a time when some communities of migrant origin are voicing strong claims to maintain their separate distinct identity – cultural, linguistic and religious – within the nation-state of which they are citizens. Simultaneously, other ethnic communities are advocating the right to contribute to and transform

the identity of the nation within which they live. Still others despise the values and principles of the society of which they are citizens and defend their right to opt out of a common project uniting the nation because they place their allegiances elsewhere.

The outcome mirrors a polyhedron reflecting various reactions on behalf of the indigenous population, which regards its own national identity, and the bonds of solidarity and social cohesion legitimizing its actions as a political community, as being under threat. Western nations are unsure about how tolerant they should be and what they should tolerate. Tragically, the West is uncertain about the content of its own values and principles and, in some cases, it seems prepared to nurture the seeds of its own decline as a civilization.

Rising doubts about multiculturalism, a greater sensitivity towards difference, fears – justified or not – of being swamped by immigrants who contribute to lowering wages, greater unemployment, crime, and the stretching of welfare services are giving arguments to the new radical right, who are playing by the rules of democracy and presenting a primarily anti-immigrant programme aimed at defending the rights of an indigenous population ‘abandoned’ by the political correctness, tolerance and multicultural policies implemented by mainstream parties in recent years. Renewed calls for preserving the ‘purity’ of national identities are on the rise.

In contrast, a cosmopolitan elite stands in favour of a hybrid cultural view of the world. They denounce the perniciousness of nationalism and often ignore and dismiss the value that national identity has for millions of people who regard the nation as some kind of extended family, as a community within which they have a stake, as a homeland within which they matter and they can expect to be assisted when in need.

## **Outline of the book**

This book explores how the identity of nations is being transformed by the impact of devolution, migration and the construction of supranational institutions in the age of globalization. It analyses some of the reactions to the end of ‘pure’ identities and invites the reader to reflect on the growing influence of a primarily anti-immigrant political agenda designed by the new radical right. It also explores the nature of cosmopolitanism and its possible compatibility, or lack of compatibility, with nationalism and national identity.

The book is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 offers a detailed analysis of the role and relevance of national identity in contemporary societies.

It emphasizes the difference between national identity, that is, the collective sentiment of belonging to the nation – understood primarily as a cultural community – and citizenship, which basically refers to membership of the state – a political institution granting rights and imposing duties on its members. Here, I examine the strategies regularly employed by the state in the construction of a shared national identity among its usually diverse population, a national identity in the end destined to legitimize the state's own existence. In so doing, I consider the transformations prompted by globalization of traditional mechanisms destined to build national identity in modern societies.

Chapter 2 focuses on various institutional arrangements intended to accommodate within liberal democratic states the nationalism of nations without states. It argues that political decentralization, when accompanied by a substantial degree of autonomy, the constitution of regional institutions and access to significant resources, promotes the emergence of dual identities – regional and national – without necessarily diminishing the latter. Besides, this chapter shows that political decentralization does not tend to foster secession, that is, devolution does not usually challenge the integrity of the nation-state's boundaries. I justify my claims by comparing Britain, Canada and Spain as three cases which, so far, prove that decentralization – including political autonomy and federalism – tames secessionism, both by offering significant power and resources to the national minorities it seeks to accommodate and by enticing regional political elites with the power, prestige and perks of devolution.

Chapter 3 introduces the concept of ethnicity to complement the study of nations and nationalism developed in the two previous chapters. Max Weber called ethnic groups 'those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or of both, or because of memories of colonization or migration.'<sup>4</sup> This chapter focuses on migration and its impact upon Austrian national identity. It explores the role of ethnicity in the construction of national identity and analyses various integration models ranging from ghettoization to assimilation and multiculturalism. In addition, it considers the role of immigrants within the new Austria emerging after the Second World War and looks carefully at the rise of the radical right Freedom Party.

Chapter 4 investigates whether a transnational political institution such as the European Union could foster the emergence of a novel type of shared identity among its citizens. The EU provides a new environment within which individuals and groups seek recognition and organize their participation in politics. The big question concerns whether the development of a

political institution such as the EU and the harmonization of Europe through the implementation of EU Directives will result in the emergence of a common identity accompanied by sentiments of loyalty and attachment to the EU or, on the contrary, whether national loyalties and interests are to prevail and prevent the emergence of a European identity.

Chapter 5 concentrates on the main challenges currently being faced by American identity. Here, I highlight the tremendous ethnic and racial diversity included in the USA. In particular, I focus on the gradual replacement of assimilation by integration within a wide range of ethnic groups endowed with their own cultures, which often include their own separate sub-economic structures. I analyse the impact of large Hispanic immigration upon America's traditional culture and monolingual status, the pervasive discrimination against African-Americans and their renewed nationalism, and the socio-political transformations brought about by the adoption of multiculturalism in the post-civil rights era. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the meaning of American identity in the early twenty-first century.

Chapter 6 examines the rise of the new radical right and its defence of what I refer to as 'pure national identities'. This chapter looks carefully at the new radical right's anti-immigration discourse and its position against multiculturalism. In so doing, I draw from the study of a range of European new radical right-wing parties – among them, the Austrian Freedom Party, the French *Front National* and the Italian *Lega Nord*. I also establish a connection between the European new radical right's defence of ethnoculturalism and white nativism in the USA.

In Chapter 7, I establish a distinction between 'global' and 'cosmopolitan' culture and focus on the ethical component absent from most theories of cosmopolitan culture and identity. The chapter compares national and cosmopolitan identity by examining five dimensions: psychological, cultural, historical, territorial and political. It concludes by assessing whether nationalism and cosmopolitanism are able to coexist and investigates the specific conditions that would render this possible. At this juncture, I argue that the political agenda for the future of nations should embrace a commitment to cosmopolitan ideals and values capable of informing political action and adding a new moral dimension to national identity. The advent of cosmopolitanism requires the pledge to eradicate social, political and economic ideologies based upon the exploitation of individuals and nations. In so far as this remains out of reach, cosmopolitanism will remain a utopian ideology.

## What is National Identity?

This chapter explores the meaning of national identity and the relevance it has achieved in contemporary Western societies by examining its definition, components and origin. It begins by briefly analysing the processes around the nineteenth century that initially gave prominence to the concern for identity and resulted in turning it into one of the most significant features of late modernity. The chapter then moves on to study the psychological, cultural, historical, territorial and political dimensions I attribute to national identity. Some of the key issues considered include the role of elites in the construction of national identity, the relevance of antiquity, the constructed or immemorial origin of nations and national identity, matters regarding the legitimizing role of history, and the significance of territory in the construction of national identity. The chapter concludes by providing an original examination of the strategies traditionally employed by the nation-state in the construction of national identity. In so doing, it points out how some of these traditional strategies are being transformed under the influence of a growing intensification of the globalization processes.

### Identity

The concern with individuality is a relatively recent phenomenon connected with the emergence of modern societies and the differentiation of the division of labour.<sup>1</sup> By the late Middle Ages, people increasingly learned to think in individual terms and slowly solidified concepts of the single human life as an individual totality. Before that, society operated on the basis of lineage, gender, social status and other attributes. Baumeister's analysis recalls that of Durkheim: 'The "individual", in a certain sense, did not exist in traditional cultures, and individuality was not prized.'<sup>2</sup>

In the nineteenth century, the prestige of the individual self reached an all-time high, but it declined in the early twentieth century when 'new social arrangements and events dramatized the relative powerlessness of the individual leading to a devaluation of the self'.<sup>3</sup> However, a process giving

special significance to the 'uniqueness' of each individual led to a particular concern about identity reflecting the individual and collective (group) desire to be 'different'.

The key questions with regard to identity are 'Who am I?' 'Who are we?' Identity is a definition, an interpretation of the self that establishes what and where the person is in both social and psychological terms. All identities emerge within a system of social relations and representations. As Melucci observes, all identities require the reciprocal recognition of others; they involve permanence and unity of a subject or of an object through time.<sup>4</sup> Melucci connects identity with action. In his view, actors must have a perception of belonging, a sense of temporal continuity and a capacity for self-reflection informing a process of constant reaffirmation of one's self-identity and differentiation from others. He argues: 'We might define identity as the reflexive capacity for producing consciousness of action (that is, a symbolic representation of it) beyond any specific contents. Identity becomes formal reflexivity, pure symbolic capacity, the recognition of the production of a sense of action within the limits posed at any given moment by the environment and the biological structure.'<sup>5</sup>

In my view, the defining criteria of identity are continuity over time and differentiation from others – both fundamental elements of national identity. Continuity springs from the conception of the nation as a historically rooted entity that projects into the future. Individuals perceive this continuity through a set of experiences that spread out across time and are united by a common meaning, something that only 'insiders' can grasp. Differentiation stems from the consciousness of forming a distinct community with a shared culture, past, symbols and traditions, attached to a limited territory. Continuity and differentiation from others lead to the distinction between members (those who belong) and 'strangers', 'the rest', 'the different' and, sometimes, 'the enemy'.

## **National identity**

The French love cheese and are proud of the Enlightenment and the changes brought about by their Revolution. The English enjoy cricket, tea and the countryside. They are also pleased about their old democratic legacy. US citizens are proud of the founding fathers of their nation; they love steaks and big cars. Spaniards appreciate good wine and paella and are content about Columbus's discovery of America under Castilian sponsorship.

But do all citizens of each one of these countries share such features? Surely not, and those who share them do so with different intensity and focusing on various specific features in each case. Are they 'less' French,

English, Spanish or American citizens in this case? The response depends on the value attributed to national stereotyping. If we were to look deeper into these definitions, we might discover that stereotypes have an origin, and, up to a point, they direct us to a set of characteristics which are believed to be shared by those who belong to particular nations. Stereotyping consists of selecting and often exaggerating some distinctive features of certain nationals. But is there a relationship between the attributes which are singled out to define certain nationals and the so-called national identity of these peoples?

National identity is a collective sentiment based upon the belief of belonging to the same nation and of sharing most of the attributes that make it distinct from other nations. National identity is a modern phenomenon of a fluid and dynamic nature. While consciousness of forming a nation may remain constant for long periods of time, the elements upon which such a feeling is based may vary.

Belief in a common culture, history, kinship, language, religion, territory, founding moment and destiny have been invoked, with varying intensity, by peoples claiming to share a particular national identity. At present, such a national identity is generally attributed to citizens of a nation-state. However, distinct national identities may also be shared among individuals belonging to nations without states, such as Quebec, Catalonia, the Basque Country and Scotland. Collective memories of a time when the nation was independent, endured oppression, or attained international leadership tend to strengthen a sense of common identity among those who belong to the nation, even if it lacks a state of its own.

## **The dimensions of national identity**

National identity is constituted by a set of attributes shared by those who belong to a particular nation. The nature of these attributes stems from the specific way in which the nation is defined. Yet, in referring to the nation as a human group conscious of forming a community, sharing a common culture, attached to a clearly demarcated territory, having a common past and a common project for the future while claiming the right to self-determination,<sup>6</sup> I am implying that national identity has five dimensions. These are psychological, cultural, territorial, historical and political.

### *Psychological dimension*

The psychological dimension of national identity arises from the consciousness of forming a group based on the 'felt' closeness uniting those who

belong to the nation. Such closeness can remain latent for years and suddenly come to the surface whenever the nation is confronted with an external or internal enemy – real, potential or imagined – threatening its people, its prosperity, its traditions and culture, its territory, its international standing or its sovereignty.

Some scholars of nationalism insist on the subjective nature of national identity's components.<sup>7</sup> In my view, the most relevant quality of those components is not whether they are subjective or not, but rather whether they are felt as real by those sharing a common identity. Across the globe we find countless examples of people prepared to make sacrifices and ultimately to die for their nations, and this proves that, at least for them, national identity is real and worth fighting for. But why is this so? Sharing a national identity generates an emotional bond among fellow nationals and, as Connor puts it, this is fundamentally psychological and non-rational. It is not irrational, only 'beyond reason'.<sup>8</sup> This is so because, basically, a nation is a group of people who feel that they are ancestrally related. In Connor's view, the nation 'is the largest group that can command a person's loyalty because of felt kinship ties; it is, from this perspective, the fully extended family.' However, 'the sense of unique descent need not, and *in nearly all cases will not*, accord with factual history',<sup>9</sup> since nearly all nations originate from the mixing of peoples from various ethnic origins. For this reason, what matters is not chronological or factual history but sentient or felt history.

The attributes, real as well as invented, sustaining the belief in common ancestry make up national identity and foster a sense of belonging which generally engenders loyalty and social coherence among fellow nationals.

The internalization of national identity, and in particular of a distinct culture specific to the nation, results in individuals charging it emotionally. In certain circumstances, sentiments of love of the nation and hatred of those threatening it are intensely felt by fellow nationals. Political leaders and agitators are fully aware of the power of national identity, and it is not uncommon for them to mix rational arguments with the appeal to shared sentiments of belonging and love of the nation while trying to mobilize the population. Calls for action and sacrifice in the face of threats to the nation and of defeat are accompanied by appeals to the 'unique character' and 'qualities' of those who belong. Such assertions have the capacity to lift people beyond their daily lives and routines, to raise them to a higher level in which their actions acquire a novel meaning and are qualified as crucial for the survival and prosperity of the nation. The strength of emotions overrides reason, because it is through a sentimental identification with the nation that individuals transcend their finite and, at least for some, meaningless lives. Their efforts



and sacrifices become decisive, even heroic, and the conviction of having contributed to a higher aim, that of preserving and enhancing the nation, increases the individuals' self-esteem as well as their own image in the minds and memory of fellow nationals.

National institutions honour some of those who defend and promote the nation within the international arena. Commemorations of heroic war actions, medals and other awards, and special receptions organized by the nation's dignitaries as a gesture of recognition to distinguished athletes or national sports teams exemplify this. Of course, some could argue that individuals endure sacrifices and seek success for their own personal sake, but most contests, in particular sports ones, are organized according to national teams, and generally only representatives of nation-states are allowed to participate.

### *Cultural dimension*

Values, beliefs, customs, conventions, habits, languages and practices are transmitted to the new members who receive the culture of a particular nation. As mentioned above, the process of identification with the elements of a specific culture implies a strong emotional investment. Two major inferences deriving from this possess a particular significance when considering national identity. First, a shared culture favours the creation of solidarity bonds among the members of a given community by allowing them to recognize each other as fellow nationals and to imagine their community as separate and distinct from others.

Second, individuals socialized within a distinct culture tend to internalize its symbols, values, beliefs and customs as forming a part of themselves.

Deutsch defines the nation as a cultural entity and refers to the processes of communication as fundamental in creating coherent societies and cultures. In his view, 'Membership in a people consists in wide complementarity of social communication. It consists in the ability to communicate more efficiently, and over a wide range of subjects, with members of one large group than with outsiders.'<sup>10</sup>

Communication requires the use of a specific language known by the members of the nation. To a great extent, vernacular languages are employed, though there are some exceptions. For instance, where the vernacular language has been lost, this is often replaced by the state's language. In Scotland the practical disappearance of Gaelic, primarily due to the imposition of English, resulted in the latter becoming Scotland's national language. There are cases where more than one language is official within the nation and