



Tradition and Agency

Tracing cultural continuity
and invention

Edited by Ton Otto & Poul Pedersen

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AARHUS UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Cover art: Mathias Kauage, painting 1998, acrylic on canvas

Cover design: Louise Hilmar

Typeface: Palatino

ISBN 87 7934 952 8

AARHUS UNIVERSITY PRESS

Langelandsgade 177

DK-8200 Aarhus N

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Preface

Tradition has been a key concept in anthropology, sociology and history since the inception of these disciplines. Its primary meaning is to capture continuity in human affairs, as it refers both to the activity of handing down the cultural heritage from one generation to the next, and to what is actually handed down: customs, beliefs, rituals, rules. About twenty years ago an anthology with the provocative title *The Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) highlighted that traditions often were an element of change as well. The authors showed that new institutions of governance both in Europe and its colonial dependencies frequently were imbued with status and legitimacy through the creation of 'traditional' ceremonies and identities. The book stimulated an enormous research activity on invented and imagined traditions in Europe and many other parts of the world. An independent discovery of this field of research occurred in the Pacific region, marked by the publication of a special issue of the journal *Mankind* (Keesing and Tonkinson 1982). The ensuing research into traditions, both in the Pacific and other ethnographic 'areas', has produced rich data on similar processes all over the world but has also tended to become regionally oriented and inward looking, focussing on the cultural dynamics of local inventions and reactions to global developments.

In this book we want to highlight the geographical extension of the invention and revival of traditions. We have collected case studies that range from Western and Eastern Europe, via Africa and Indonesia to Australia and the Pacific. Each chapter presents a striking case study that tells its own captivating story but, at the same time, illustrates one or more general aspects of these related phenomena. In the Introduction we have endeavoured to capture how these phenomena are related from the perspective of their relevance for understanding human cultural activity in general. We do this by reviewing the discussions on the invention of tradition and assessing their contribution to questions of cultural continuity and discontinuity, agency, and the use of cultural resources. In the Postscript, one

of the editors of *The Invention of Tradition*, Terence Ranger, links the chapters in another way by tracing connections established through nationalism and imperialism (which formed the context of the *Invention* book) as well as globalised exchange and borrowing.

As sometimes happens with anthologies – partly due to the vagaries of publishers' policies – this book has been in the making for quite some time. Most chapters derive from papers that were originally presented during the 5th biennial EASA conference in Frankfurt in 1998. The editors of the book convened a three-day workshop on the theme of 'Anthropology and the revival of tradition', that generated an overwhelming interest and a large number of contributions. Another selection of revised papers from this workshop was published in 2000 in *FOLK: Journal of the Danish Ethnographic Society* 42, bringing together seven articles on Western and Eastern Europe, and two on the Pacific region and Australia. The present book has profited from further discussions and workshops, among others a PhD workshop in Aarhus in May 2003, organised by the Danish Research School of Anthropology and Ethnography, in which both Terence Ranger and Bob Tonkinson participated. We would like to thank all the participants in the Frankfurt and Aarhus workshops for their active contributions.

We owe special thanks to Sally Laird for revising most of the chapters, Stacy Cozart for improving our introduction, Toke Bjerregaard for assisting the editing process, Mary Lund for proof reading and Louise Hilmar for drawing the maps and taking care of the final typesetting. In addition, we are grateful for the generous financial support from the Danish Research Agency, the University of Aarhus Research Foundation, the Department of Anthropology and Ethnography and the Faculty of Humanities, University of Aarhus.

Ton Otto and Poul Pedersen
Aarhus, February 2005

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Disentangling Traditions

Culture, Agency and Power

Ton Otto and Poul Pedersen

Two decades ago, Hobsbawm and Ranger published their celebrated anthology *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), which included articles on the emergence of new traditions in Europe, colonial India and Africa. A year before, Keesing and Tonkinson edited a special issue of the journal *Mankind* (1982) under the title 'Reinventing Traditional Culture: The Politics of Kastom in Island Melanesia', which deals with similar issues in a different region. One can only speculate about the causes for this synchronous discovery of a new field of research, but one possible explanation is that this was prompted by cultural developments in the recently decolonised regions in the Pacific, Africa and elsewhere as well as a revived interest in regional traditions in Europe, as the continent was moving towards greater economic and political integration. Whether this is a sufficient explanation for the sudden academic interest in the phenomenon or not, the idea that traditions can be newly constructed and serve political and social functions freed up an enormous amount of scholarly energy among historians, anthropologists, ethnologists and political scientists, and led to the production of a substantive corpus of literature on similar processes all over the world.¹

This scholarly output is not only very substantive but also undeniably very valuable, as it documents the relationship between

* We thank Nils Bubandt, Helle Vandkilde, Robert Tonkinson and Stacey Cozart for their constructive criticism of this introductory chapter.

1. See note 3 and the following, regionally biased list, as well as other references in this chapter and the rest of the book: Handler and Linnekin (1984); Babadzan (1988, 1999); Fienup-Riordan (1988); Spiegel (1989); Errington (1989); Kisbán (1989); Jolly and Thomas (1992); Thomas (1992); White and Lindstrom (1993); Lindstrom and White (1994); Briggs (1996); Errington and Gewertz (1996); Rutherford (1996); Otto and Borsboom (1997); Apter (1999); Otto and Pedersen (2000); Hamelin and Wittersheim (2002); Demian (2003).

cultural and political change in many different contexts. There are, however, also some weaknesses in this body of scholarship. In the first place, the discussions have tended to be confined by regional interests, leading to burgeoning regional research traditions – especially concerning the Pacific, Africa and Europe – that nevertheless lacked interregional cross-referencing and intellectual exchange. Secondly, the debate has been hampered by some conceptual confusion or imprecision: the word tradition has a long history in Western thought and usage (Wiedenhofer 1990, Williams 1983) and evokes a range of connotations that have caused theoretical hitches. Since the primary popular meanings all refer to continuity with the past², the provocative strength of the title ‘invention of tradition’ (or ‘reinventing traditional culture’) hinges on the contradiction between innovation and continuity. Liberating as this has been, this contradiction has also engendered a number of conceptual dichotomies that in our view have tended to blur the scholarly quest for relevant questions and answers: genuine versus spurious traditions, authentic versus concocted, cultural continuity versus the invention or construction of all cultural expressions, reproduction versus politics.

This volume contains nine case studies from five different regions – Europe, Africa, Indonesia, Australia and the South Pacific – that were selected for the exemplary way in which they illustrate and develop one or more aspects of the theoretical discussions on the invention and reproduction of tradition. In this introduction our ambition is to outline the theoretical importance of the debate for an understanding of cultural process as well as to disentangle some of its conceptual knots. First, we sketch the ideas of the instigators of the

2. The dictionaries we consulted all minimally referred to the following two meanings of the word tradition: a) the act of passing down from the past to the present (especially by word of mouth or practice); and b) that which is passed down in this way (beliefs, practices). See for example Oxford English Dictionary Online (Oxford University Press 2004) under the heading tradition: particularly gloss 4.a. ‘The action of transmitting or ‘handing down’, or in fact of being handed down, from one to another, of from generation to generation; transmission of statements, beliefs, rules, customs, or the like, esp. by word of mouth or by practice without writing. Chiefly in phrase *by tradition*.’; and gloss 5.a. ‘That which is thus handed down; a statement, belief, or practice transmitted (esp. orally) from generation to generation.’

debate and then deal with recent criticism by Marshall Sahlins (1999) in an article entitled 'Two or three things that I know about culture'. Next, we discuss the things that we believe we can learn from the debate, which are related to the following four issues: the multiplexity of culture (of which tradition is a part), the relationship between agency and tradition, the use of tradition as a political and economic resource, and, finally, the ethical and political entanglements that researchers interested in tracing tradition through changing political conditions can get caught up in.

The invention of tradition

Eric Hobsbawm's introduction to the 'Invention' volume summarises and clarifies the theoretical implications of the included studies in an exemplary way. He defines the term 'invented tradition' as 'a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past' (Hobsbawm 1983). Note that in Hobsbawm's definition invented traditions establish continuity with the past in two ways. Firstly, Hobsbawm observes how the repetitive nature of the practices itself creates a sense of continuity. Secondly, he notes that invented traditions 'normally' evoke a more explicit link with a specific past. The word 'invention', on the other hand, stipulates that the practices are in fact new and therefore do not constitute a direct continuity with past practices, and, following directly from this, that the claimed continuity with a certain historic past is 'largely factitious' (ibid: 2).

Hobsbawm's notion of 'tradition' is developed from an analytical distinction of tradition from the apparently similar concepts of 'custom', 'convention', and 'routine'. Whereas traditions characteristically claim or represent invariance, customs allow for flexibility and change even though by nature they engender continuous repetition. And in contrast to traditions, conventions and routines do not have a significant ritual or symbolic function. Further on in his introduction Hobsbawm opposes 'genuine traditions' to invented ones in

the context of a discussion of how social change creates the conditions for the invention of tradition (ibid: 8). We find these conceptual discriminations important and relevant, even though we consider the term 'genuine' somewhat unfortunate since in our view it over-emphasises the contrast between real continuity and a constructed sense of permanence. We prefer to focus on the level of explicitness of (constructed) continuity, for reasons we shall develop below. In addition, we do not quite agree with Hobsbawm's observation that "'custom' ... dominates so-called 'traditional societies'" whereas modern societies are more likely to invent traditions (ibid: 2). We will argue that customs – as well as traditions – are central to all kinds of societies, even though differences can be found in the type of traditions that prevail.

In our reading, the major theoretical contribution of Hobsbawm and Ranger's volume lies in three central assumptions. In the first place, the invention of tradition is seen as a process of formalisation and ritualisation that may probably be found in all times and places. But it is likely to occur with particular frequency in times of rapid social change, when the strength and legitimacy of old patterns are weakened or destroyed. The editors claim that such changes have been especially momentous in the past 200 years (ibid: 4/5). Secondly, one of the great transformations and innovations of this period is the emergence of the 'nation' as a political project (associated with nationalism and the rise of the nation-state). It appears that the invention of tradition has been particularly relevant and widespread in relation to this transformation and has often involved an element of 'social engineering' (ibid: 13/14). Thirdly, the editors assume that invented traditions perform certain social functions. As already mentioned in the above definition, traditions inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition; thus, they are devices for socialisation and the production of consensus. In addition, traditions can serve to legitimise institutions and relations of authority. Finally, traditions have the capacity to symbolise and establish social cohesion and membership of a group or community. This third function implies the other two as a means for creating social identities (including those of 'imagined communities' such as the nation). It is

particularly this function that gives such an impetus to the invention of new traditions in times of change (ibid: 8/9).

Apart from being co-editor of the 1983 'invention' volume, Terence Ranger contributed to that volume with a chapter on colonial Africa. Since his contribution spurred an extensive discussion within African studies,³ and Ranger himself returned to the debate twice in writing,⁴ it is useful to see how he modified his original positions. In a chapter published in 1993, 'The invention of tradition revisited: the case of colonial Africa', Ranger defends his earlier work by highlighting that it dealt with a certain historical period characterised by the rise of romantic nationalism, in which traditions were particularly frequently invented. In Africa, this historical divide corresponded with the cleavage between precolonial and colonial societies. Ranger observes, however, that newer work, including his own, points out that his original focus on European inventions of colonial state ceremonies and so-called African traditions (ethnicity, customary law, traditional religion) was too narrow. For one thing, colonial hegemony was far from absolute and involved the contestation of invented traditions by various agents. Africans also participated quite actively in formulating and creating the new traditions and this involvement was part of the development of the colonial society. Finding that the word 'invention' has gotten in the way of a fully historical investigation of these two processes, he suggests that we use the expression 'imagination of tradition' instead. He also suggests that there should be more research into the relationship between postcolonial states and African tradition. The two chapters on Africa in this volume (by Petit and Højbjerg) deal with the postcolonial period, as does most of the work in the Pacific area, to which we turn in the following section.

Interestingly, in his 'third thoughts', Ranger (1999) extends his research chronologically in the other direction: to the situation in

3. See Vail (1989), Gorgendiere (1996), Guyer (1996), Niehaus (2002), Harneit-Sievers (2002).

4. See Ranger (1993) and Ranger (1999). He returned more often to the debate in presentations and discussions, such as at a PhD seminar in Aarhus in May 2003.

precolonial societies. He is concerned with identifying precolonial collective identities and seeing how these relate to the identities of the colonial state. He finds a variety of collective identities in precolonial times – such as membership of cities, chieftainships and kingdoms, empires and religious groups – and he also finds ethnicity, but not as a dominant form. He concludes: ‘The colonial invention, [...], built on much of what was already there. Nevertheless, it *did* represent a profound paradigmatic shift from a situation in which ethnic collective identification existed in rare cases to one in which ethnicities and tribes became the *necessary* form of African identity expression.’ (1999: 142). Thus there is substantial continuity and radical transformation at the same time. Note, however, that in Ranger’s publications the focus shifts from invented traditions to a discussion of ethnicity (as one example of an invented tradition in the colonial period). Concluding that forms of ethnicity probably existed in precolonial times does not necessarily imply that invented traditions – with their characteristic focus on continuity with the past – also existed. We return to this issue below.

Reinvented traditions in the Pacific

The debate on the invention of tradition in the Pacific began with a special issue of the journal *Mankind*: ‘Reinventing traditional culture: The politics of *kastom* in Island Melanesia’ (1982). *Kastom* is the Melanesian Pidgin equivalent for tradition. In their respective introductions, the editors, Keesing and Tonkinson, set the tone for many of the ensuing discussions concerning the Pacific area. Keesing emphasises the ideological dimension of *kastom*, which serves as a ‘symbol’ for anticolonial struggle. Melanesian societies gained their political independence rather late (in the 1970s and later⁵), and as they advanced toward autonomous statehood the discourse of tradition was an important factor in uniting local groups and evoking a sense of national identity. Keesing (1982) argues that the discourse has older roots in earlier anticolonial movements. The power of the discourse lies in its potential to disguise and mediate contradictions.

5. New Caledonia is still a French dependency.

The key symbol, *kastom*, is vague and vacuous and therefore it facilitates the establishment of a superficial consensus, which disguises underlying differences:

The diversity of meanings Melanesians attribute to *kastom* underlines the way such symbols do not carry meanings: they evoke them. Their very abstractness and lack of precise content allow a consensus that would otherwise be impossible, among peoples whose material circumstances, class interest, and ethnic affiliations are different and often deeply divided. (1982: 299)

Interestingly, Keesing ends his introduction by cautioning his readers against assuming that political ideologies, like *kastom*, come into existence only as a result of the colonial impact: 'We err, I think, in imagining that spurious *kastom* is radically different from genuine culture, that the ideologies and ideologies of the postcolonial present had no counterpart in the precolonial past' (ibid: 301). In a later, seminal article on the issue he develops this point further (Keesing 1989). Culture in all its forms has an ideological dimension in the same way as reified *kastom*. So-called 'authentic' cultures are the cumulative product, at least partly, of the political myths of the ancestors (1989: 24/25): 'The symbolic material of cultures – rules imputed to ancestors, rituals, myths – serves ideological ends, reinforcing the power of some, the subordination of others' (ibid: 36). Keesing called upon Pacific islanders to develop a critical scepticism about representations of 'traditions' by Western scholars and indigenous elites alike. This politicisation of the tradition debate was not equally well received by all indigenous scholars, and Keesing's article provoked an attack by the Hawaiian scholar Trask (1991), who accused him of perpetuating colonial arrogance and racism by questioning indigenous representations of their own tradition (see Keesing's reply 1991). Similar indigenous reactions against anthropological studies of the politics of tradition have characterised the Pacific debate ever since (Friedman 1993, Hanson 1989, Hanson 1991, Linnekin 1992, van Meijl 2000). In particular, the word 'invention' has caused a stir because it undermines exactly what it describes: the political use of 'age-old' traditions to defend or establish rights, status and privilege. These examples demonstrate that researchers into the political use of

culture always risk being entangled in the phenomena studied.⁶ We will try to unravel some of the ethical and epistemological issues at the end of this chapter.

In his introduction to the special issue of *Mankind*, Tonkinson (1982) makes the crucial observation that one has to distinguish between the political use of tradition at the local and the national level. At the national level in regions such as Melanesia where cultural diversity is marked, the concept of Kastom has to be largely empty of specific content, as argued by Keesing, the rhetoric of kastom being invoked to support ideas of unity, homogeneity and national identity. At the local level, though, kastom normally has detailed content and specificity and is used for defining differences and marking boundaries between competing groups (1982: 302; see also Tonkinson 1993). A central theme in Melanesia is the tension between kastom and Christianity, which was deeply felt in the village context, but mediated or resolved in the national identity project. In later articles, Tonkinson (1993, 2000) argues for the conceptualisation of tradition as 'a resource, strategically employed (or not employed) by certain (but not all) of a community's members in pursuit of individual or collective goals' (Tonkinson 2000). This perspective emphasises the agency of human actors in relation to cultural processes and calls for detailed contextual analysis of the role, distribution and strategic uses of 'traditional' knowledge.

We find Tonkinson's argument central to understanding the cultural dynamics of tradition as an indigenous concept and practice, and one of us has pursued this line of investigation by focusing on the relationship between local leadership and the uses of tradition at the village level (Otto 1992a, 1992b, 2002). It is important to keep

6. In his monograph *Custom and confrontation: The Kwaio struggle for cultural autonomy* (1992), Keesing develops his understanding of kastom as an aspect of resistance to colonial domination. The Kwaio of the interior of Malaita staunchly resisted Western impact, in contrast to the coastal tribes. They engaged in a process of codifying their tradition (*kastomu*), in which the anthropologist Keesing played a welcome role. Thus, long before Keesing became aware of the ideological dimension of culture, he was helping Kwaio tribesman in their cultural identity project. Apart from resistance theory, Keesing draws inspiration from Gramsci's ideas on counterhegemonic discourse as well as from Guha's subaltern studies.