Reclaiming the Concept of Culture: A Review of Recent Thoughts on Cultural Invention and Cultural Change

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Defining culture as the capacity for humans to symbolically classify, codify, and communicate their common experiences, Boas’ “genius of a people” (Bunzl 2004), has yielded to popular understandings of culture as a bounded entity that exists discretely in the world. These latter notions are constructs arising from the imposition of Western cultural notions on examined societies. The concept of culture, once the exclusive tool of anthropological investigations and explanations, finds itself arrogated by “everybody everywhere,” facing devaluation of its meaning and rendering it ineffective as an analytical tool, (Marcus 2008) yet reclaiming the more nebulous meanings of the term culture may suit well current explorations.

Reliance on previously constructed ethnographies for the examination of current situations ignores the dynamic and fluid nature of culture. Interaction and conflict between cultures is not a new phenomenon; recuperative and historicist ethnographies both indicate that most of the cultures anthropologists have studied were subject to and subjected other with “hybridization, idiosyncratic identities, and translocal connections.” (Bashkow 2004:444) The great diversity of customs in small geographic areas informed Franz Boas that “intercourse between neighboring tribes has always existed and has extended over enormous areas,” (1940:278) reinforcing the notion that boundaries and borders as they apply to culture are porous and permeable, not static. The representation of cultures as discrete geographic or national objects, according to the observations of Abu-Lughod and Kahn, can reinforce inequality and domination, which validates one groups’ hegemony over “others.” (Bashkow 2004) Yet boundaries serve useful purposes, allowing for examination of adherence to, and rebellion against, cultural dictates by means of expressive and contrastive functions. Cultures appear to have different boundaries dependent on point of view; in this time of the globalization and translocality of cultures and people, anthropologists need to draw multiple boundaries, or those similar to the isoglosses of linguistic analysis, than maps, recognizing that the boundaries drawn may not adhere to the boundaries people draw for themselves. Additionally, Kirin Narayan notes that people belong to several cultures, concurrently and contextually: (1993) cultural boundaries do not forbid entry, nor do they exclude exodus. (Bashkow 2004)

There is not a culture that has not, at some point in their history, invented or adopted traditions. “The question of ownership is a question of who has the right to define another person’s or population’s culture.” (Friedman 1992:837-859) All constructions of the past are socially motivated; now, instead of anthropologists investigating and interpreting the “others,” the “others” are now defining and interpreting themselves. “Constructing the past is an act of self-identification and must be interpreted in its authenticity, that is, in terms of
the existential relation between subjects and the constitution of a meaningful world.” (Friedman 1992:837-859)

Social groups construct self-images in terms of an agreed upon version of the past, which is kept alive not by individual memories, but by communicating them frequently and in totality within the group, and to the larger society around them. (Halbwachs and Coser. 1992) Construction of the past includes the apotheosis of marginal or liminal traits extant in the culture and the introduction of new traits, whether contact-influenced or created out of societal necessity through incorporation and identification with new traits, or by revitalizing a community. Research of the theories of culture change advises examination of these "new" traits and invented traditions.

Society is a network of obligations and expectations, (Stevens 2008) referencing the structure of relations that hold together a culture. An alteration at any juncture of the structure necessitates an accommodation within the group to maintain the societal moving equilibrium, in what Wallace refers to as a "recombination of configurations." (Wallace 1970:168) Many societies have defined "apparent innovations not as 'new' but merely stages in a repetitive cosmic cycle," (Wallace 1970:165) some negotiate paths of consideration of new and introduced traits, while others react with withdrawal from the cognitive dissonance of a perceived threat to the social order in a reinforcement and solidification of their separate cultural identity. Invented cultural traits are a sign/symbol substitution (Hanson 1989) replacing an extant trait with one that either combines traits or accepts (with or without modification) newly introduced traits. Relatively sudden changes in the cultural construction can provide impetus for revitalization movements, organized attempts "by some members of society to construct a more satisfying culture by rapid acceptance of a pattern of multiple innovations" (Wallace 1970:188) when faced with "a tipping point" that offers the dichotomy of options: change or disappear. Within all these parameters of change exists the concept of invented traditions.

Considerations of invented tradition invariably invoke the collected work edited by Hobsbawm and Ranger advises the definition and explanation of the idea:

"Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices … which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past … the peculiarity of 'invented' traditions is that the continuity with it is largely fictitious. In short, they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition. (Hobsbawm 1983:1-2)

If anthropologists in the past defined the cultures they viewed through the lens of Western civilization, which was not objective, then today the “past” that many objects of ethnographic study attempt to recreate in “newfound subjectivity” bears little resemblance to the past previously defined. (Friedman 1992) Western scholars and colonial powers, in their position of political dominance, frequently invented cultures and traditions from their own cultural understanding for the people they contacted, and then proceeded as if those cultures were the actual state of society. (Hanson 1989) “The ‘invention of tradition’ is a double-edged sword that criticizes the assumptions of cultural continuity while implicitly
reprimanding those who would identify with such cultural fantasies today.” (Friedman 1992:837-859) We need not "strip away invented portions of culture as inauthentic, but to understand the process by which they acquire authenticity." (Hanson 1989:898) In an ethnographic study done within the theories of cultural relativity, the culture is studied as a snapshot in time, and the invented traditions are taken as part of the whole, and as a part of the reflexive definition of the culture by the members therein.

“What is made is always made from materials already given … in such a way … the present can only be made from the past, but the future can be made from the present. As culture is transmitted and transformed, it opens up new horizons.” (Balkin 1998:5)“Just as a person draws on a stock of stories to frame and understand what is currently happening, so members of a culture draw upon its stock of stories or myths to frame and understand what is happening to them.” (Balkin 1998:205) Balkin maintains that human beings are born with the ability to absorb and communicate what he labels cultural software, and the component parts of the “software” are memes. (1998) Once the memes, a sort of cultural virus, plant themselves into the community, they spread and grow or, if they are too far from the base of experience, they wither and new memes replace them. This constant process negates attempts to impose stiff boundaries around a culture or cultural practice as traits are in a constant state of flux, whether on a culture-wide scale or in smaller and more succinct arenas.

There are myriad examples in ethnographies of invented traditions, whether imposed from the outside as a definition of a culture or "revitalized" from within as a banner of self-identification. Wallace researched the Seneca prophet Handsome Lake's successful codification of religious and cultural reformation that replaced the expired system of alliances and power the League of the Iroquois knew previously, allowing them, albeit in greatly constricted form, to continue as a distinct culture. (1970) Cargo cults erupted in the wake of colonial interference with indigenous societies in the Pacific, their millenarian behaviors invoking "sympathetic" magical intervention to obtain material goods seen as rightfully theirs in an attempt to make sense of the seeming abundance of the agents of change. (Trompf 1990)

Allan Hanson posited that two Maori traditional cultural traits were indeed not historical but an amalgamation concocted through contact by whites intent on classifying and combining diverse myths and stories. (1989) Anthropologists and Maori alike, both of whom misunderstood his analysis as an attempt to invalidate and refute the authenticity of the Maori identity, roundly criticized his essay. (Linnekin 1991) In an analysis of Hawaiian traditional identity and national symbolism, Jocelyn Linnekin writes, "Cultural revivalists search for an authentic heritage as the basis for ethnic distinctiveness; as they rediscover a culture they also create it." (1983:241) The Bachama of northeastern Nigeria adopted the myth of an ancestor and place of origin in common with the neighboring Adamawa Fulani, inventing a new popular history in the belief that this commonality of ancestry would prove kinship, and thus ensure non-aggression. (Stevens 1975)

In conjunction with re-defining whole cultures, culture change also affects class, gender, subcultures and ethnicities within cultures. Wearing the kimono marks one as feminine
and is part of the process of both gendered and cultural identities in Japan. (Goldstein-Gidoni 1999) It is possible that Orientalist scholars, influenced by their Brahmin (upper) class informants, constructed a view of Hinduism and a single "world identification" from a polycentric set of beliefs and accompanying cultures. (King 1999) The United States includes a vast variety of ethnic immigrants; the invention and/or elevation of cultural celebrations among Mexican (Cinco de Mayo), Polish (Dyngus Day), and Irish (St Patrick's Day) immigrants and their descendants magnify cultural and ethnic identity in the face of the larger "American" culture while existing as more minor celebrations "back home." Invented traditions also manifest the complete creation of subcultures, which then create their own cultural traits by adapting those of the larger society and introducing reconstructed historical traditions. The Reclaiming Collective in San Francisco, a Wiccan group founded by Starhawk, absented themselves from mainstream religious and political society, constructed a community, and then re-entered society in part to affect environmental issues and transnational politics. (Salomonsen 2002)

Historically, anthropology examined the structure of societal relations and the symbolic representation of and for a culture, reviewing it as static in keeping with investigator's Western influenced models of social organization. Hanson delineates the invention of culture as the "symbolic construction of social life." (Linnekin 1991:447) Roy Wagner states that symbolic invention is a general process exhibited by all cultures. (1981) Clifford, Clifford and Marcus, and Marcus and Fischer have challenged "our 'ethnographic authority' to define authentic culture." (Linnekin 1991:447) What we discover in historical and ethnographic examinations is that every culture adapts and changes to meet the requirements of its members, and it is timeless, if we accurately expand our definition and conception of culture. "Authenticity" as applies to the validity of cultural traits is a "cultural construct of the Western world" tied to Western notions of the individual. (Handler 1986:2)

Culture is what the members need it to be, durable in its elasticity and its capability to adapt, adopt, and change. Not the geographically, regulatory and temporally bounded extraneous influence anthropologists solidified as definitive, culture has always been, especially through the concepts of culture change and invented traditions, dynamic and vibrant, and authentic as it meets the needs of its members.

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