

SECRET, POWERFUL, AND THE STUFF OF LEGENDS: REVISITING THEORIES OF INVENTED TRADITION

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Abstract / Résumé

This article revisits theories of invented tradition and their use by scholars of Aboriginal people. Examining the two main competing theories of invented tradition—the Hobsbawmian and the constructivist—I survey key issues and problems inherent in each approach. This article suggests that extant theories of invented tradition have tended to discount the extent to which traditions can simultaneously innovate as well as serve as powerful normative forces for cultural continuity. Drawing on works that provide new ways to understand Indigenous traditions and on Clifford Geertz's interpretive theory of culture, I suggest that scholars, rather than treat them as genuine or invented, reassess traditions as operationalized symbols constitutive of specific cultural and historical meanings.

L'article examine les théories de l'invention des traditions et leur utilisation par les universitaires qui étudient les peuples autochtones. En examinant les deux principales théories concurrentielles de l'invention des traditions, soit la théorie constructiviste et la théorie de Hobsbawm, on présente un aperçu des principales questions et des principaux problèmes de chacune des approches. L'article souligne que les théories de l'invention des traditions ont eu tendance à réduire l'importance du fait que les traditions peuvent être une source d'innovation, tout en servant de puissantes forces normatives pour la continuité culturelle. En s'inspirant d'ouvrages qui proposent de nouvelles façons de comprendre les traditions autochtones et de la théorie interprétative de la culture de Clifford Geertz, l'article propose qu'au lieu de traiter les traditions comme étant réelles ou fictives, les universitaires devraient les réévaluer comme des symboles opérationnalisés qui sont remplis de significations culturelles et historiques particulières.

The late Floyd Red Crow Westerman quite possibly is the most popularly-recognizable Native American ever. An accomplished actor, Westerman made over fifty film and television appearances, including one in the blockbuster movie *Dances with Wolves*. More recently, people might recognize him as the spokesperson for LaKOTA pain relief supplements. Westerman can be seen in their advertisements dressed in full Native American regalia, earnestly reciting the lines, "After centuries of secrecy, it's about to become legendary. Experience the most powerful Native American remedies on earth: LaKOTA herbal pain relief formula!"¹ What pharmaceutical drugs, or commercials for that matter, have to do with Indigenous traditional medicine is not clear, but that is likely beside the point. What is clear is the imagery being evoked: Native American medicinal traditions as secret, powerful, and the stuff of legends. While perhaps humorously anachronistic to scholars of Indigenous people, LaKOTA pain relief commercials speak of a much larger phenomenon: the invention of tradition.

Traditions—real, invented, or otherwise—are everywhere. Whether one eats Habitant-brand split pea canned soup or watches the Atlanta Braves play baseball, people are immersed in symbols and imagery evocative of the past. Indeed, it may be just as hard to find things which do not draw some symbolic relationship to past precedents, as to find things which do. For historians and anthropologists, the realization that traditions play important functions in societies, both present and past, has had a significant impact on theoretical approaches to academic study. The theory of invented traditions and its use in studies of Indigenous people is the subject of this review. A concept which has brought to light the political nature of academic research, invented tradition has been a source of open interpretation, and, not by mere coincidence, much contention. This article revisits some of the theories of invented tradition, their use by scholars, and key issues and problems arising from their application. Examining recent works that probe promising directions for future studies of Indigenous traditions and cultures, this essay concludes by suggesting that anthropologists and historians need to reassess how we theorize and ascribe meaning to tradition. Through more microhistorical and culturally-relativistic analyses, traditions can be seen less as real or unreal, genuine or invented, but more as operationalized symbols constitutive of specific cultural and historical meanings.

Inventing Confusion

Although theoretical debate over the question of authenticating traditions stretches back to the 1960s,² Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger

are commonly credited with coining the concept in their 1983 edited work, *The Invention of Tradition*. Employed by most contributing authors to describe historical case studies in European history, the concept of the invented tradition has since been widely utilized and interpreted by historians and anthropologists. Whether used to describe the invention of the neo-traditional notion of the “folk” in Nova Scotia or the process by which a class of nineteenth-century grape growers in France constructed a global reputation for Bordeaux wines, the concept has proven to be an analytic tool remarkable for its malleability and wide-ranging application.³

Perhaps not surprisingly, the use of the theory of invented tradition by historians and anthropologists for studies of Indigenous peoples has created a wide diversity of scholarship and debate. Academics have offered different interpretations of what an invented tradition is, what it means, and what implications arise from its use. In many ways, a perusal of the growing body of scholarship employing the concept leads one to wonder to what extent people are even referring to the same idea. Indeed, most employers of the theory of invented tradition tend to reflect the position noted by Charles Briggs in the introduction to his article, “The Politics of Discursive Authority in Research on the Invention of Tradition.” Briefly referencing Hobsbawm and Ranger’s *The Invention of Tradition*, Briggs adds that such works “have received so much critical attention that it hardly seems necessary to introduce readers to the notion that cultural forms that derive their authority from a perceived connection with the past are ‘invented,’ ‘imagined,’ ‘constructed,’ or ‘made’” (Briggs, 1996: 435). “Critical attention,” however, does not equate with consensus and all too often authors such as Briggs take for granted the theory’s implications. Moreover, the lack of a consensus definition perhaps reveals why the concept has proven to be so malleable and ambiguous since its inception.

Understandably for many, the idea of the invented tradition contains an inescapable connotation of falsity and contrivance; if traditions are invented rather than historical in origin, the assumption is that they must be forgeries. According to Jocelyn Linnekin, confusion and misunderstanding commonly accompany mention of the concept, particularly in non-academic spheres. The New Zealand media’s reaction to Allan Hanson’s study of Maori oral tradition provides one example. The headline offered by one newspaper covering the study, “US Expert Says Maori Culture Invented,” suggests that the theory is prone to popular misunderstanding. This misinterpretation, Linnekin notes, ensues when academic works are represented in non-academic circles; since anthropologists have little control over the processes by which their works are pub-

licly represented, non-academics bear much of the blame for conceptual misunderstandings of invented tradition.

Confusion over what is meant by invented tradition, however, is not uncommon in both academic and non-academic realms. As Brian Haley and Larry Wilcoxon suggest, "The social construction of cultural identities and traditions is a process that scholars have not explained very well beyond the university (or even very convincingly within it)" (Haley and Wilcoxon, 1997: 763). Indeed, to misunderstand what is meant by an invented tradition, one does not need be a non-academic nor does one have to draw on a popular connotation to arrive at confusion. Part of the problem lies in the aggregate terminology that compose the concept itself. The Oxford dictionary defines invention as "1) the process of inventing. 2) a thing invented; a contrivance, esp. one for which a patent is granted. 3) a fictitious story." Tradition, on the other hand, is defined as "an established practice or custom," that "has been handed down." Seeing the potentially contradictory meaning of these two component terms, it should come as no surprise the concept of invented tradition can be easily understood as oxymoronic. At this point it may be useful to return to basics: what is an invented tradition?

Inventing the Theory: Approaches and Problems

Two main theories of invented tradition emerge from the literature on the subject. First, and most commonly employed, is Hobsbawm's idea of invented tradition, "taken to mean 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 behavior by reputation, which automatically implies continuity with the past" (Hobsbawm, 1997: 1). A practice that employs ancient materials to serve a novel purpose, Hobsbawm adds, inventions of tradition occur "more frequently when a rapid social transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which 'old' traditions had been designed" (*Ibid*: 4). Hobsbawm distinguishes invented traditions as something different than customs, which he defines as the genuine practices of so-called "traditional" societies. Genuine traditions or customs, he notes, are also capable of change and innovation, although the requirement that customs must appear compatible or even identical with precedence imposes substantial limitations. The main distinction Hobsbawm draws between custom and invented tradition revolves around the supposed need for a tradition. The appearance of movements for the defense or revival of traditions, he notes, indicates a break with genuine traditions, which, when alive and well, need not be revived or invented. For Hobsbawm, the concept of invented tradition has a specific definition

and use. It is an explanatory theory used to describe historical phenomenon which do not fit into the more conventional category of custom.

Hobsbawm's definition of invented tradition contrasts with the other main theoretical approach to the concept: the constructivist theory of tradition. This is an idea most notably developed in the work of Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin. Their 1984 article "Tradition, Genuine or Spurious" offers a more relativist approach to tradition, one which treats traditions as contemporaneous symbolic constructions undertaken by societies in the present (Handler and Linnekin, 1984: 273-90). Viewing tradition as something neither genuine nor spurious, Handler and Linnekin maintain that such social phenomenon do not exist outside our interpretation of them; rather, tradition is best seen as a process that involves continual re-creation. Such a framing of tradition is a departure from Hobsbawm's in that it de-historicizes tradition and removes the supposed need to distinguish between genuine customs and invented traditions.

Hobsbawm's criteria for distinguishing between genuine customs and invented traditions rely on historical proof, namely the ability to assess the rates and extent to which customary practices are exercised over time. In other words, Hobsbawm's model rests on the notion that the verity of a tradition is linked to its social exercise and employment, and that such practices are empirically and historically observable. The main problem facing this approach is that such observation is impossible. Gaps and inadequacies in sources inevitably hinder a scholar's ability to trace a tradition's historical pedigree. Moreover, at some point societies disappear from source records and with that, so does the scholar's ability to prove the immutability of a traditional practice over time. In short, Hobsbawm's definition of custom posits the notion that a true tradition would have historical origins from time immemorial, and that its continuity would somehow be discernible. Another problem with Hobsbawm's criterion for assessing the immutability of a tradition arises when considering the issue of intent. The legitimacy of a custom necessarily supposes a link between social behavior and belief, and ignores the possibility that interpretive discrepancies between observed action and thought are always possible.

In contrast, by framing all traditions as contemporaneous social constructions, Handler and Linnekin's constructivist approach is able to avoid the methodological issue of how to distinguish real from fabricated traditions. Handler and Linnekin's theory, however, has its own problems. The constructivist conception of tradition treats practices claiming to have ancient or cultural origins as essentially pragmatic acts with mere symbolic connections to historical antecedence. Handler and

Linnekin use case study examples in Quebec and Hawaii to assert their point. The authors challenge the historically-based nationalist narrative of the Quebecois, arguing that the idea of the Quebec nation is a modern construction employing nationalist metaphors, rather than something actually handed down from prior generations. Similarly, with traditional culture in Hawaii, Handler and Linnekin note the contemporaneity of Hawaiian cultural practices. Handler and Linnekin's theory that all traditions are invented certainly resonates with their chosen case studies; Quebec is a late nineteenth century political entity with a convoluted colonial history; Hawaii, which became the fiftieth U.S. State in 1959, is the most westernized nation in Polynesia. In many ways, Handler and Linnekin could not have selected two more forceful case studies to support their argument. For both Quebecois and Hawaiians claiming national status, drawing a connection to the past, whether through the evocation of a tradition or the assertion of a collective identity based on history, has a strong political component. The question remains, however, how well does the constructivist theory of tradition stand up in other case study applications? This question is explored below.

Finding Inventions in Indigeneity

Since the early 1980s, the theory of invented tradition has been increasingly used in scholarly descriptions of Indigenous cultures. Most works, despite some notable exceptions, have tended to examine how Western societies have actively constructed Aboriginal cultures and traditions. In the Canadian context, Daniel Francis's 1992 intellectual history *The Imaginary Indian: the Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture* provides one such example. *The Imaginary Indian*, "a book about White—and not Native—cultural history," Francis notes, demonstrates how non-Native people have manufactured mythic imagery of Natives (Francis, 1992: 5). Shepard Krech III perhaps provides the most famous recent example of scholarship employing invented tradition in this way. Krech's 1999 *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* reassesses the idealized image of the noble savage: the stereotype of the Native American as a natural conservationist and environmentalist. Similar to Francis, Krech argues that this image is a construct based on Western thought more than historical reality. Using exemplary episodes in history to make his point, Krech argues that the reality of Indigenous traditional practices of land and resource use in North America has been obscured by idealized Westernized imagery of indigeneity.

Since its publication, the *Ecological Indian* has garnered mixed reaction. While academics have debated its merits as historical scholarship, some Aboriginal scholars have criticized the *Ecological Indian* as

propagandist, pejorative of Aboriginal symbolism, ignorant of the history of colonialism, and even colonialist itself, founded on Western academic privilege.⁴ Negative reactions to Krech's work echo the analytical premise of Gananath Obeyesekere's *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific*. In this critique of Marshall Sahlins's hypothesis that Hawaiians saw Captain Cook as the god Lono during his 1779 visit to the Hawaiian Islands, Obeyesekere accuses Western scholars of inventing this idea, adding that "mythmaking, which scholars assume to be primarily an activity of non-Western societies, is equally prolific in European thought" (Obeyesekere, 1992: 10). Mixed reactions to *The Ecological Indian* and popular reception of *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook* amongst Hawaiian scholars do more than suggest that the writing of Indigenous history is contested ground; they also point to the important functional role traditions play for Aboriginal cultures and societies.⁵ For many Aboriginal groups historical traditions are inseparably bound up with contemporary questions of identity, belief, rights, and proprietorship. Accordingly, a challenge to the meaning or authenticity of a tradition represents a wholesale affront to one's cultural identity and authority. Anthropological critiques of Aboriginal traditions as invented, especially to those whose traditions are under interrogation, can be seen as distasteful, if not offensive and colonial.

The importance of traditions to societies, of course, is not exclusively endemic to Aboriginal groups. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a historical or contemporary situation in which traditions—whether those involving thought or action, belief or practice—have not played a central epistemological, economic, and political role for societies, whether in rapid transformation or not. Traditions play important normative functions that serve to both differentiate and unify social groups, as well as individuals within them. For Aboriginal people in Canada the current political landscape of land claims, treaty negotiation, redress for historical abuse, and reconciliation with non-Aboriginal groups and governments has politicized discussions of Aboriginal traditions. Not surprisingly, these developments have acutely shaped the work of historians and anthropologists.

Authenticity and the Politics of Tradition

As Linnekin notes, new problems are created when cultural invention is explored in nationalist contexts. She adds that, "in such situations both sides view cultural authenticity as the legitimizing charter of group identity" (Linnekin, 1991: 447). Perhaps in no other place does the debate over tradition as real or invented take precedence as it does in the courtroom. Proving the legal authenticity of traditions has become a

prime means by which disputes within and between North American Aboriginal groups and governments are decided. The contemporary landscape of ongoing litigation, and multilateral negotiations over land claims and title has exerted a tremendous influence on how traditions are viewed and validated, and for what reasons. One result, as Haley and Wilcoxon note, has been the tendency to grant greater authority to earlier sources. Moreover, Aboriginal rights movements often rely on expressions of primitive "tradition" that are aimed at demonstrating Indigenous resilience and agency amidst a history of colonialism (Haley and Wilcoxon, 1997: 777).

For Aboriginal people living in Canada, traditional precedents have taken on modern political and material significance. Whether used to assert rights to resources and territories or lobby for self-government, references to tradition often serve as both the basis and means of substantiating contemporary claims. Litigious discourse and the legal standards of certainty required by the courts have particularly influenced how Aboriginal traditions have been understood and approached in recent years. The 1997 Supreme Court of Canada *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* decision, which overturned Justice MacEachern's 1991 BC Supreme Court decision to disallow Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en oral narratives as evidence, challenged prior notions and standards concerning jurisprudential proof. The greater use of oral testimonies and traditions as evidence in legal settings, however, has not necessarily meant that Aboriginal claims are being increasingly recognized, acted upon, or upheld. The 1996 Supreme Court of Canada *R. v. Van der Peet* decision provides an example in point. In this decision, the court arbitrarily used the point of European contact and an interpretation of the market economy as the means by which to assess the verity of an Aboriginal woman's traditional right to fish (Carlson, 1996: 8).⁶

To prove the historical and legal verity of Aboriginal claims through contemporary standards of proof required by the courts, Aboriginal people have had to adopt new ways of remembering and telling history. This is reflected by the growth of Native groups employing academic experts, methodologies, and discourses for legal and political purposes. Not surprisingly, anthropologists and historians figure prominently in these processes. In addition to serving as court witnesses, experts, and consultants for both government and Aboriginal litigants, academics have also helped to create the lexicon and parameters of debate through which such discussions take place. As Haley and Wilcoxon note, anthropologists "help construct and promote Traditionalist/nontraditionalist conflict...while posturing over who among them is really defending the rights of the true indigenes" (Haley and Wilcoxon, 1997: 777). The draw-

ing of an Indigenous-versus-Western dichotomy, whether to distinguish actors, cultural domains, or approaches to history, they add, “mystifies the historical processes of identity formation and serves to conceal the participation of anthropologists, as well as other non-Indians, in these processes” (*Ibid*). As Haley and Wilcoxon suggest, scholars have played a central role in constructing the binary concepts of traditional and non-traditional. For decades, anthropologists and historians have depicted Aboriginal cultures and traditions as bounded, unique, and enduring, a portrayal that often contrasts sharply with the perceptions of governments and the non-Native public. The problem with this binary approach to tradition is that it, in employing a tacit logic of oppositional classification, isolates cultures as having essentialist rather than dynamic or innovative qualities. Moreover, the common tendency to essentialize all Native cultures, as Jace Weaver notes, assumes the existence of a homogenous, monolithic Native American experience and ignores the incredibly rich diversity of histories, spiritual traditions, and cosmologies that exist among North America’s roughly six hundred tribal groups (Weaver, 1996: 10).

While scholars can be credited with inventing the categories of traditional and non-traditional, the legal context in which questions of authenticity are worked out has helped entrench these oppositional and static conceptions of culture. Michael Brown, for example, notes that while many anthropologists are looking to abandon the traditional culture concept in favor of processual and constructivist models which treat culture as fluid, they are finding this shift difficult (Brown, 1997: 778). Accordingly, such a redefinition of culture has the effect of placing anthropologists in a thorny position. The attempt to move away from more established conceptions of culture not only jeopardizes the Aboriginal political causes many anthropologists have worked towards building; such a departure also undermines the authority of such anthropologists by positioning them as anomalous vis-à-vis the well-established approaches propounded by their academic predecessors. Indeed, scholars who are now trying to see cultures as dynamic and in constant processes of change are encountering new challenges. For example, by removing all essentialist characteristics of a culture, anthropologists also remove any evaluative means by which to assess what constitutes a tradition.

Part of the appeal of Handler and Linnekin’s constructivist theory of tradition is that it discards the traditional/non-traditional binary and provides a general theory to apply to any cultural setting. Within this model, the issue of authenticity is less important than that of identifying the structures and patterns of cultural production. As Richard Handler sug-

gests, “anthropologists have to take all individuals and their culture-making activities seriously—we cannot assume that any are less or more real than others” (Handler, 1997: 780). While Handler sees this as imperative in light of the power politics of authenticity rife among some Indigenous groups, such an approach to competing traditions precludes the ability to differentiate the verity of one tradition over another. Differentiating traditions in such a manner would re-introduce some kind of standard of authenticity and undermine the entire theoretical premise of the constructivist approach.

Another basic problem with this “all tradition as constructed” approach is that it tends to treat all traditions as contemporaneous and ephemeral, rather than historical in origin. By depicting all traditions as symbolic constructions containing similar basic structural and functional qualities, the constructivist theory of invented tradition tends to obscure the varying meaning or importance that traditions may have to different societies. Additionally, the view that traditions are contemporary constructions could be used to undermine the legal foundations of Aboriginal land claims. Once shown to be mutable and relative, all traditions, as well as the claims based on them, become equally valuable or worthless. Appeals to history and Aboriginal traditions of remembering the past, which lay at the core of Indigenous claims, would thus lose much of their legal efficacy. Indeed, if traditions are really just social constructs, references to history simply become the means by which to locate the symbolic references implied by a tradition, rather than as ways to qualify the independent and transcendental existence of a tradition over time.

New Directions Towards a Better Understanding of Tradition

In recent years, scholars have begun to examine constructions of Aboriginal tradition *by* Aboriginal people. Few studies yet exist, although the comments of some anthropologists suggest that such works may be around the corner. J. Tim O’Meara, for example, has suggested that traditionalist proponents of a political cause may themselves invent tradition. Noting the combination of empirical and non-empirical claims that together make tradition, O’Meara states:

Distinguishing the acts of believing and the reasons people have for believing from what their beliefs assert, we see that while much of the Traditionalists’ believing and many of their reasons for believing are (or have become) sincere or “genuine,” many of those beliefs make claims concerning ancestral people and practices and the Traditionalists’ own connections to those ancestral people and practices that are

empirically false. (O'Meara, 1997: 784)

Just what constitutes an empirical or non-empirical belief, of course, is the key issue here. Although he neglects to substantiate what the criterion would be for determining the authenticity of a belief—assuming of course, this is possible—O'Meara is one of the first authors to suggest that Indigenous people are no less likely to invent their own traditions.

Several other anthropologists have commented on the desirability of new studies of Aboriginal inventions or constructions of tradition, suggesting that such studies are ultimately to the benefit of Indigenous people. Krech, for example, is critical of proponents or defendants of the myth of the Ecological Indian since “They victimize Indians when they strip them of all agency in their lives except when their actions fit the image of the Ecological Indian” (Krech, 1999: 216). Andrew Spiegel also makes a similar point, noting that:

anthropological advocacy that fails to apply deconstructivist insights is not only intellectually dishonest...but also disingenuous, as it may work against the interests of those it is intended to support by leaving them open to critical deconstruction without the means to defend the fictions of their position. (Spiegel, 1997: 785)

As his call for less “intellectual dishonesty” suggests, Spiegel is critical of anthropologists who merely juxtapose “hegemonic invention with inventions of Indigenous resistance...implicitly or explicitly disparage[ing] the former while applaud[ing] the latter” (*Ibid*). Spiegel's description of anthropological writing suggests that anthropologists are no different from historians in that they too, find themselves drawing on literary conventions and tropisms more commonly associated with literary works of fiction.⁷

Other scholars have helped shift focus away from the question of traditions as invented or authentic by raising awareness of the cognitive shortcomings of extant disciplinary and methodological approaches. Authors such as Robert Borofsky have convincingly argued that some traditions deemed invented actually are mischaracterizations arising from the interpretive limitations of ethnographic and anthropological study. Borofsky's 1987 ethnography of Cook Island Pukapukan culture, *Making History: Pukapukan and Anthropological Constructions of Knowledge*, critiques what the author views as the tendency of anthropologists to overassume cultural coherence, uniformity, and stasis. The book focuses on the 1976 emergence of the Pukapukan *Akatawa*, a traditional system of organizing Pukapukan social and political space previously unobserved by scholars. Rather than characterize the *Akatawa* as an invented tradition, Borofsky explores how traditional knowledge is

utilized, adapted, and reinterpreted by different generations of Pukapukans. A notable work that acknowledges the analytical shortcomings of anthropological inquiry, *Making History* suggests that cultural knowledge cannot be analyzed in the abstract; rather, traditions are treated as operationalized systems with specific historical application (Borofsky, 1987: 128).

Keith Basso's *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* is another work that emphasizes the dynamic qualities of Indigenous knowledge affirmations. Like Borofsky, Basso calls for reexamination of traditions in terms of their historical and actual use. Basso's particular approach is explained in his opening pages; *Wisdom Sits in Places* explores how geography and place names are constitutive components of Apache culture and how, more generally, place-naming is a universal tool of the historical imagination. Focusing on the relationship between history, geography, and language, Basso suggests that "If place-making is a way of constructing the past, a venerable means of *doing* human history, it is also a way of constructing social traditions and, in the process, personal and social identities" (Basso, 1996: 7). While they may seem like simple stories to an outsider, Basso shows, Apache oral narratives and practices of placenaming can, in fact, serve important epistemological and normative functions.

In some ways, *Wisdom Sits in Places* treats place-making as a form of invented tradition. Apache place names, Basso notes, "are experienced as inherently meaningful, their significance and value being found to reside in (and, it may seem, to emanate from) the form and arrangement of their observable characteristics" (*Ibid*, 108). According to Basso, place names act as conduits for Apache stories and history, serving as natural "reflectors" that express what their animators enable them to say. While Basso's depiction of place names seems overly materialistic at times, namely in that it dismisses the possibility that Apache place names may have latent powers and be more than mere reflectors,⁸ *Wisdom Sits in Places*, taken more generally, points to new ways of conceptualizing tradition. Where scholars have previously been fixated with traditions as iconic, ceremonial, or pragmatic rituals, Basso's work suggests that some traditions may be more complex than previously understood: traditional place names are not just physical objects or even narratives about such objects; once operationalized, they emerge as powerful symbols for Apache culture. Place names and the narratives about them exist symbiotically as one symbolically invokes the other.

Other authors have focused important attention on the dynamic relationship between symbolic traditions and identity construction. Building on the work of Basso, which offers only brief concluding remarks on

how contemporary developments may influence the importance attributed to place names or give rise to new ones, Thomas McIlwraith has suggested that contemporary expressions of Aboriginal culture may take on innovative and syncretic forms. McIlwraith's study, "The Problem of Imported Culture: The Construction of Contemporary Sto:lo Identity," examines the cultural practices and imagery of the Sto:lo people of the British Columbia lower Fraser Valley. Noting the confluence of traditional Sto:lo culture with introduced prairie Native imagery, symbols, and practices—such as dream catchers and pow-wows—McIlwraith suggests that contemporary expressions of Sto:lo culture can be seen as no less real than invented. Rather, he notes, "Sto:lo identity is constantly shifting in focus and content, and people negotiate the selection of symbols to be adopted and promoted" (McIlwraith, 1996: 65). Importantly, McIlwraith shows how Sto:lo identity construction, which has been marked by significant changes in how Sto:lo people view and express themselves, does not necessarily presuppose changes in Sto:lo values. Rather, identity is being consciously constructed through the use of symbols and symbolic actions to meet both contemporary and traditional exigencies.

My own research among the Kwakwaka'wakw of the south central British Columbia coast further corroborates the idea that a dynamic relationship can exist between identity construction and its expression through symbolic action. Historical study of Kwakwaka'wakw participation in the sustenance, or traditional food economy, in the twentieth century provides another example of how cultural practices can innovate in response to changing historical contexts and exigencies. The Kwakwaka'wakw sustenance food economy and traditional protocols surrounding the collection, processing, and sharing of traditional food was innovated and modified to take advantage of modern means and technologies offered by the capitalist economy. The incomes and conveniences afforded by commercial fishing and seasonal wage labor allowed for an expansion of the traditional sustenance economy, a trend that continued from early contacts well into the twentieth century. Similar to the Sto:lo, the Kwakwaka'wakw adapted contemporaneous means to replicate symbolic aspects of traditional Kwakwaka'wakw identity and practice. Kwakwaka'wakw historical participation in the sustenance economy, which endured through periods and situations lacking clear economic, political, or revivalist impetuses, is poorly rationalized by both the Hobsbawmian and constructivist criteria for identifying invented tradition. Rather, Kwakwaka'wakw cultural practices, like those of the Apache and the Sto:lo, speak to the extent to which symbolic practices can simultaneously innovate as well as serve as powerful normative

forces for cultural continuity.

The continuance of Apache, Pukapukan, Sto:lo, and Kwakwaka'wakw cultural practices through history—often amidst forces prohibitive to their exercise—presents compelling evidence that traditional and cultural considerations can exert a powerful influence over behavior for prolonged periods. In some ways, Kwakwaka'wakw involvement in the sustenance economy reveals how customs, or so-called genuine traditions, can, as much as invented traditions, serve important functions for societies in rapid social transformation.⁹ This example also indicates that traditions can adapt and innovate to a far greater extent than allowed for by Hobsbawm's notion of custom. Lastly, as all of the case studies examined above suggest, traditions can be continued and innovated in the absence of obvious political or economic justification. As noted above, the constructivist theory presupposes such justifications. Accordingly, a more nuanced explanatory framework than that offered by both the Hobsbawmian and constructivist model is needed.

Reconceptualizing Tradition as Symbolic Action

Anthropologists and historians have long recognized the importance of symbols for use in cultural reconstruction. Clifford Geertz's seminal *The Interpretation of Cultures, Selected Essays* established the centrality of symbols in human cultures. Geertz's interpretive theory of culture posits that cultural analysis consists of sorting out the structures of significance and determining their social ground and import (Geertz, 1973: 9). Published more than thirty years ago, Geertz's work is still relevant to discussions of invented tradition since it approaches symbols not as sources of inherent meaning, but rather as meaningful once operationalized. Geertz notes:

Once culture is seen as symbolic action—action which, like phonation in speech, pigment in painting, line in writing, or sonance in music, signifies—the question as to whether culture is patterned conduct or a frame of mind, or even the two somehow mixed together, loses sense. (*Ibid*, 10)

In other words, Geertz suggests that what is relevant about symbols is not their ontological status, but rather, what their meaning is when such symbols are operationalized in a cultural context. This critical point, however, is one poorly developed in constructivist theories of tradition. For instance, while Handler and Linnekin's constructivist theory recognizes the symbolic importance of tradition to cultures, neither author chooses, or is able, to describe how it is that symbolic meanings are given life, how they are reproduced, or even what those meanings might be.

Assigning meaning to symbolic actions, of course, presents another challenging set of interpretive issues. Geertz notes that while symbolic action is a useful source for cultural meanings, the view that culture itself is a symbolic system is problematic. This approach, he adds, locks “cultural analysis away from its proper object, the informal logic of actual life” (*Ibid*, 17). The work of Peter Winch further warns of the tendency of anthropologists to over-assume coherence as a requisite quality of cultural systems. Winch’s seminal 1970 essay “Understanding a Primitive Society” contends that “the forms in which rationality expresses itself in the culture of a human society cannot be elucidated *simply* in terms of the logical coherence of the rules according to which activities are carried out in that society” (Winch, 1970: 17-18). Indeed, scholars must allow tolerance for “informal logic” and “un-coherence” when interpreting other cultures. Such an approach frees cultures from being portrayed as hermetic and static systems, and allows for broader, more open-ended understandings of cultural practices. In the specific case of Aboriginal traditions, it allows, if not expects, some aspects of tradition to be simply unexplainable by Western epistemology. Given the existence of some traditions which seem to lack apparent economic, political, social, spiritual, or psychological impetuses, recognizing cognitive limitations is a crucial premise for carrying out research which is both accurate and respectful of “other” peoples.¹⁰

Historical and more culturally-relativist approaches to culture, however, can help scholars to begin to assign more appropriate cultural meanings to both contemporary and historical events. A return to Obeyesekere and Sahlins’s infamous debate over Hawaiian interpretations of Captain Cook provides an exemplary case in point, as in many ways the roots of this debate are epistemological and concern the question of how to interpret and contextualize events: did Hawaiians see Cook as Lono, and if so, what does it mean? Does it suggest that Hawaiians were irrational, easily duped, or gullible? Or can it be seen as a sign of Hawaiian assertions of tradition and cultural resiliency in the face of European incursion? Sahlins’s “Cook as Lono” hypothesis clearly favors the latter perspective. Sahlins shows how Cook, even after death, was interpreted by Hawaiians within the traditional Makahiki narrative. As Sahlins notes, “The point is that Hawaii islanders knew Cook as ‘Lono’ before they set eyes on him” (Sahlins, 1995: 212). Where Obeyesekere reverts to deduction and his own personal experiences to arrive at his idea of how “Natives” think, Sahlins attempts to integrate historical sources and cultural perspectives to construct a Hawaiian perception of Cook.

The Sahlins-Obeyesekere debate reveals the extent to which refer-

ences to cultural and historical context can profoundly impact the symbolic meaning one ascribes to an event. Finding meanings in traditions is no different in this sense. It, too, requires more than a choice between theories of traditions as invented or constructed; it also requires some references to culture, symbolic action, agency, and history. In many ways, this is the greatest weakness of the theories of invented tradition examined in this essay; given the reductiveness of both strands of the theory, each approach tends to rob societies and cultures of their many nuances, subtleties, and complexities. Indeed, the essentialist tendency to assess all behavior evocative of tradition as either genuine or as invented has tended to deny the powerful, real, and inherently meaningful role symbols and symbolic acts serve in Indigenous societies.

The examined case studies of Borofsky, Basso, and McIlwraith move beyond the tradition-as-genuine versus tradition-as-invented binary. Read together, they point to the need for scholars to reconsider how they approach and conceptualize traditions in specific cultural and historical settings. Rather than attempt to extrapolate theories of invented tradition over wide expanses of culture, space, and time, more precise and culturally-sensitive approaches set in specific micro-historical contexts are needed. Analyses of traditions as operationalized symbols constitutive of cultural meanings provide a new perspective for assessing traditions. Studies which synthesize the strengths of historical and anthropological approaches will be best able to discern what these meanings are.

Conclusion

This essay has outlined some of the problems inherent in the two main theories of invented tradition. In many ways, it is time for a reassessment of how scholars use these theories, for what purpose, and to what result. Much of the discussion surrounding traditions needs to expand beyond the traditions-as-genuine versus the traditions-as-constructed binary; many cultural practices evocative and expressive of tradition clearly do not fit into either category. Furthermore, little do such theories serve to improve our understandings of what traditions mean to Indigenous societies. The tendency of scholars to reduce many traditions to judgments of verity or falsity has served to deny the ways in which symbolic actions can be real, powerful, and effective.

The litigious and politicized context in which many debates surrounding authenticity and tradition are negotiated has complicated, and likely will continue to complicate, this endeavour. To Canadian scholars of Aboriginal people this should come as no surprise; Indigenous traditions have been a political matter ever since the arrival of Europeans.

Eurocentric views of Aboriginal cultural practices such as the potlatch and sun dance justified a long history of discriminatory laws and helped rationalize the Canadian state's mission to protect, civilize, and assimilate its "Indian" people. That said, debates over traditions as authentic or invented will not likely lose their political currency nor disappear anytime soon. Accordingly, Floyd Red Crow Westerman may indeed be the most recognizable Native American as a result of more than mere exposure: the image of the "Indian" serves important social and political functions for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Moreover, as Westerman's numerous employers have known for a long time, traditions sell. Perhaps this quality alone ensures that debates over the authenticity of traditions will continue.

Notes

1. Online source: <http://www.lakotaherbs.com/> (Accessed 2 November 2004.)
2. Some earlier discussions include Rudolph and Rudolph, 1967; Singer, 1972; Eisenstadt, 1973.
3. See McKay, 1994; Ulin, 1995: 519-527.
4. See Deloria, Jr., 2000: 283-293; Crosby, 2002: 715-717; Ellis, 2002: 717-719; Warren, 2002: 719-721.
5. For a discussion of this subject specifically regarding the Sahlins-Obeyesekere debate see Robert Borofsky, Herb Kawainui Kane, Gananath Obeyesekere, Marshall Sahlins, 1997: 255-282.
6. Ironically, six years earlier the 1990 Supreme Court of Canada *Sparrow v. Queen* decision declared that Aboriginal rights were not frozen in time. The 1991 *Delgamuukw* and *R. v. Van der Peet* rulings demonstrate how oral narratives have been attributed relegated status in the courts.
7. See White, 1978: 281-314.
8. Basso ignores the possibility of place names possessing spiritual or other latent powers of their own. Sonny McHalsie, however, contends that for the Sto:lo people of the lower Fraser Valley, Stl'aleqem sites, a type of Sto:lo place name, can be "spiritually potent places." Noting how Stl'aleqem sites do not fit into the Western categories of "real" or "unreal," McHalsie suggests that such places are "difficult to describe or explain to people raised outside of the culture" McHalsie, 2001: 8.
9. Similarly, while Hobsbawm suggests that "all invented traditions, so far as possible, use history as a legitimator of action and group co-

hesion," this definition can as easily be applied to customs, or genuine traditions, as well. Hobsbawm, 1997: 12.

10. I thank Sonny McHalsie of the Sto:lo Nation for sharing his insights on this subject.

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