# What is Tradition?

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In her opening essay to the wonderful catalog of the exhibition *Memory and Imagination: The Legacy of Maidu Indian Artist Frank Day*, Rebecca Dobkins (1997:1) asks the almost impossible question "What are the meanings of 'tradition'?" What a question! She might as well have asked "What is life?" And at the Memory and Imagination in Twentieth-Century Native American Art Symposium on April 19, 1997, Frank LaPena and I were supposed to answer this question in our thirty minute presentations.[1]

Just as life has death as its opposite, so tradition is often said to be opposite to innovation. But just as within Christianity and other religions there is life in or after death, so there is a "tradition of innovation," as in contemporary Western art traditions, or there may equally be the "innovation of tradition," as in the commonly referred to "invention of tradition." The latter topic has been the subject of a growing body of literature in the last two decades, following the publication of Hobsbawm and Ranger's book by that title (1984).

In my discussion of tradition, I am indebted to the work of Alice Horner, whose Ph.D. dissertation in anthropology, "The Assumption of Tradition," is perhaps the best thing ever written on the topic (see Horner 1990). Horner reminds us that tradition refers both to the *process* of handing down from generation to generation, and some *thing*, custom, or thought process that is passed on over time. Thus we can say, for instance, that a multi-generational dance is an item of custom, a performance, and at the same time, such a dance is an occasion for the passing of the technique and the feeling of the performance from older to younger generations. Until recently, this handing on was a natural, unself-conscious part of the dance. Until the continuity was threatened, until the possibility of the inability to hand things down arose, people were not so self-conscious of the process of the handing on of tradition.

This takes us back to the origin of the concept of tradition in the European world, but I want to make it clear that we can probably draw parallels in most of the rest of the world: a consciousness of tradition arose primarily only in those historical situations where people were aware of change. Tradition was the name given to those cultural features which, in situations of change, were to be continued to be handed on, thought about, preserved and not lost. Although it is somewhat of an exaggeration, the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1966:233-34) has divided up societies into two types: those that believe that every generation recreates the past and that time is a series of cycles, which he calls "cold" societies, and those that are conscious of change and of the irreversible direction of history, which he labels "hot" societies. In a lecture given at Berkeley in 1984, he tried to trace the emergence of one kind from the other by reference to ninth-to-eleventh century Japanese Heian court society. During that period the usual marriage rule requiring the marriage of men to their cross-cousins (mother's brother's daughters or father's sister's daughters) broke down when people began to break the rules and marry strategically for status and personal gain. He was able to show how the former kind of society, found traditionally in much of the world, is one that reproduces the social structures every generation (so that men fell into the same positions as their fathers and grandfathers, and women, their mothers and grandmothers). Whereas in the latter kind, every generation is different and, according to the literature of that age, more exciting, so that new family relationships and kinship structures were formed every time. This kind of excitement and period of intrigue he called "The Birth of Historical Societies."

Originally the concept of tradition, literally from the Latin meaning "something handed over," in slowly changing societies was almost equivalent to inheritance. Tradition was both the means of

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making a living and the symbols, stories, and memories which gave one both identity and status. So we can say that even in situations where society stayed almost the same from generation to generation, "tradition," or whatever people of that society might have called it in their own language, was something pretty central or important. In situations of perceptible change, in Levi-Strauss's "hot" societies, the concept of tradition has taken on even more important, perhaps more ominous, meanings. In the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, when science and rationalism came to the fore, the rulers began to think that society could be logically rearranged for the calculated benefit of the majority or for everyone, leading to notions such as the social sciences, socialism, and the welfare state, so that guided change was the norm.

The planners and rulers of that age often thought that tradition, i.e., that which was handed down unchanged, unthought out, unchallenged from generation to generation, was perhaps a hindrance to the perfection of society. One began to hear about the weight of tradition or people bound by tradition, as though it should be thrown aside or destroyed. In fact, tradition became synonymous with that which was being overtaken by science or modernity. Tradition consisted of things on their way out. With the rise of social evolutionary theory in the mid-nineteenth century, this idea was given a scientific underpinning: in the survival of the fittest, tradition was doomed by progress, thought to be an accidental survival of an earlier age, a carrier of backwardness, such as feudalism and superstition and, most ominously, aspects or ways of life which, it was hoped, like the major diseases, would give way to progress and be destined for extinction. Indeed, European anthropologists and folklorists commonly studied and collected what they considered curious customs, games, and beliefs among the lesser educated and rural lower classes of their societies, believing them to represent the vestiges of earlier forms of human society. Well into the twentieth century, anthropologists and archaeologists studied non-modern, usually non-Western, societies and technologies for clues they could give about earlier eras and ways of life labeled, for instance, Cave Man, Stone Age, hunting and gathering, preliterate, small scale, or natural societies.

In the Western world a series of crises brought about a change from this negative valuation of tradition. One crisis came in the middle of the nineteenth century when science and evolution made it appear that the Christian religion, the core tradition of the Western world, was perhaps itself an unnecessary feudal tradition, an impediment to reform or to the progress of science and society. This was ironic because it was Christianity that had supplied most of the key social values which the social sciences were trying to "scientifically" bring about: egalitarianism, democracy, protection of the vulnerable, universal justice. At the same time as Christianity was an expanding proselytizing religion, it was also the main bulwark against the rampages of capitalist expansion, against slavery, and against the cruelties of forced labor, pillage and rape.[2] Christianity may have thought itself progressive, but it was also a "pre-modern tradition" that was very much threatened by scientific rationalism, while it in turn threatened the ways of life, and particularly the religious beliefs and associated arts, of many smaller groups of people around the world.

Another series of doubts or crises brought about further changes in the status of tradition and traditional societies. Anthropologists, some missionaries, and other renegades, people often called "romantics," thought that the maligned customs of many conquered peoples were not only not necessarily immoral, but often artistically and functionally equal or better than what was being offered by the so-called civilized world. We can see some of these changes of attitudes in the depictions of colonized peoples and in the growing appreciation of their arts and crafts, which were collected not just as booty but for their inherent beauty, craftsmanship or mystery. As the pace of change sped up all over the world, scientists and others began to look for and want to preserve the traditional, i.e., threatened ways of life, both because of their status as representatives of other, disappearing ways of life, but also for their aesthetic and functional values as well as out of curiosity. We can see even in the crude displays of dependent peoples and their arts in the world's fairs and museums of the nineteenth century (Benedict 1983) not only prurient curiosity but plain admiration for their exhibition of forbearance and humanity in the face of oppression, for the quality of their personal relationships, and their obvious skills and creativity.

As manufactured goods replaced handmade traditional utensils and skills were in danger of being lost, a few upper middle class Euro-Americans

encouraged the continuity of tradition, even teaching themselves about techniques and materials such as basketry, making them the recorders and carriers of culture. A moral superiority of the handmade and the personal began to grow (Lee 1991). The so-called disappearing "savages" (meaning people beyond the grasp of the law) were looked to as human exemplars, not by all, but by a significant few. All over the world, not just in the expansion of Western powers, people began to feel what Renato Rosaldo (1989) has called "imperialist nostalgia," the regret over having destroyed something or someone after the fact. This is not just a Christian-based guilt, but a nostalgia for having changed the world in a homogeneous direction, for having eliminated ways of life and ingenious time-tested customs that had suited some peoples for eons. This form of nostalgia is one of many modern forms of nostalgia which most of us come to experience; in changing societies, it is often felt over the passing of a way of life. Perhaps even in Levi-Strauss's "cold" societies nostalgia is felt about the passing of a stage of life, such as childhood into adulthood, or middle into old age.

Tradition is usually seen as the opposite to modernity, yet it is much loved by modernity. Traditions are continually being created, not in some past time immemorial, but during modernity. Even these new, historically created phenomena are often quickly assumed to be age-old or timeless, because people want them to be so and because the customs become invested with authority that is difficult to challenge. Here are some recent examples: Anthropologist Edmund Leach became Provost of Kings College, Cambridge, at a time in the 1970s when women were first admitted. When this first happened, Prof. Leach inaugurated a welcoming ceremony for the young men and women to get used to being in college together. This was a success and was repeated every year. After a few years, the new students began to believe that this must be an age-old, medieval ritual still preserved by Kings College! Here in Berkeley, I recently saw an advertisement in the *Daily Californian* about surrogate motherhood, where the clients wanted the "in womb," or "traditional" kind. It makes one wonder how long commercially advertised surrogate motherhood has been around and what the nontraditional kind is! In these examples we see tradition as either valued for its existence over time or, in the second case, as a label for a superseded custom, one which has been overtaken by something newer (though not necessarily devalued or threatened with extinction).

So far I have mainly been talking about the meanings of tradition for the mainstream societies which have come to dominate much of he world. But as smaller societies have encountered or been incorporated into the larger multi-cultural society, what some have called the world system (Wallerstein 1974), or systems of material and cultural flows, capitalist or otherwise, almost everyone has come to share the concept of tradition even if it is imbued with different local meanings.

Many native peoples in North America are the object of admiration of some members of the surrounding society: they have survived in spite of all the pressures towards assimilation or extinction in the near past, they have come to represent tradition, they are survivors from other ages par excellence. But as we all know, this force of imperialist nostalgia can be dangerous, too: it can be a judgmental force which looks to Native Americans as representatives of a frozen past, some sort of indicator against which to measure the speed of change or the measure of progress in the ever fickle mainstream society. This is an attitude which then only judges native peoples positively if and when they act like the past and don't show that they live in the modern world, too. This romantic image is perpetuated through the media and even in educational institutions. At the same time it may be purposely adhered to by Native Americans who want to commoditize their time-honored traditions, performances, and cultural products. Unwittingly, many Native American habits, for instance religious behavior, just by being handed on relatively unchanged, can become subject to inspection and commoditization.

The native peoples of North America have always been conscious of their particular identities, because all of them (except one [3]) were always in social, trade, or warlike contacts with the people around them. The concept of what was steadfastly theirs, the equivalent of the English words tradition, culture, heritage, must have been very strong. Notice, I did not use the more neutral words habits, doings, and customs, which although accurate do not express the power and importance that we now attach to the words tradition, heritage, and culture. And, except for some progress-minded people in the Western world after the Enlightenment (and simi-

lar cases around the world) tradition is a strong, positive concept.

Under the attacks suffered at the hands of expanding Spanish, French, British and American peoples, many Native Americans probably did not at first know what hit them: was it an unprecedented apocalypse, a spiritual whirlwind, the end of the world, or what? But as soon as contacts became more routinized, as in mutual trading, schooling, missionization, they came to understand that even if their lives were saved their lifeways were threatened. Whitemen, the *qallunaat* (the thunder people or the eyebrow people) as the Inuit called them, were out to eliminate many of their/our traditions, especially those of freedom of movement, language and religious behavior.

Even so, ambivalence crept in. Right from the time of first contacts, the European newcomers wanted to collect many of the ingenious technological items and beautiful products of the native people. They may even have admired their dances and songs, their fighting and hunting prowess as well as their personal decoration, their women and children, and sometimes even their physique and skin color. It must have been a puzzling surprise when some but not all native traditions were encouraged, and frightening when it was always the outsider who seemed to decide which traditions native people could keep and which were punishable.

Horner (1990) has pointed out that in Africa it was the British who respected native tradition more than, say, the French or the German colonizers. Unlike the post-revolutionary French and the new nation of Germany, the British cherished very much their own historical traditions at home. And as soon as they learned this, the Africans knew that they could continue many customs or get away with many innovations in their own societies by calling them traditions.

Horner also notes that this admiration of native traditions was not a great feature of post-revolutionary war American society. Once the direct military onslaught on Native Americans ceased, very little was clear to them about what aspects of their behavior would be tolerated. For instance, polygamy was illegal in the U.S. and potlatching was made illegal in Canada in 1884. Peyote was illegal for anyone, and drinking alcohol was made illegal for most native peoples. Laws differed from place to place, changed over time, and might not have been enforced or were exceeded by local troublemakers who still hated, feared or were jealous of Indians.

But as the overwhelming power of science and the faith in progress came to be questioned, nostalgia and romanticism softened attitudes. In the wake of the agricultural and industrial revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, local, especially rural, traditions became the source of inspiration and identity in many European nations, especially those such as Finland, Ireland, Hungary and the German principalities which had no prior independent statehood.

Folklore and archaeology, the ultimate collectors of tradition, became valued professions which provided ammunition for respect, freedom, and autonomy, much as anthropology and ethnology have for many other colonized peoples. Having traditions and a culture became the *sine qua non* of nationhood. If traditions were threatened, scattered or weak, they might be invented, collected, labeled, celebrated and museumized, much as Handler (1988) has shown that the French-Canadians of Quebec have been doing in the past few decades.

And it is in roughly the same period that Indian nations or peoples have felt free to do the same. Though Indian arts and crafts traditions have long gathered admiration and have been encouraged both for collection, study and commoditization, this by no means permitted full cultural freedom. For instance, it has only recently been recognized or at least granted that place names and relationship to the land are crucial bearers, and parts, of tradition. Even still, most native people don't have full freedom to inhabit or name their own parts of the earth, although this is well under way over the whole Canadian Arctic and most of the Subarctic (Muller-Wille 1997).

Horner (1990:14-17) also raises consideration of the idea of tradition as a reservoir. In modern times, when tradition is not everything but is strictly defined as selected aspects of a past (though not necessarily prehistoric) way of life, there often appears the choice: shall we pick from (our) tradition or shall we go along with something mainstream or more modern? This choice might be ideal for many people of the world, were it possible. Tradition as a reservoir is the concept that tradition is a strength to draw upon, a source of historically defined identity, and a source of a sense of safety, specialness, or difference. But the tradition as reservoir concept still suffers from real world draw-

backs. Will the real world allow you as Native Americans to draw from tradition, to use peyote, to play gambling games, to marry multiple spouses, to practice local medicine and healing, to teach your children in your own way, or even to speak your own language? These are very real questions, and although some freedoms are greater now, there are problems which will never completely go away in the modern world.

An even greater problem with the idea of tradition as reservoir is the question of whether tradition is still there or whether it has been drained away by the forces of history. It is here where individuals like Frank Day are crucial. Not only was he a man with access to the reservoir of his own life experience, but he was willing to share and show the way. And he shared his knowledge not only with his own people directly, such as many northern California native peoples who learned at first hand of whole ancestral worlds that were disappearing, but he shared with sympathetic outsiders, who for reasons of science, humanity, or nostalgia, or all three, enabled his expressions and recorded his knowledge. That is, they strengthened the reservoir and have been more than willing to share the contents with those who are the inheritors.

But the reservoir of tradition is not static. It grows through activity and attention to maintenance, it fills up with the creation and practice of traditions. It does not know whether the traditions are old, modified or new, but that they are traditions, that they are strong and that they are the strength of the people. I have witnessed many native peoples in North America fighting for their traditions and continued identity in a rapidly changing, threatening, homogenizing world. I have long seen and helped the Inuit of the Canadian Arctic fight to have their language be the language of their schoolchildren, and now even the teachers are trained in *inuttitut* (Crago et al.1992:121-170). I have seen the people of Greenland reverse the trend toward Danification, such that even the Danes living in their country have to speak Greenlandic and their children educated in it (Langgaard 1992:177-186). I have seen the Inupiat of north Alaska and more recently the Canadian Inuit recover both their rights to and their practice of whaling (Doubleday 1994; Freeman, Wein and Keith 1992). In 1996, I helped lead the formation of an international native peoples whaling group, including the Nuu-cha-nulth and other Indians, to counteract the beef salesmen and self-righteous Yankees who are banning traditional native ways of feeding themselves (World Council of Whalers 1997).

Closer to the California native experience, I have seen the Tlingit and Tsimshian of the Northwest Coast come fully back into their traditions as master artists, with the help of both other native peoples and whites (Graburn 1993). And none of these people are going backwards or leaving the modern world at all. Tradition is not the opposite of modernity; perhaps it is modernity's strength, its richness, and one of its essential sources of meaning in life.

## Notes

1. This paper has purposefully been kept close to the style in which it was originally delivered at the symposium "Memory and Imagination in 20th Century Native American Art" at the Oakland Museum of California on April 19, 1997.

2 The Aborigines Protection Society (1838) developed into a worldwide organization, allied with the anti-slavery movement, against the exploitation and mistreatment of colonized peoples. Although a Christian society, it led directly to the more humanitarian activist (i.e., not strictly scientific) tradition in anthropology which remains with us today.

3 The Polar Inuit of northwest Greenland are an exception. After hundreds of years of separation from the Inuit of Canada, the Polar Inuit thought that they were the only people left in the world at the time they first encountered Europeans in the eighteenth century.

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