

# 1

## Conserved world-views or salient memories?

The ‘traditional’ cultural phenomena concerned here can be briefly characterised by the following features:

- (i) they are *instances of social interaction*;
- (ii) they are *repeated*;
- (iii) they are *psychologically salient*.

Let me comment briefly on these abstract phrases, using a prototypical case of the sort of institutions I will talk about. After his first trance, a newly initiated shaman tells an audience of fellow-shamans and villagers of the contract he has made with the spirits of the jungle. I will call this event ‘traditional’. This usage of the term is not really contentious. It is important, however, to be clear about what sort of objects we are dealing with; otherwise some crucial (and typical) mistakes may creep in and make the discussion hopelessly confused.

First, what I mean by saying that I will deal with instances of social interaction is simply that we are concerned here with *actual events*, with the things people actually do and ethnographers observe, not the things anthropologists think should be posited in order to explain what people do. That is to say, the social phenomenon considered here, and labelled ‘traditional’ is the shaman’s singing, more precisely the social event of the shaman’s singing to a certain type of audience, about a certain type of mystical experience, etc. Now an anthropological account of this event should include many other things, notably a series of hypotheses about the organisation of people’s ideas, the social organisation of the place, people’s emotional involvement in the ritual, and so on. In the anthropological usage, both these underlying things and the social events are called ‘traditional’. This confusion, as we will see, is the root of some very problematic claims about tradition. In order to avoid conceptual promiscuity, we should therefore try and keep separate labels for the phenomena we observe and the underlying processes we hypothesise. Here the *events* will be called ‘traditional’. In the following pages I will try to examine general properties

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of ‘traditional contexts’ and ‘traditional situations’; such terms will always refer to specific social events.

Let me now turn to a more difficult point. The events described here as ‘traditional’ are *repeated* events. It is important to understand that this is a criterion of recognition, not a theoretical claim, in the same way as telling someone that ‘giraffes’ are ‘these tall animals with a very long neck’ gives them a criterion to identify what is being referred to, nothing more. So we will call the event of the shaman’s singing ‘traditional’ because it is a repeated event, because it is performed with reference to previous occurrences of the same type of social event. This, in practice, is how anthropologists recognise that they are dealing with a traditional institution: at people’s constant reference to past occurrences, and at the resemblance between these occurrences. Not to put too fine a point on it, repetition is an observational term.

It is very difficult, however, not to make a fatal mistake here, which consists in equating the repetition of occurrences and the conservation of a model. The event of the shaman’s singing seems very similar to what happened when other shamans were initiated, two years ago, ten years ago, and so on. It seems reasonable to surmise that there is some cultural model of ‘shamanistic initiation singing’, which seems to be conserved over the years. Indeed, it may be the most reasonable hypothesis, but we must remain aware of the fact that this ‘conservation’ is not an observed property of the events, but a hypothesis put forward in order to account for their actual repetition. This distinction, however pedestrian, is crucial because if the ‘conservation of models’ is a hypothesis, then it may be false and it must be discussed. One just cannot take it for granted; supporting evidence is required.<sup>1</sup>

We will not examine all the aspects of repeated social interaction, and that is why the third criterion is pertinent. The shaman, to return to our example, probably uses a language whose vocabulary, syntax and phonology are very much the same as thirty years before. That is not what we want to explain. On the other hand, anthropologists are interested in explaining why these initiation journeys should be sung rather than talked about, why it is deemed necessary to induce a trance, or why the whole process is supposed to cure someone’s disease. To borrow a term from G. Lewis’s study of ritual (1980), we are interested in the ‘attention-demanding’ aspects of these institutions. An utterance of a gesture will not be considered traditional if it does not focalise people’s attention more than ordinary discourse or actions. Psychological salience, therefore, is another criterion of recognition.

Again, these criteria do not constitute a ‘definition’ of tradition. They are simply used here in order to pick out a certain class of social phenomena; although they are no doubt too vague, I hope they make it possible to *recognise* the class of institutions the argument will be about. In fact,

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recognition should not be too difficult, since such institutions (myth, 'religious' or 'political' ritual, etc.), are the subject-matter of most classical anthropological monographs and theories so far. Whether it is legitimate to give the term 'tradition' this narrow extension is a purely terminological question. As long as the reference is recognised, my 'traditional' institutions could as well be called 'XYZ'; but that would be just too awkward.

The point of a theory of 'tradition' (as identified here, henceforth without quotes) is to describe the general processes whereby the salient aspects of certain phenomena of social interaction are repeated or reiterated. There is no satisfactory anthropological theory to deal with this problem. The aim of this chapter is to show that the anthropological answers are unsatisfactory, not only because the solutions are empirically wrong, but also because the problem itself has been misconstrued. In order to go further, we must therefore examine and discuss some common assumptions about traditional actions and utterances. Unfortunately, the 'common' conception, precisely because it is common, is almost always left implicit. It is not explained in theoretical essays or general textbooks, but it is pervasive in ethnographic descriptions and the generalisations based on them. So it takes a little reading between the lines to uncover and discuss it. I must admit right now that my description of common anthropological views is intended as a springboard for further speculation rather than a detailed analysis of the discipline's implicit premises.

**The 'common' conception of tradition**

When doing fieldwork in a traditional environment, an anthropologist is bound to give some kind of answer to the question, why and how the institutions identified as traditional get repeated. And the type of answer he or she gives to that question reflects in the particular hypotheses put forward about those specific institutions. Things are not so simple, however, and the question of repetition is almost always coupled with another one, which concerns the 'cohesiveness' of the institutions considered, i.e., what keeps them together; to put it in a less abstract way, what is the link between, e.g., the specific initiation song for shamans, people's utterances about spirits and the fact that shamans are said by an informant to cure other people? There is no *a priori* reason why the questions of repetition and cohesiveness should be examined together; as we will see, however, the 'common' anthropological treatment of repetition implies a strong hypothesis about cohesiveness, and *vice versa*.

The question of cohesiveness is answered in a way which reflects pervasive anthropological assumptions about culture and society in general. The idea is that utterances, actions and more generally the bits and pieces of behaviour anthropologists observe and record, are in fact held together by some

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*underlying intellectual objects*. These are called ‘world-views’, ‘cultural models’, ‘local theories’, ‘collective representations’, etc. There is a considerable ambiguity in anthropological literature about: (i) what part of these objects is supposed to be in people’s minds and what part is the combination of what different actors know and think; (ii) how implicit or unconscious they are; and (iii) to what extent they are a reality or a model of it.<sup>2</sup> Here I will not examine these ideas at such an abstract level. I will only discuss their consequences as regards the treatment of traditional institutions. The main point of this conception is that traditional phenomena are linked to, and explained by a set of underlying ideas or representations.

As for the question of traditionality, the common answer is that some groups and societies are ‘conservative’ or ‘traditionalistic’; they are so organised that change is ruled out or deemed dangerous or interpreted as a threat to the social order. This is construed as a characteristic either of the social groups, the organisation of which inevitably favours the reproduction of past practice, or of the people, who are naturally conservative or frightened for some reason at the possibility of change. And it is often assumed that this in fact is the normal or natural state of affairs in human societies; the problem then is to understand how some societies, like modern Western ones, seem to foster the idea that change is welcome or inevitable.

These assumptions are generally supposed to be unproblematic. They are seldom discussed, or even presented in too much detail. Anthropology textbooks for example generally gloss over the exact status of collective representations, or present a few examples of traditional ‘conservatism’, to give readers the feel of the thing. Anthropological assumptions are thus taken as a matter of fact, rather than as hypotheses which could be discussed in terms of plausibility and heuristic value. To cite but one example, in a rigorous and detailed study of anthropological theories of religion, J. Skorupski has no compunction in writing that a traditional believer sticks to his creed ‘precisely because he is traditionalistic’ (1976: 204). That an otherwise punctilious author should not mind the tautology is an indication of how natural and self-evident the idea of ‘conservatism’ or ‘traditionalism’ is supposed to be. It is no surprise, then, that these ideas are in most cases left implicit. This makes our discussion much more difficult, as we always run the risk of creating the easy target of an anthropological strawman. It may be of help here to consider one of the very few explicit conceptions of tradition, that put forward by R. Horton in a series of papers on the comparison of African traditional thought and Western science (1967a and b, 1970, 1982).

According to Horton, traditional thought as a whole should be considered as an attempt to reach a *theoretical* understanding of the world, essentially comparable to scientific theorising. Theories are built in order to explain events by integrating them into ‘a wider causal context’. In traditional

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thought as in Western modernity, according to Horton, we can find two levels of thinking and discourses: that of 'primary theory' (i.e., common sense or everyday notions about the world) and that of 'secondary theory' (tradition in one case, science in the other) which is supposed to make up for the 'incompetence' of everyday knowledge in certain areas of human experience (1982: 229). Primary theory is built on common sense forms of reasoning which seem to be much the same in all societies; its explanations resort to a 'push-pull' type of causality, linking observable events which concern middle-sized objects. On the contrary, secondary theory resorts to 'hidden entities' (like waves and particles in Western physics, deities and mystical substances in traditional thought). Horton then proceeds to the distinction between traditional secondary theories and modern scientific ones; two features can serve as fundamental criteria of demarcation. Traditional theories are founded upon a 'traditionalistic' view of knowledge, i.e., the assumption that knowledge handed down from former generations is necessarily better than new adaptations, because it is 'time-tested' (1982: 238). Also, tradition resorts to a 'consensual mode of theorising', 'in which all members of a community ... share a single over-arching framework of secondary-theoretical assumptions and carry out intellectual innovation within that framework' (1982: 229). Alternative theories generate anxiety because they break this social consensus. On the contrary, Western scientific thought is anti-traditionalistic (more recent theories are supposed to be better) and resorts to a competitive mode of theorising.<sup>3</sup>

Obviously, we are dealing here with a particularly strong formulation of the common assumptions. Horton is not satisfied with such vague anthropological constructs as 'world-views' and 'conceptions'; for him, traditional phenomena are the expression of *theories*. It is clear in his first papers that the term must be taken in a strong sense; traditional thought, just as modern scientific theorising, produces sets of beliefs that are (i) integrated (ii) consistent and (iii) explanatory. Anthropologists however are constantly dealing with utterances and actions that seem inconsistent or paradoxical, and usually demand more explanation and interpretation than they provide. So they cannot be entirely at ease with Horton's strong claims. Hence a long and heated controversy about the *format* of the 'theories' anthropologists are expected to find underlying traditional phenomena.<sup>4</sup> Here I will not dwell on the intricacies of that discussion, most participants of which shared what I called the 'common assumptions' about tradition, namely (i) that traditions are conserved because people want to transmit them unchanged, and (ii) that they are held together by some underlying ideas which constitute a general description of the world. These are the hypotheses I will challenge, and I think my arguments apply to all versions of these ideas, from Horton's very strong formulation to the 'soft', watered down version that can be found in other authors.

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In the rest of this chapter I will try to show that such an approach replaces a genuine empirical question, about the processes of repetition, with question-begging abstract explanations. To return to the example mentioned at the beginning, we want to account for the repetition of a certain type of social interaction, e.g., between a newly initiated shaman, his colleagues, an ill person and an audience; we want to know why all this is attention-demanding; we want to explain why only certain aspects of the interaction are reproduced, while others are forgotten or left aside. These are difficult empirical questions, and the search for general properties of such interactions demands a painstaking process of hypothesis building and testing. If, on the other hand, we just assume that all this happens because people 'stick to their traditional theories', the whole question is magically eliminated. The 'solution', however, does not really hold; in order to see how much it is on the wrong track, however, and to grasp exactly what is wrong with this pervasive conception of traditions, it may be of help to present a more detailed ethnographic example.

**Fang literary tradition**

The example is that of a traditional literature I have observed and studied, that of the Fang of Gabon, Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea.<sup>5</sup> The main genre is called *mvét*, after the name of the harp which is used to accompany the singers. The repertoire is composed of extremely long and complex epic stories, most of which narrate the interminable wars between two clans of mythic heroes, the immortal giants of the village Engong and the mortal lineage of Oku, who try to steal their secret 'life medicine', the secret of immortality. Numerous characters are involved in the intricate plots; most of them are fierce heroes who straddle giant iron elephants and throw rainbows or red-hot iron balls at each other; in case of danger they often make a quick escape beneath the earth or above the sky. They slay each other by the thousand, and cases of magic resuscitation are not uncommon.

The *mvét* stories are told only by specialised singers, who have undergone a long and difficult personal initiation under some reputed poet's supervision. Becoming a singer is very much conceived of as the equivalent of becoming a witch-doctor. The rituals are quite similar, as well as the ambiguous reputation. Both initiations enable one to master the domain of witchcraft, due to a special relationship with the ancestors; but this capacity may also be used for other, anti-social purposes, so that most villagers are rather leery of these uncanny practitioners. A *mvét* session is an important social event; people from neighbouring villages gather at night in a 'men's house' and the session usually lasts until dawn. The epic is interwoven with other literary pieces, notably an obscure account of the singer's own initiation, together with anecdotes, jokes, proverbs, etc. *Mvét* story-telling appears to be one of

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the main elements of Fang tradition. In those sessions, it is generally agreed, important truths about such matters as ancestors or witchcraft are communicated; these important ideas cannot be reached in ordinary contexts. Mvet players are among the initiates, those who know about past knowledge and hidden entities. Moreover, mvet-related knowledge is all the more valued as it is a marker of identity. Although neighbouring groups have equivalent and often very similar genres, mvet is considered as exclusively Fang.

The storytelling sessions have all the usual characteristics of a traditional phenomenon. They are performed by authoritative specialists who constantly refer to knowledge transmitted across generations, during long initiation rituals. The picture is, however, more ambiguous if we try to *describe* the 'world-view' or 'conceptions' expressed. One of the striking features of the mvet stories is that most crucial notions in Fang discourse are used here in a puzzling way, often contradictory or paradoxical. A revealing example is the way the ancestors are described; they are mentioned in both the stories and the narrative of the singer's initiation. Both descriptions are quite complicated; the ancestors' unpredictable behaviour brings about sudden *coups de théâtre* in the narration. As for the lyrical evocation of the singer's initiation, it is generally so obscure that even the competent ancestor-cult specialists get bogged down in the intricacies of the poet's adventures. To compound these difficulties, both descriptions are strikingly different from, and sometimes incompatible with, what is received as common wisdom about ancestors. The same can be said about the other conceptual domains evoked during the mvet sessions; if epic stories and songs convey a world-view, it certainly gets very muddled in the process. This does not mean that some kind of conception is not expressed, but that it is certainly difficult for the audience to represent what it consists of.

In such a context, the idea that some 'world-view' is conserved across generations is rather difficult to evaluate. The first good texts were recorded in 1959 (see Zwè Nguéma 1972) and a comparison with epics recorded in 1981, from the next generation of singers, shows little change insofar as the style, characters and main plots are concerned. This, however, concerns the 'surface' of the institution; it would be wrong to infer that any important 'meanings' have been conserved, since it is quite difficult to describe them at any stage of the institution.

The problems described here are not specific to Fang literature; most anthropologists have that kind of difficulty when trying to identify or describe the 'conceptions' behind instances of traditional interaction. African traditional literature and Amerindian shamanism elude such descriptions in the same way. These difficulties, however, are not only the result of incomplete ethnographic descriptions. They indicate a more fundamental problem, concerning the lack of 'fit' between the cultural phenomena

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observed and the predictions of the theory. In the rest of this chapter I will expand on this point, and try to re-formulate the problem in a way that is more consistent with the type of data anthropologists actually gather.

**Digression: is long-term conservation relevant?**

Before proceeding to the discussion of the common paradigm, however, the Fang example will allow me to introduce an important distinction, between the phenomena a theory of traditions is supposed to explain and those outside its scope. In the above description I have left aside what some anthropologists may consider the crucial problem about traditional situations: is the alleged 'conservation' of cultural material *real*? that is, do groups or people involved in traditional interaction really conserve the same form of interaction over generations? In the 'common' conception described above, the question is either avoided or treated in a rather agnostic way. People stick to established 'conceptions' or 'world-views'; what matters is that they *believe* those conceptions to be 'time-tested', not that they are actually conserved over long periods. A striking illustration of this pervasive view is that, although most anthropologists focus on traditional interaction, they seldom study it across time, measuring its changes over long periods; and those who do are led to emphasise change rather than permanence. So is the permanence of tradition anything but an illusion? In the course of trying to describe traditions as empirical phenomena, I have found, to my own surprise, that this in fact is one of the least important and difficult questions posed by traditions. Without anticipating too much on the rest of the argument, I must indicate briefly why the questions of stability and change will not be discussed at much length here.

What is described as traditional in ethnography consists of actions or utterances which are performed with the guidelines provided by people's memories of a previous occurrence. For instance, this year's fertility rites are performed in a certain way because that is the way the specialists and other participants remember the other years' festivals. In the long run, this process may well result in a gradual and thorough change; it may also result in near perfect repetition. Now whether things go one way or the other depends on historical and ecological factors which are largely independent of the fact that the ritual is traditional.

Let me return to the example of Fang epic poetry. It is traditional in the sense that the essential features of the communicative event are repeated, and that people's memories of previous sessions provide the standard against which present performance is evaluated. The complex apprenticeship followed by young men until they become fully fledged epic poets is largely based on the memorisation of whole stories and should normally result in the reproduction of themes and style from generation to generation. Storytelling



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sessions however do not happen in a cultural or historical vacuum; the relevance of the epic motifs depends on what representations the audience can associate with them or infer from them. When G. Tessmann, the first reliable ethnographer in the area, transcribed fragments of epic songs in 1913, these could be considered as 'war-songs'. Violent inter-clan and inter-ethnic feuds were rife at the time, and epic poetry was meant to inspire bellicose enthusiasm. Two generations later, however, the colonial and post-colonial national order has put an end to traditional warfare. Epic combats are more obviously 'mythical' than in Tessmann's time. The evocation of witchcraft powers, on the other hand, is certainly more central than it used to be, as the colonial order is widely interpreted as a period of thriving sorcery. Now the fact that story-telling has changed in content and relevance does not mean that it is not traditional; conversely, the fact that it is traditional does not imply that it conveys the same representations and has the same effect on successive generations.<sup>6</sup>

The phenomenon a theory of tradition must explain is why and how it seems so natural to people, in certain circumstances, to take last year's or last decade's version of some myth or ritual as the only relevant way of performing these actions. This, as we will see, is an important empirical question, which cannot be solved in the usual, question-begging way or with tautological hypotheses. The theory therefore focuses on the *process* of traditional repetition, and must leave aside the question whether the process leads to actual cultural permanence across many generations, because this result is only partly dependent upon the process. To take a distant analogy, a good theory of reproduction should explain the processes whereby living beings generate other living beings which are very similar to them. One cannot expect the theory to explain the evolution of species, because such factors as mutation and adaptation are outside its scope.<sup>7</sup>

The reason why these questions are confused is that anthropology once believed it could kill two birds with one stone, as it were, namely explain both traditional repetition and the historical evolution of societies within the same theory. This led to the fabrication of such fictions as 'cool' or ahistorical societies, to the description of current hunting groups as similar to paleolithic ancestors, etc. Such ideas relied on two confusions: (i) between a form of interaction (tradition) and the kind of societies where this interaction seems predominant (I will return to this point in the last chapter); (ii) more importantly for our present argument, a confusion between describing a process and describing its output in all possible circumstances. The latter confusion is the one we must avoid here. What we are aiming for is a description and explanation of the processes whereby past occurrences of an interaction are the reference of present occurrences. This phenomenon is extremely widespread, it constitutes the subject matter of many anthropological descriptions. It has different long-term results, depending on

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[More information](#)*Tradition as truth and communication*

extraneous factors; but we do not want to describe these factors here, only the process itself.

**Problems generated by the common conception**

We started with an empirical question; we wanted to know why and how certain salient forms of social interaction get repeated. We noticed that the anthropological ideas about tradition, however pertinent, do not address our original problem directly. Traditions as effectively studied are clusters of repeated, salient, etc., *events*. General theories of tradition, on the other hand, focus on intellectual constructions ('world-views', 'conceptions', 'models', 'theories', etc.. Instead of dealing with the repetition of actual interaction, they focus on the conservation of underlying cultural models. Obviously, this is a different question; while repeated events are observed, conserved ideas are hypothesised. The two problems just cannot be confused.

The reasons why anthropologists substitute conservation for repetition and models for actions is that they have an *implicit causal hypothesis*. Cultural models cause actual behaviour, and their conservation causes traditional repetition. People repeat rituals because rituals express ideas and people think ideas ought to be conserved. Obviously, there are many nuances and subtler formulations, but the hypothesis is there. Indeed, it has to be there, otherwise there would be no reason to describe traditional institutions in terms of underlying conceptions. The causal hypothesis is not really discussed, because it is viewed as self-evident; as a result it is not even considered a hypothesis at all, rather a fact of the matter. Now, if we take seriously the fact that it is a hypothesis, we must examine its 'cost' and compare it to rival explanations. Amazingly, these aspects are almost never envisaged in anthropological discussions, so that we have a theory of tradition without any examination of what other explanations would be like, therefore without any *argument*. Here I will first focus on the 'cost' of the hypothesis. The common anthropological claims are not as trivial and self-evident as they may seem. They are 'expensive' in two ways; first they do not fit the data very neatly, so that one has to put forward additional hypotheses, to bridge the gap, as it were. Second, they imply some strong claims about the way people's minds work when processing traditional actions and utterances. Obviously, the fact that a hypothesis is expensive does not entail that it is wrong, unless we have rival hypotheses which will do the job without the expense. I will try to show that this is precisely the case.

Let me first focus on the cost of the claims, and on the problem of 'fit' mentioned above. The traditional phenomena observed are series of repeated actions and utterances. Although it seems reasonable to suppose that there are some underlying conceptions, describing them and establishing the link between them and the 'surface' phenomena are no easy tasks. In general