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0521374170 - Tradition as Truth and Communication: A Cognitive Description of
Traditional Discourse - Pascal Boyer

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Tradition as Truth and Communication

A cognitive description of traditional discourse

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Preface

Although the bulk of anthropological literature is about traditions and traditional societies, there is no such thing as a *theory* of tradition in social anthropology. As Shils puts it (1981: vii), a book about tradition is very much in need of a tradition. That anthropologists do not generally recognise the need to develop such a theory is in itself a puzzling feature of the discipline. Social or cultural anthropology began as an attempt to describe and understand exotic societies, almost all of which were traditional; the main theoretical constructions were erected to explain typically traditional ways of thinking and behaving. The functional interpretation of myth and ritual and the description of marriage prescriptions as structured exchange were meant to shed light on mainly if not exclusively traditional customs. Trobriand, Zande, Nuer and Navajo, these names used as landmarks in almost every anthropological discussion or speculation, are all names of traditional groups. When trying to uncover the whys and wherefores of strange customs, Malinowski or Evans-Pritchard certainly got the familiar, if exasperating answer ‘we do that because we’ve always done so’, ‘because that’s the way we do it here’, ‘because our fathers told us to’, and so on. This does not concern the legendary pioneers only; although modern anthropology is not ill at ease in modern urban environments, it still is much more geared to describing and explaining traditional ways.

Not the problem

In the anthropological literature the characterisation of tradition is generally considered both self-evident (everyone knows what a tradition is) and immaterial (the way you understand it has no empirical consequences). Here I shall try to show that, on the contrary, it has both difficulties and consequences. One of my aims is to show that there *is* a problem, that the repetition or reiteration of tradition implies complex processes of acquisition, memorisation and social interaction which must be described and explained.

Like most anthropological categories, ‘tradition’ is not a proper theoretical concept. Diverse institutions are lumped together under the label

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'traditional', mainly on the basis of their resemblance to certain prototypical cases. There is no *a priori* reason to think that the institutions thus labelled have any scientifically relevant properties in common, in the same way as there is no reason to think that the ordinary distinction of trees and shrubs is relevant to biology; scientific categories often cut across common sense taxonomies. In other words, a theory of traditions like the one outlined here may not be a theory about all the things usually called 'traditional'. This is just because ordinary language, including its anthropological variety, is sloppy, and we must try not to be. According to Shils (1981: 12), the ordinary concept of tradition 'includes all that a society of a given time possesses and which already existed when its present possessors came upon it'. Surely, if *that* is tradition, then there cannot be a scientific theory of tradition, just as there cannot be a theory of rectangular objects or a theory of white animals. There is no reason why all the objects included should share properties other than the trivial. Understood in that way, the category is useless (as Shils himself, I hasten to add, makes clear in his book).

It is therefore important to make clear what this book is *not* about. It is not about written traditions, i.e., the conservation, transmission and exegesis of written texts or 'scriptures'. The argument here is based on examples of purely oral communication; although the interaction described can be found also in literate societies, as I will explain, it is found there in the form of an oral interaction. The question, whether the institutions described here and the conservation of texts have anything in common, is an empirical one, which surely cannot be solved unless we have a reliable description of what happens in both domains; but we have no such description so far.

Even granted this restriction, there are still many things called 'traditional' which I will not examine. Indeed, I will focus on a very narrowly defined set of institutions, in which important truths are supposed to be expressed by licenced speakers, and attention-demanding ritual gestures are performed by specific actors, all this being accomplished with reference to previous occurrences of the same statements and the same gestures. My assumption is that such situations of social interaction share certain important properties and therefore constitute a proper scientific object.

'Tradition' and psychology

Without opening a long methodological digression, I must mention the few commonsense principles I have followed here. A fundamental one is that there is no theory of what happens in cultural interaction without some strong hypotheses about what is happening in the actors' minds. So we should try to make these hypotheses explicit; if they are not plausible, we should change them so that the anthropological theories are at least compatible, if not altogether congruent, with what psychologists know about mental processes.

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There are two possible ways of making psychological claims in anthropological theory. One is to make use of some precise hypotheses in experimental psychology, to examine their relevance as concerns the specific anthropological data and to put forward new explicit hypotheses where needed. From the days of Bartlett and Rivers to modern cognitive anthropology, many anthropologists have followed this path. Nothing of the kind, however, has been done about the psychology of tradition, which has been approached in the other possible manner, i.e., by considering human cognition as a 'black box' in anthropological theories. The main idea in the black box approach is that it is possible to make strong claims about the result of cognitive processes without bothering to examine how actual psychological mechanisms could bring about such phenomena. In this view, the technicalities of cognition, the workings of the black box, do not really matter; what counts is the alleged result, namely the 'conservation' of certain concepts and beliefs. When a certain property of traditions is observed, or indeed conjectured, a psychological mechanism is postulated, whose operation would give precisely such results.

Against this *ad hoc* approach, it is in fact possible to make precise claims about the processes involved in traditional interaction, and to compare them to some important findings and hypotheses of cognitive psychology. This research programme obviously implies a great deal of speculation, especially because cognitive anthropology has only recently begun to consider the domain of 'symbolism' and other such complex phenomena of interaction. However tentative and limited, the findings of cognitive psychology allow us to see why some anthropological theories are just psychologically implausible. It is often possible to replace unnecessarily complicated models with simpler psychological hypotheses. Throughout the book, I will use psychological findings in this way, as a safeguard against the multiplication of *ad hoc* entities and processes. This way of proceeding is founded on two assumptions which, I suppose, do not need to be justified in great detail: one is that unnecessary entities should not be multiplied; the other is that one should not place too much confidence in anthropological analytical concepts. Most of them are more like 'phlogiston' than 'oxygen'; they do not refer to real things in the world, and they designate problems instead of solving them. This is why I have dispensed, as much as possible, with such terms as 'symbols', 'cultural models' or 'socialisation'. Important (and unsolved) problems are often concealed under these familiar categories.

Lastly, I must point out that the ethnographic examples given in support of various hypotheses must be treated in the same way as examples in all anthropological theories, i.e., as suggestive illustrations rather than definitive proofs. Most of the recurrent patterns the theory is based on are well known to anthropologists. This is why the analysis of all the implications of theory, at each step of the argument, is given priority over the elaboration of suggestive ethnographic descriptions. As a consequence, what is proposed at

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the end of the book is a set of general *hypotheses*, which further empirical material should flesh out, modify and possibly refute.

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