Reflecting on 'Tradition' as a 'Hollow Concept' in Contemporary Anthropology and Beyond

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Abstract

'Tradition' is a widely used and rarely defined term that sits at the heart of anthropology and across the social sciences. Drawing on the established idea of 'hollow categories', this paper frames 'tradition' as a 'hollow concept', a definitionally and discursively 'empty' concept that takes on meaning through context, usage, or implied oppositeness to other terms. With a geographical focus on sub-Saharan Africa, the paper considers how 'tradition' may be held in opposition to 'progress', 'modernity', and 'civilisation' and points to the colonially and racially charged meanings that the tradition concept may conjure up as a result. While more obviously racist descriptors like 'primitive' and 'savage' have been widely abandoned, 'traditional' often takes their place and has thus become a euphemistic way of evoking ideals of Euro-American superiority. The paper argues throughout that we – as anthropologists, social scientists, academics, and people – should use the concept of 'tradition' reflexively and critically, with active attention paid to the ways in which tradition evokes multiple temporalities and is not confined to an ahistorical past.

Keywords: *post-colonial/decolonial anthropology, tradition, hollow concept, progress, modernity*

"Tradition"

Noun

1a: an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behaviour (such as a religious practice or a social custom)

1b: a belief or story or body of beliefs or stories relating to the past that are commonly accepted as historical though not verifiable

2: the handing down of information, beliefs, and customs by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another without written instruction

3: cultural continuity in social attitudes, customs, and institutions

4: characteristic manner, method, or style"

(Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2023)

Introduction

'Tradition' is a widely used and rarely defined term that sits at the heart of anthropology and across the social sciences. It is also a common word in everyday conversation, well known enough not to cause confusion or miscommunication. Due to this familiarity, 'tradition' is often used in academic contexts without first clarifying the exact meanings of the term. Whether talking about intellectual traditions or cultural ones, authors often take for-granted our shared understanding of 'tradition', and thus "the term carries unspecified assumptions" (Shanklin, 1981, p.71). Beyond this, traditions can be intangible, meaning that they are hard to isolate enough to define – "people would not know their tradition, for they simply lived in it" (Kuligowski, 2014, p.323).

Building on Ardener's notion of 'hollow categories' (1989), this paper explores (mis)uses of 'tradition' in anthropology by framing it as a 'hollow concept', a definitionally and discursively 'empty' idea that takes on meaning through context, usage, or implied oppositeness to other terms. I critique the ways in which tradition is framed as the antithesis of modernity, progress, and/or civilisation, concluding that unreflexively using tradition perpetuates harmful and racially charged colonial stereotypes. Rather than delimiting the discussion chronologically, I primarily draw on anthropological literature with a geographical focus on sub-Saharan Africa because of the over-association of a homogenised 'Africa' with undifferentiated 'traditions'. As noted by Mozambican sociologist Élisio Macamo, the two terms have become so intertwined that they are often treated as synonymous: "in other words, what is African is traditional because Africa is traditional anyway" (2009, p.65). Throughout, I argue that the concept of tradition can only be "good to think with" (Lévi-Strauss, 1962, p.89) if we use it reflexively and with an attentiveness to the colonial echoes that may fill its conceptual hollowness.

Tradition as a Hollow Concept

Edwin Ardener developed the concept of 'hollow categories' while working with the Kole people in Cameroon to conceptualize the ways in which group membership relied on "different criteria at different times" (1989, p.69). The idea of 'hollow categories' emphasises the situational, fluid, and mutable qualities that arise when thinking about ethnic groups and their identity formation processes. In this view, hollow categories are able "to be filled with substantive content when the occasion demands" (Dixon, 1991, p.59), becoming more or less semantically rigid and full depending on context. Owing to their taxonomic emptiness, the meaning of hollow categories is often made clear through assertions of what they are not, rather than what they are. As a result, ethnic groups' identity processes and narratives

often centralize another group as their key 'Other'. Anthropologist Dimitrios Theodossopoulos demonstrates this in his work, using hollow categories to show that Greek conceptualisations of 'the Turk' are definitional through opposition, and that "the categories of the Greeks and the Turks are equally as hollow and indefinite as several other categories set in opposition" (2006, p.4). By attributing qualities and meanings to the undifferentiated 'Other' category of 'the Turk' and then situating the Greek Self in stark contrast to this, the two identities are established in a binary framework which causes the category of 'the Greek' to take on meanings of what it is not, and thus, implicitly, what it is. In his later work with the Emberá indigenous community in Panama, Theodossopoulos (2016) again points to the construction of binaries, noting that Western logics often position 'indigeneity' and 'modernity' as mutually exclusive opposites. He coins the term 'indigenous-and-modern' in order to demonstrate how clothing, traditions, and people can be both indigenous and modern at once: "modernity and indigeneity – with all their permeable, ever-changing connotations – do not exist in isolation from each other" (2016, p.184). The 'hollowness' of these concepts does not mean that they are lacking in meaning, but rather have enough taxonomical space to adopt meanings situationally. This becomes potentially problematic because of human tendencies towards binary thinking, as 'tradition' – or 'indigeneity', in Theodossopoulos' case (2016) – becomes the foil for concepts which are prioritised or privileged within certain worldviews.

In this paper, the idea of taxonomical hollowness is applied to concepts, rather than to categories – hollow concepts lack semantic certainty, are seldom defined, and can carry numerous associations depending on context. 'Tradition' is a prime example of this hollowness which, again, "does not denote meaninglessness, but ampleness in terms of taxonomic space" (Theodossopoulos, 2006, p.4), space which is able to be filled as needed. Folklorist Simon Bronner speaks to this variability (2000, p.96):

> *"If tradition… is indeed both invented and inherited, individual and social, stable and changing, oral and written, of past and of present, of time and space, about both authority and freedom, then what does it exclude?"*

Here, the hollowness of tradition allows for enough space that it can even take on seemingly opposing qualities, which we can perhaps think of as the concept 'accommodating' multiple meanings rather than meaning those things in and of itself. This paper is structured in line with the idea of opposite pairings, considering the implications and problems of 'tradition' when opposed to modernity, progress, and civilisation, in turn. The vacuity of the tradition concept imbues it with a situational semantic volatility and slipperiness that leaves it at risk of largely existing as a foil for colonial ideals. As a result, 'tradition' cannot be assumed to be "a

neutral and self-standing concept" (Finnegan, 1991, p.110). The idea of conceptual 'hollowness' allows us to think about the ways in which this could happen.

Tradition in Opposition to Progress and/or Modernity

Particularly in Euro-American contexts, 'tradition' and the preservation of traditional values are increasingly positioned as conflicting with progressive politics or modernization. As such, 'tradition' has become "a loaded keyword of culture and society" (Bronner, 2000, p.95) that obstructs "virtually any innovation" (Williams, 1983, p.318-320 as in Bronner, 2000, p.96). When 'tradition' is conceptualized as the opposite – or even, the enemy – of progress and/or modernity, it thus comes to mean something static, ahistorical, and "immune to conflict or change" (Scott, 2013, p.2). This framing is predicated upon a Western view of time and history that is unidirectional, linear, and irreversible (Bevernage, 2011:2). For this reason, Pierotti argues that understandings of 'tradition' as "unchanged or perhaps timeless" (2018, p.301) are incompatible with "indigenous traditions [which] do not assume progress, but are always ready for change in the environment" (2018, p.302).

The ideas of social progress and modernization are fraught with cultural specificities: what qualifies as progress? Whose vision of modernity are we working towards? What direction(s) of change are considered to be progress? Why does a society have to modernize at all? The terms 'progress' and 'modernity' also have a certain hollowness to them, which enables them to be manipulated and applied in different ways, for different purposes, and in line with different values. Where tradition is positioned as an obstacle to progress and/or modernity, "tradition could represent perpetuation of the political and social status quo" (Bronner, 2000, p.95), including whatever social inequalities and injustices that this status quo entails. This view of tradition as static and unchanging fails to capture all of the active processes that engage with, maintain, and invoke tradition: "tradition is not a body of knowledge, but a process… traditions are chosen and adapted, not merely followed" (Bronner, 2000, p.91-94). Furthermore, the very idea that 'tradition' is incompatible with 'progress' or 'modernity' already indicates a point of interface between them, as "a consciousness of tradition arose primarily only in those historical situations where people were aware of change" (Graburn, 2000, p.6). Here, I show the changeability of tradition across time by referring to Scott's development of a black radical tradition (2013), to *Les Maîtres Fous* (Rouch, 1955), and to Shaw's ethnographic work on Temne witchcraft (1982, 1996, 1997, 2001), all of which demonstrate the fact that "the mobilization of a tradition has a radical potential" (Lewis, 2018, p.28).

Commenting on the tendency to view traditions as static or stagnant, anthropologist David Scott writes (2013, p.2):

> *"Indeed, some would argue that tradition does not belong in the same semantic universe as radical, appearing as it does to be the very reverse of subversion or transgression. What relation between past, present, and future does a tradition comprehend? What notion of temporality and spatiality does it map?… [E]ven in our attempts to disengage from the claims of tradition we are nevertheless oriented by it."*

Here, Scott not only highlights the temporal potential of 'tradition' – in that it inevitably conjures up ideas of the past – but also points specifically to the ways in which that historical quality becomes an orienting force in the present. So, the 'pastness' of tradition is not relegated to the past but is in fact characterised by its ability to inform present-day thinking about ways to move into and towards the future. Thus, 'tradition' is not static or opposed to progress but rather is deeply interlinked with the ways in which we learn, we organise, and we imagine. In Scott's discussion of a black radical tradition, the term 'tradition' refers also to an intellectual tradition – as would 'anthropological tradition', 'ethnographic tradition', 'Marxist tradition', and so on – and thus invokes a particular theoretical, philosophical, and/or methodological foundation, which both situates and legitimises the voices of authors within this tradition. In this sense, the specific past invoked by the use of the term 'tradition' is directly involved with present-day valuations and perceptions of scholars, their scholarship, and their scholarly voice – if someone can be positioned within a particular intellectual tradition, then their views and work can be interpreted and understood in light of that. Thus, the tradition informs the author's work, while the author simultaneously reproduces that tradition.

Jean Rouch's controversial short film, *Les Maîtres Fous* ('The Mad Masters'), documents 'traditional' hauka spirit possession rites performed in Ghana. Hauka was an anti-colonial resistance movement that transplanted colonial authority figures into supposedly 'pre-colonial' rituals and "ritually stole their powers" (Ferguson, 2002, p.555): performers would "assume a series of identities associated with the colonial world… Governor, General, Major, Corporal of the Guard" (Henley, 2006, p.732). This directly challenges characterizations of tradition as something unchanging and confined to the past – in fact, some spirits were explicitly tied to specific people and time periods, such as "the identity of a certain Madame Salma, the wife of an early twentieth-century French colonial official in Niger" (2006, p.372). At the time of release, Rouch's film was widely criticised and was even banned in Niger and Ghana (Ferguson, 2002, p.555). Evidently then, traditions are able to have a profound impact on the present-day, especially when actively integrating contemporary symbols into historical practices, perhaps amplifying the significance of the traditions by enhancing their relevance to performers' current circumstances.

Similarly, Rosalind Shaw's ethnographic work demonstrates the integration of distinctly 'modern' motifs into 'traditional' Temne witchcraft beliefs in Sierra Leone (1982, 1996, 1997, 2001). Shaw describes *ro-seron*, 'the place of witches', as a technologically abundant metropolis: "a preposterous city where skyscrapers adjoin houses of gold and diamonds; where Mercedes-Benzes are driven… and where witch airports dispatch witch planes" (1997, p.857). The 'modern' imagery here speaks to well-established views of witches as selfish and willing to harm others for their own benefit, but with 'updated' symbols of power, status, and wealth, such as diamonds and expensive cars. Temne witchcraft also features a number of other motifs that can be tied into specific time periods and thus disprove ahistorical views of tradition: the most powerful witches have "witch-guns" (1982, p.52-53), witchcraft accusations produced slaves for the Atlantic slave trade (1997, p.863-865), were-animals harvest human organs in a commentary on extractive violence (2001, p.50-51), and 'demonic insurgencies and power' played key roles in kickstarting the 1991-2002 civil war (1996). Among the Temne, images and themes associated with major historical shifts – such as colonisation, slavery, and 'modernisation' – became woven into the fabric of traditional belief, adding to the chronicle of Temne collective history. Most prevalently, symbols of wealth and violence speak to a history of commodification and forced transportation within the slave trade, when "people had, in fact, been reduced to consumable entities and exchanged for foreign wealth" (1997, p.861). In this light, many of the concerns highlighted by 'traditional' Temne witchcraft were/are tied to current affairs.

Tradition, then, is neither static nor stagnant, and is not inherently opposed to progress or modernity. In fact, invocations of tradition appear to contribute directly to radical change and thought, serving as intellectual, practical, and socio-political forms of resistance and self-legitimization, which can bolster efforts for progress or modernization. 'Progress' is also a contentious word when invoked in that way, because at its simplest, it refers to change in a direction that is desirable for the speaker/author. For example, my vision of progress would be incredibly different from that of someone falling on the other side of the political spectrum. Likewise, 'modernization' refers to change in line with a particular vision of modernity, and my ideals for a 'modern world' would be vastly different from that of someone with values and dreams that differ from my own. Progress and modernity are thus also hollow concepts to a degree, deriving much of their meaning from the specific positionality, subjectivity, and values of the invoker. This means that characterizations of tradition as the opposite of progress and modernity are even more hollow and, as a result, even more susceptible to being deployed as cloaking devices to justify restrictive policies, conceal 'divide and rule' tactics, and conjure up support for conservative political figures who base their manifestoes on 'preserving traditional values'. The hollowness of tradition, amplified by

the hollowness of the progress and modernity it supposedly opposes, thus creates a socio-political smokescreen that is increasingly deployed in politics across North America and Europe.

Tradition in Opposition to Civilization – or, 'Traditional' as Euphemism for 'Primitive'

The final opposing pair considered within this paper – 'tradition' versus 'civilization' – is the most problematic, setting up a binary between 'civilized' and 'uncivilized', 'developed' and 'simple', 'advanced' and 'primitive'. Such framings were common in early anthropology, when as part of the anthropological mission to "stud[y] 'primitive' and 'traditional' society, the two terms [were] taken as synonymous" (Finnegan, 1991, p.108). The hollowness of 'tradition' allows for a certain amount of conceptual slippage, making it possible for 'traditional' to be used as a less controversial replacement when the discipline began rejecting more obviously racist and colonialist language, such as "primitive", "tribal" (Ekeh, 1990, p.662-663), "unlettered" (Bronner, 2000, p.91), "simple" (Lowie, 1936, p.ix), "savage" (Ferretti, 2017, p.113; cf. Trouillot, 2003), "uncivilised and barbaric" (Scott, 2009, p.336). Previously commonplace, these terms are now relegated to the confines of inverted commas, a grammatical trend which "indicates the shaky and unsure ground upon which they rest" (Dozier, 1955, p.187).

While these terms are no longer in use, the binary of 'civilized-uncivilized' is still present, a colonial echo that is conjured up when Euro-American social scientists use 'traditional' to describe certain societies or beliefs that differ from "more advanced societies like our own" (Peristiany, 1954, p.39 as in Hallpike, 1993, p.31). The view that African societies 'lacked civilization' was one of the major justifications of the colonial enterprise, drawing on Euro-American understandings of 'progress' and 'modernity' to argue that African communities were somehow lagging behind, populated by "primitive people who impeded progress and needed to be civilised and brought into modernity, or as savage beings who needed to be subdued" (Ramírez, 2020, p.155). The evolutionist socio-political hierarchies constructed through this type of language were used to moralize colonialism. Masking economic and political motivations, literature at the time points to a widespread view that Euro-Americans had a 'duty' to 'civilize' their colonial subjects. This is evident in Rudyard Kipling's poem, *The White Man's Burden*, which refers to "new-caught, sullen peoples, // Half devil and half child" (1899). As observed by Canadian studies scholar Samantha Stevens, this line captures "the imperial sense of salvation, of saving these people from their devilry and their childish innocence" (2020, p.83). This logic of saviorism was explicitly couched in racial terms and served to legitimize and justify colonial violence against people across sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere.

While explicitly colonialist rhetoric is less widespread now, colonial echoes still follow the term ‘tradition’. Many contemporary forms of discrimination derive from views that frame anything ‘traditional’ and ‘African’ as ‘uncivilized’, whether this is the view that “natural afro hair is unkempt, excessive, and unprofessional” (Rashidi-Zakuani et al., 2020) or that African American Vernacular English is “incomprehensible” (King & Kinzler, 2020) to white Americans, who view it as “is less acceptable, less intellectual, and less respectable” (Chung, 2019). Whenever there are conversations about who does or does not qualify as ‘civilized’, these are simultaneously also conversations about who has the authority to determine the criteria for civility. In the same vein, the hollowness of concepts like tradition, progress, modernity, and civilization enables those with authority to determine their meanings and connotations in line with the interests of a particular social group. Within this context, ‘tradition’ can quickly become a euphemism for racially charged terms that echo colonialist logics. Although ‘tradition’ is often a valid and appropriate word to use, it is important to remember the historical baggage of the term, its conceptual hollowness, and the resulting definitional slipperiness.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have shared a number of thoughts and examples relating the conceptual hollowness of ‘tradition’ to its potential for perpetuating colonial views. Although I have focused on the negatives, I am not proposing that we banish ‘tradition’ from our vocabulary. I do however think it is important to start actively reflecting on the use of such a term and to do so we need to start to explicitly acknowledge that ‘traditional’ does not mean ahistorical, static, or primitive, and that ‘tradition’ does not exist in strict opposition to progress, modernity, or civilization. Instead, we should view traditions, or traditional practices and beliefs, as bodies of knowledge that have been accumulated over time, passed down from generation to generation, gathering wisdom and weight through specific cultural and historical events. In this perspective, lessons learned in the past are able to inform present-day decision-making about our visions for the future. The ‘tradition’ concept can thus move beyond a stagnating relegation to the past into a multi-directional reframing of the relationship between temporalities, communities, and knowledge.

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