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Preface



Once upon a time there were no American traditions. But, then, once upon a time there was no America. There was surely a continent west of the Atlantic Ocean, but no one called it America, and there were surely people inhabiting that continent, but none of them called themselves American. America—the country or the identity—was invented fairly recently. The people who migrated from Europe, and then eventually from every other part of the world, to what would become America or the United States brought traditions with them; those traditions were European, African, Asian, and so on—traditions *in America* rather than “American” traditions. At the moment of American independence, there were few, if any, traditions that were originally and uniquely American.

It may sound counterintuitive to speak of “invented traditions.” In our day of “fake news” and “post-truth” arguments and assertions, though, it is not preposterous to consider how humans fashion and inhabit their own realities—even more so than in previous eras, when knowledge was less certain and the pathways of knowledge were unreliable at best. Granted, the “traditional” idea of tradition implies (often, if not usually, spurious) continuity with the ancient past. The United States, however, has no ancient past; it is a society and country self-consciously created in the late eighteenth century but by no means completed in that era. It took many decades for the U.S. to accumulate—and to reflect on and fret about—the experiences out of which “tradition” was constructed.

And America is hardly unique in this regard. Even “traditional societies,” which are sometimes imagined to be primordial and static, even ahistorical, have actually been dynamic and changing. This is certainly true of the native nations of North America, who had their own traditions, many not as traditional as we often assume. For instance, the Iroquois Confederacy of the northeast of the U.S. was not formed until the 1500s, shortly before Dutch and English settlers began arriving in numbers in their territory; after a period of intertribal war, a man of peace appeared, known to history as Dekanawida or Tekana:wita, The Great Peacemaker, traveling with a companion named Hahyonhwatha or Ayenwatha (made famous in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s epic poem *The Song of Hiawatha*). The very name “Iroquois” is an invention and imposition, applied to them by the French; they called themselves *Haudenosaunee* or *Ongwanonsionni*, which means something like “the people of the longhouse.” The western Plains culture is another example of a tradition that could not have existed far into the past; the classic horse-riding culture of groups like the Cheyenne and Lakota was an innovation, since horses were not indigenous to the Western Hemisphere. Only after horses were brought to and released on the continent could Native Americans begin riding them, so this tradition is an adaptation to a foreign introduction. Worse still is the fact that historical, linguistic, and archaeological evidence indicates that some of these groups, such as the Cheyenne, were not even indigenous to the West but migrated there because of population pressures brought on by European settlement.

Around the world, the story is the same. Traditions that appear or claim to harken back to “time immemorial” prove to be creations, often in the quite recent past. The very societies themselves that purport to be traditional turn out to be products of contemporary forces. Anthropologists Meyer Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, for instance, commented in 1940 that some of the supposed “traditional tribes” of Africa in actuality “appear to be an amalgam of different people, each aware of its unique origin and history,” often forged by European colonialism on the continent.¹ The same can be said of the Betawi, who are often touted as the indigenous people of the Jakarta region of Java, Indonesia; instead, the Betawi (a name derived from the Dutch colonial

city of Batavia) are most likely the descendants of displaced societies and enslaved individuals who were lumped together in the colonial census and gradually melted in “a new, shared culture and identity and their own dialect, *Omong Betawi*” until they recognized themselves—and were recognized by the newly independent Indonesian state—as an authentic ethnic group and a model for all of Indonesia.² Closer to home for Americans, the “Melungeons” have been dubbed a “traditional” group of the Appalachian region, despite the fact that the very name probably comes from a corruption of the French word *mélange* or mixture (in this case, a mixture of races in a highly race-sensitive time and place) and that no one avowed the identity or culture of “Melungeons” until recently. Thanks to a play from the 1960s titled *Walk Toward the Sunset* and the formation of the Melungeons Heritage Association, as well as books and articles about them, people who had never identified as Melungeons suddenly “became Melungeons”; according to Melissa Schrift, in more than a few cases “individuals do not recall being Melungeons before they chose to do so as adults,”³ inventing and joining a “traditional society.”

The Melungeons are but one example of the fertile productivity of tradition-invention in the United States, a country and society that is itself, as mentioned above, thoroughly a recent achievement. And in a very real sense, the business of inventing American tradition could not commence until America itself was born, making many of those traditions of much later vintage—some no more than a few decades old and hardly any of them more than a century-and-a-half old. This book tells the story of a few of the signature traditions of American society. It does not attempt to be exhaustive; that would be impossible for a book of portable size, if not for an entire series or encyclopedia. I have made a selection of some of the most familiar, important, and revealing traditions in America. I have only included traditions that originated in America, which, for instance, excludes Christmas; assuredly, Americans do Christmas, and in a distinctly American way, but Christmas is not a fundamentally American tradition. I have also not included some domains of tradition, such as sports or music, which could easily fill—and have filled—volumes on their own. Finally, I have not included religion, although America has been the site of the invention of some

prominent religions, from Mormonism and Seventh-Day Adventism to Scientology. I offer instead a sampling to make a point.

Further, this book does not strive to excavate the “true history” of the traditions, partly because their history is often shrouded in uncertainty and controversy and partly because there often is no “true history.” That is, we are not in search of “the first Thanksgiving” or “the real national anthem,” because the first or real one is not the main point (and, in the case of national anthems, there is no “real” one). As often as not, the myth and legend is as important—and revealing—as the “facts.” The question is how a tradition gets started, transmitted, altered, and adopted. Many people contribute to a tradition, for many (often extremely partisan) reasons, and there is almost always a struggle over tradition. The outcome of the process—what we will call the “traditioning” process—is by no means assured. Nor should we ever consider the traditioning process finished.

The examples chosen for this book are organized into four categories. The first is political traditions, which have to do specifically and officially with the American government (or what social scientists call the American “state”). They include symbols or representations of the state such as its national song, its national flag, its national oath and motto, and its national personification (as “Uncle Sam”). The second section features holidays, which are a fertile area of tradition in all societies. Many holidays were invented in the United States, and many of them refer singularly to the United States (such as Thanksgiving or military holidays such as Veterans Day or Memorial Day);⁴ however, others do not refer exclusively to America—such as Mother’s Day and Father’s Day, and some, ironically, do not refer to America at all—such as St Patrick’s Day or Cinco de Mayo. Some people may question whether these latter celebrations are American holidays, but if they were invented in or are principally celebrated in America, how could we exclude them?

The third category is everyday traditions of dress, food, and even gesture. Americans have contributed a remarkable number of such traditions to the world (for better or for worse), such as blue jeans, hamburgers, and the word and gesture “OK.” It is truly fascinating and significant that most of the world knows, if not practices, these American-originated traditions, although once those other societies

adopt and modify them, we might just as well call them traditions of those other societies (as in the Brazilian tradition of blue jeans or the Chinese tradition of the hamburger). Again, as we said already, the origin of a tradition is not as crucial as its transmission and integration into a society. Indeed, both blue jeans and hamburgers have a certain non-American and pre-American source too.

The fourth and final category consists of distinctive, even internationally representative, American characters, such as Superman, Paul Bunyan, and Mickey Mouse. Some of these legendary characters come from American folklore, but many of them are much more recent—and intentional—fabrications, what some scholars have dubbed “fakelore.” But, as we will see, the line between folklore and fakelore is a thin and permeable one. The book ends with a glimpse into the future of American traditions, because traditions have not only a history but a future.

The chapters can be read in any order, and readers who do not want to engage in the scholarly analysis of tradition can skip the first chapter, but I would implore them not to, as the pervasive traditioning process will be much clearer if they attempt the first chapter before encountering the specific traditions. Accordingly, before the book begins the tale of particular American traditions, it spends some time discussing the nature, processes, and (perhaps most importantly) functions of tradition. What do we mean by “tradition”? How do traditions work—how do they begin, grow, adapt, often fail or disappear, and ultimately earn their way into American culture and consciousness? And, in a question that people seldom ask themselves, why do we have those traditions? In fact, why do we have any traditions at all? What purpose is served by tradition? Or, to put this question another way, whose interests are served by the creation, transmission, and acceptance of tradition?

Tradition, as we will acknowledge, is “about” the past in some way, but it is never only or even mainly about the past. As this notorious slogan in George Orwell’s novel *1984* has it, he who controls the past controls the future, and he who controls the present controls the past. Thus, two critical and unavoidable factors are *authority* and *the future*. Who has authority to create, transmit, or adopt a tradition—and how does creating and transmitting a tradition *create* and *perpetuate* authority? And finally, how are tradition and authority today, in the name, if not in the image,

of the past, related to the future? What new traditions, or new aspects of existing traditions, will be added to American culture, and how is the traditioning process really an exercise in shaping the future culture and identity of America?

The wonder is not that American tradition took so long to emerge and evolve but that American tradition exists at all. The United States was conceived, rather intentionally, as a country and society breaking the shackles of history, especially of European history, and thus as a society of the future. In the ironically appropriate source of the introduction to Marcel Proust's famous novel of memory, *In Search of Lost Time*, Richard Howard opined that Americans "have a kind of allergy to the past; it's our national disease, and the very assurance . . . that the past is *within the present* is likely to seem repellent, even offensive" to them.⁵ This suggests that the advent of, running into an obsession with, tradition in America has a deeper meaning. Each American tradition has its own story—a story of intention and accident, of institutionalization, competition, and opposition—but each is a scene in the bigger American story of *becoming* a "traditional" society. Born self-deliberately imagining itself breaking with tradition and looking only toward the future, by the centennial of the country's independence, many Americans perceived their nation and culture in peril. The half-century between 1870 and 1920 was especially and explicitly anxious for those Americans, and "tradition" was one bulwark against the specters of immigration and socialism, not to mention the traumatic near-self-destruction of the recently ended Civil War. It was perceived fairly overtly as a means to ensure or manufacture literally American self and society, which was endangered or altogether absent. We may then find that tradition-inventing is the prerogative not so much of an energetic and confident people but of a tired and stressed one, desperately striving to perpetuate an identity by actively creating it.

Introduction: Tradition is Not What It Used to Be



History is facts which become lies in the end; legends are lies which become history in the end.—JEAN COCTEAU

O *dissi* is considered one of the classical forms of dance in India, although it only became “classical” in 1958. Centuries ago, it was a style of movement practiced by female temple dancers, called *maharis*; in the 1700s, male dancers commandeered the genre, and by the 1800s it was not considered entirely proper for decent women, given its (fictitious?) association with temple prostitution. However, it was only in the 1950s that these men—completely excluding actual *maharis*—codified the dance style, establishing its “rules and aesthetics” and canonizing those newly minted norms as “classical” *odissi*.¹ Amusingly, those fresh standards were granted such authority that a controversy recently erupted over the apparel of dancers, some clothing deemed to be intolerably nontraditional despite the fact that the “costume worn by *odissi* dancers on stage today barely resembles the one worn by *maharis*, and was specifically reconstructed during the codification of *odissi* dance.”²

Modern life is full of traditions and would-be traditions. And who doesn’t enjoy a good tradition? In fact, would life even be possible without tradition? The fact that traditions are appealing and compelling (sometimes verging on compulsory) habits and that they refer to and, in a sense, revive the past does not mean, though, that they are necessarily ancient or primordial. Some traditions are very old, and some are quite new. Most Americans would consider the Super Bowl an American tradition, but in the year 2017 only the 51st Super Bowl was played, the first instance of this tradition having occurred

in 1967—although the term “super bowl” was not used at the time of the first contest between the National Football League and the upstart American Football League, and legend has it that Lamar Hunt, the owner of the Kansas City Chiefs, named the game after his daughter’s Super Ball. The MTV Music Awards began in 1984 (there were no “music videos” much before that date), and the 89th Academy Awards were presented in 2017.

One might argue that these are not “real” traditions or that they are not “important” traditions. But of course, some traditions have deep meaning (to some people; to others they are meaningless or worse), and some are lighthearted fun. So let us consider some “real” and “important” traditions. Many Protestant Christians cherish their traditions, but naturally there are no Protestant traditions that go back more than five hundred years, since there was no such thing as Protestantism (at least in the familiar form of Martin Luther’s revolution) before the 1500s. No Protestant tradition is more than five hundred years old, and some are much younger (for example, Methodism did not come along until the 1700s). Even worse is the fact that while Christians in general tout their traditions, there are no specifically Christian traditions that go back more than two thousand years, since there was no such thing as Christianity before two thousand years ago. There are, of course, pre-Christian roots to some Christian traditions, including what Christians have traditionally come to call “the Old Testament” (but which was the only testament in its time, and still is the only testament for the Jewish people). And there are also non-Christian roots to many Christian traditions, Christianity having absorbed various bits and pieces of Greek and Roman culture, as well as from Germanic, Nordic, and, more recently, African, Asian and Native American cultures during its history.

The same could clearly be said about Islam (the traditions of which date only from the 600s of the Common Era), Mormonism (the traditions of which date only from the 1800s), or Scientology (the traditions of which date only from the 1950s). And what is true for religion is true for all areas of human “traditional” behavior. Every tradition has an origin, and every tradition has evolved from the moment of its origin. In other words, tradition is not what it used to be.

In the American context, many traditions practiced in the United States, such as Christmas, certainly have a pre-American origin. Other traditions, such as Thanksgiving, were born on American soil (although not at the time or in the way that most Americans imagine, and the tradition of “giving thanks” long predates the U.S.); some American traditions appeared much more recently. And whenever it began and whatever its source of inspiration, every American tradition has a history, as it has morphed, adding or shedding elements or interpretations. Nor have American traditions “stayed at home”: once a tradition is launched, it easily—often intentionally—flows across social boundaries, and maybe to the entire world. This is why we can find rock ’n’ roll or hip-hop music, blue jeans, T-shirts, and hamburgers in virtually every society on earth. In the contemporary globalized world, tradition is not only not what it used to be; it is not *where* it used to be. Tradition, like all culture, is mobile, portable, plastic, and hybrid.

What is Tradition?

“Do you guys know any songs?” I asked the Aleuts (an indigenous people of Alaska).

“I know all of Hank Williams,” the elder Aleut said.

“How about Indian songs?”

“Hank Williams is Indian.”

“How about sacred songs.”

“Hank Williams is sacred.”³

When Americans hear or use the word “tradition,” they tend to have two things in mind. First, “tradition” and its variations such as “traditional” connote age: “traditional” is what has been done for a long time, maybe even “since the beginning.” It is, in a word, a legacy and continuation of the past. Second, “tradition” tends to suggest what is good, what is authentic, what is “really us.” This is particularly clear when we think about usages such as “traditional marriage,” “traditional family,” or “traditional values.” For people who talk this way, “traditional” means *good* marriage, *real* family, or *the correct* values. But then, not everything that is “traditional” in America is equally good: slavery was a long-lasting tradition that we are all glad to be rid of. And there

is no objective way to establish that one set of values is “more correct” than another. One kind of American is not better or more real than another; if America is anything, it is diverse.

So for most people, the essence of tradition is its connection—that is to say, its *continuity*—with the past, usually (selectively) remembered (or imagined) as a “noble past.” Something really happened back then, and that something set the pattern for what we do, or should do, today. However, if we look at the derivation of the word “tradition,” antiquity is not the key issue. From the Latin *tradere* for “to deliver/hand down/transmit” (further, from *trans* for “across” and *dare* for “to give”), the kernel of the idea of tradition is the transmission process, not the age of the transmitted message. Thus, as Newell Booth expressed it over thirty years ago, tradition “is commonly understood as meaning ‘the inherited wisdom’ of the past, and ‘traditionalist’ as referring to one who preserves this heritage . . . but the emphasis is more on the process of transmission than on the content transmitted.”⁴

The core quality of tradition, then, is not any specific detail (the “true” stuff or the “good” stuff) nor any specific age (the “old” stuff) but the process by which the related ideas, beliefs, behaviors, and artifacts are reproduced and perpetuated over time and between people. In a sense, anything that people transmit and share is “traditional” to some extent, making the word awfully vague and nearly synonymous with “culture” in general. In fact, for many listeners, “tradition” is hardly other than the “most authentic” or the “most important” elements of their culture—its language, its religion, its stories, its food, its clothing, and so on.

Accordingly, the scholars who have spent the most time thinking about tradition have been those most directly concerned with culture, language, stories, and religion, especially folklorists and theologians. For instance, in an influential analysis in 1984, folklorist Dan Ben-Amos argued that even the experts used the word in many different ways—seven, to be precise.⁵ First, tradition could mean “lore,” a corpus of knowledge, usually transmitted and practiced orally, including songs, tales, sayings, games, jokes, and the like. Second, tradition could refer to “the canon,” that subset of cultural knowledge or lore that is most “official” or deemed most fundamental to a group: “narratives, songs, proverbs, and riddles that have withstood the test of time, and have

become the main mental staple of a society, are conceived as the cultural canon,”⁶ and it is those that are most essential to preserve and propagate. In this view, tradition is often the “high” culture, the sayings and doings of the elite, as opposed to “popular culture,” which is more ephemeral and, quite frankly, sometimes lower in quality. (These are, of course, value judgments, and the line between high and low culture is a negotiable and permeable one.)

Third, folklorists have stressed that tradition is a “process”—namely, the process of transmission (again, usually seen as an oral process). But since a social process like transmission necessarily entails a social group, Ben-Amos’s fourth sense of tradition redirects the focus from the contents of the tradition to the “bearers” of the tradition. As anthropologist and folklorist Richard Bauman phrased it,

The folklore is the product through creation or re-creation of the whole group and its forebears, and an expression of their common character. It is spoken of in terms of traditions, with tradition conceived of as a superorganic temporal continuum; the folk are “tradition bearers,” that is, they carry the folklore traditions on through time and space like so much baggage—particular people and generations come and go, but the group identity persists and the tradition lives on . . .⁷

This perspective not only emphasizes the “folk” in folklore but attunes us to the integrative and identity-fostering aspect of tradition.

After mentioning as his fifth definition that tradition can basically act as a surrogate and synonym for culture, Ben-Amos added two other observations. One (his sixth strand) sees tradition as an abstract set of rules for generating knowledge or behavior, like the grammar of a language; scholars have come to call this the *langue* dimension of language—that is, the underlying grammar or competence to say (and do) appropriate things, rather than actual things that people say (or do), which is known as *parole*, following the ideas of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. This view tends to highlight the stable, even timeless, nature of tradition. Ben-Amos’s other observation (his seventh and final strand) takes exactly the opposite stance, envisioning tradition as

“performance,” what people actually say and do; this approach reintroduces time, variability, and creativity. As the eminent linguist and folklorist Ruth Finnegan said, a tradition “has to be *used* by people for it to continue to exist.”⁸ And since different individuals and subgroups may have different knowledge, skills, interpretations, and motivations in regard to the same tradition, the performative quality of tradition opens up a whole new way of thinking about the subject.

Likewise, writing in the journal *Church History*, Richard Heitzenrater identified several distinct “common usages” for the word “tradition,” including

1. “the repetitive practice of a certain activity or the regular recitation of an idea, a repetition through which something is being passed on from person to person, from generation to generation. The fact that we do or say something with routine recurrence down through the years within families, institutions, or countries, makes it a tradition.”
2. “That which is being celebrated regularly, that which is being passed on, is also called a tradition. These traditions often point to an auspicious beginning for a group or a significant defining idea or event or a special development in the life of an individual or a group.”
3. “We also speak about tradition in a more encompassing fashion to refer to the body of people who share a particular set of traditions relating to their origin, background, experience, perspective, and story. In this sense (as with the last sense), ‘tradition’ takes on a proprietary sense—‘our tradition,’ ‘their tradition.’ The totality of shared ideas, structures, and concomitant events (that is, the traditions) that characterize a group or institution are also at times called a ‘heritage.’”
4. Additionally, calling something a tradition implies “that the story or bit of information has the aura of factuality through repetition, though it is not necessarily verifiable—‘tradition has it that . . .’ Such an acknowledgement makes explicit in this meaning of tradition what might be implicit in the last two uses of the term—a possible lack of historical or factual

verifiability as to origins of the tradition. These traditions are no less important to groups, however, and are as frequently and faithfully passed on.”⁹

5. Finally, in keeping with the performative and inventive dimension, tradition can be thought of as a verb, as an active process—to *tradition* or to participate in *traditioning*—that not only transmits but modifies and even generates tradition in the first place. We will have much more to say about this later in the chapter.

Culture and Revitalization

As transmitted content, transmission processes, and a community among whom the content is transmitted, tradition partakes in the nature of “culture” generally; it might be more accurate to say that tradition is a subset of culture. Now, part of the convention of the social sciences has been to treat culture as an enduring, sometimes static, phenomenon—that which a society has been doing for an undetermined but presumably long time. However, at least since the middle of the twentieth century, anthropologists and sociologists have been acutely aware of the dynamic and creative quality of culture.

One of the most important and useful discussions of cultural change and innovation came from the anthropologist Anthony Wallace, who compared “many instances of attempted and sometimes successful innovation of whole cultural systems, or at least substantial portions of such systems.”¹⁰ He discovered that cultures commonly (and increasingly commonly in the modern world) experience many kinds of change processes, including “evolution, drift, diffusion, historical change, acculturation” and so forth,¹¹ all of which are relevant to the study of tradition. But his main interest was the *revitalization movement*, defined as “a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture.”¹² In other words, what is particularly significant about revitalization movements is that they are intentional, orchestrated, and sustained attempts to change culture in a particular way.

Social scientists have observed a wide and colorful array of revitalization movements over the past century or two. Wallace himself



The Ghost Dance by the Oglala Lakota at Pine Ridge Agency. Drawn by Frederic Remington from sketches taken on the spot.

investigated the Handsome Lake movement among the Seneca at the turn of the nineteenth century (named after its founder, a man called Handsome Lake); other famous cases include the Taiping “Rebellion” in China, the Ghost Dance among Plains Indians in the U.S., and, of course, the many, often dramatic, “cargo cults” on Pacific Islands.¹³ But Wallace’s real contribution was his summary of the standard course that such movements take.

In his model, culture starts off in a relatively stable and satisfactory condition that he called the “steady state”; in this pre-movement state, individuals understand their world and possess the mental and cultural tools to navigate it successfully. The steady state is not necessarily totally static, but change is slow and incremental rather than sudden and disruptive. Then something comes along to disturb the steady state; this could include environmental change or natural disaster but more likely involves social processes such as contact with a radically different society, invasion and conquest, war (especially defeat in a war), internal division and conflict, severe economic trouble, and other such dislocating events. At first perhaps only a few individuals feel the change, but the effects become more pronounced in this stage of “increased individual stress.” As tensions build, the society enters a period of “cultural distortion,” resulting in more or less widespread failure of people’s cultural knowledge and practices. The distortion manifests in negative