Following Tradition

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Epilogue

The Future of Tradition

Nothing focused my attention on American traditions like being away from them. This book began as I contemplated the youth of America's national relics against the ancient ruins of England and I heard countless times how the United States and England were two nations divided by a common language. It ended in Japan where I heard fewer hints of commonality with the United States. Pundits on both sides of the Pacific presented Japan to be essentially different from America. While England and the United States were both part of what has been called Western tradition, Japan and America split apart into East and West. Set against the background of this sharp division, several prominent figures discussed in this book went to Japan to reflect on the meaning of American culture. Lafcadio Hearn pondered materialism, Richard Dorson contemplated nationalism, and Alice Bacon mused on feminism. Judging by the keynotes sounded by an expanding chorus of authors taking up comparisons, Japan is America's reverse mirror. It especially shows in conceptions of tradition.

The Japanese I met talked assuredly about the cultural unity of their country. They understood the basis of their traditions in a common racial stock, an ancient lineage, a group orientation, and a shared narrative of their distinctiveness. Much as I heard rebellious scholars give abundant evidence of the illusion of Japan's homogeneity and uniqueness, that did not check the flow of references to the Japanese as a separate race isolated on its islands and thereby able to form a distinctive culture (see H.W. Smith 1995; Weiner 1997). When the entrance examination for the national university I attended asked for an essay in English on the center of Japan's tradition, the American graders were amazed at the high level of agreement in the returned answers. Ninety percent of the students placed the heart of the nation's tradition in the same spot—the ancient temples of Kyoto. The examiners could not imagine that kind of consensus for a similar question put to Americans.
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Well after the examination, I saw a qualification for the placement of Kyoto as the center of Japanese tradition in a headline that declared, “Kyoto Plays Tradition Card to Lure Students Back.” Going to Kyoto is a kind of pilgrimage for most schools in Japan, but the traditionalists have become concerned by competition from, of all places, Tokyo Disney Land (Iida 1997). That clinched for them the connection of America with novelty and consumerism and Japan with antiquity and spiritualism. To whisk the students into the American past, I provided “Electronic Field Trips” to historic America produced on Laserdisc (ABC News 1997). After getting used to the futuristic idea of transporting them electronically to absorb America’s shrines, I ruminated on the disc’s representation of American memory. Eighteen sites were featured with a careful eye to multicultural inclusiveness of American social experience. No capitol, no monuments to presidents, certainly no plantations. A student appeared puzzled and asked, “But where is the kokoro?” She meant the heart and soul, the ancient spiritual center of American tradition, as the Japanese conceived it. I paused and explained America’s decentering.

I realized the ubiquity of festivals as one source of the Japanese view of tradition. The country has thousands of local festivals whose histories have stretched back centuries. Each one re-enacts the importance for the Japanese of continuity with the past and bonds with community and nation. Instead of proclaiming adaptation to the changing times, they preserve original customs intact. They all seem to draw from the dramatic start of the New Year celebration, which encourages participation in familiarly known rituals for family, neighborhood, and nation. “Starting the Year with Tradition,” one headline of a national newspaper at the time blared appropriately across its pages (Sakane 1997). As obviously industrialized, indeed modernized by Western standards, as the Japanese have self-consciously become, there are constant reminders that they believe that tradition as an inheritance of their ancient racial past persists into the present. “The Old in the New,” one typical essay explains of Japan’s resilient tradition. Read the narrative of continuity as the author offers to attend to “craftsmen who, while preserving Japan’s tradition of consummate craftsmanship, are striving to create new types of craftwork suitable to modern living. In the process, we explore the root—the spirit of craftsmanship—of Japan’s technological prowess” (Muda 1997).

Having heard so often about the sturdiness of tradition in the edifice of Japanese unity, I witnessed cracks in the facade when I took students to a Japanese folklife museum and they were taken aback by what they did not know of their own traditions. Given to express values of filial piety, they seemed embarrassed by their neglect of practices familiar to their parents and many generations before. The fragility of some traditions in a place where residents supposedly follow traditions unswervingly is evident in a national program since 1950 to protect “folk cultural properties” and “intangible cultural properties” (Saitsu 1996). The national public television station promotes tradition with regular broadcasts of folk performing arts and festivals, and features a weekly program called “Hometown
Traditions" usually focused on crafts, foods, and occupations. The national newspapers (and there are many in contrast to the few in the United States) almost daily carry a photograph of Japanese citizens engaged in an old folk art or custom. At the same time, they regularly report surveys revealing anxieties about the transforming effects of modernization and "internationalization" on the continuity of Japanese traditions such as language, food, and family.

Upholders of Japanese tradition express special worry about the rebelliousness of Japan's uniformed high school girls, dubbed "The Boom Brigade," against the ways of the past. The national press gives ample coverage to their voracious appetites for novelty, supposedly influenced by American consumerism. Although appearing to be a statement of individual difference, in Japan it is probably more of a sign of conformity to the age group, which helps spread fads of virtual-reality pets, loosely worn high sweat socks, and miniature digital photographs. Presuming America as the unquestioned home of novelty, one American news reporter noted in alarm that Japan may have outdone the United States in industry, and now in fadism (Watanabe 1997). As much as the girls shock their elders by dyeing their hair and wearing outrageous platform shoes, they are expected to conform to tradition by the time they work for companies and marry. Another consolation for Japanese elders is that they imagine that new fashions incorporated into their culture since the end of World War II have been transformed so as not to interrupt Japanese tradition. They proudly recognize American imports from baseball to burgers but with a decided Japanese cast (see Whiting 1989; Sakaiya 1993).

So sure are the Japanese of their national culture that they judge their uniqueness by contrasts with the United States, while measuring their progress by their similarities. It is in this constant exercise that separate identities, or some may say stereotypes, for both Japan and the United States become reified within their joint embrace of modernity (see McClean 1992). The columns the attributes form extend far down the page: America is individualistic, Japan is group-oriented. America is dangerous, Japan is safe. Americans go for the large and expansive, the Japanese like things compact and detailed. The Japanese are polite, closed, formal, while the Americans tend to be brutally direct, open, informal. America is spacious and has many natural resources, Japan is cramped and has few caches of raw materials. America is diverse, Japan is homogeneous. America is new, Japan is old. Since many cultural features from America are admired, it rarely occurred to the people I talked to in Japan that the United States could have a sense of tradition comparable to theirs. They perceived America as a place where the past gave way constantly to the future, where radical individualism prevented bonds to groups fostering tradition, and racial and ethnic diversity made it difficult if not impossible to reach consensus or represent a common tradition.

I know Americans who feel the same way about their nation, but I maintain that public discourse in the United States, especially in the twentieth century, has instilled a distinctive American sense of tradition. It has consistently provided
extra depth to America's shallow roots. A major dispute has been about where those roots lay and how they affect the country's development. There has been an ongoing project to identify the social and intellectual attributes of national tradition, and innumerable arguments about how far one can generalize shared modes of thought from cultural evidence through time. Instead of claiming homogeneity as a basis for national tradition, there has been a tendency to offer America's varied "strains" as its distinguishing cultural feature. Yet a bone of contention has been the processes of integration or, less delicately stated, assimilation, working on America's varieties. Do they gravitate toward a model of Americanness, or are they unsuspectingly shoved toward it? Whose model is it, anyway? The question of whether the varieties of America naturally come together forming an American type, keep their difference, or have it kept for them fans the fire of debate. For all the declarations of how Americans stand together, one can easily find pronouncements of how they live apart. Weighing the balance between unity and diversity has been a defining characteristic of American scholarship as well as the national experience.

If this falling out set the old debates over American tradition, redirected conversations are apparent from placing the United States in a global stream rather than an isolated spot. They also arise from observation of border-crossing complexities in the many situational choices, many identities available, within an individualistic, future-oriented society. If that sounds blind to the past, it should be remembered that as never before "folk histories," narratives of the past and cultural surroundings of ordinary people, especially members of often neglected ethnic groups, are more in evidence as backgrounds to many of the new discussions. One can increasingly hear questions of how individuals and organizations negotiate social unities, cross racial and sexual borders, and organize usable pasts at the local subcultural as well as international mass cultural levels (see Cross 1991; Roberts 1993; Hannerz 1996; Sollors 1997; Gubar 1997). The inquiry takes on significance as ways of categorizing Americans, and thereby explaining their traditions, shift, multiply, and blur in a swirl of cultural interactions associated with modernizing America. At Harvard symposia I attended in 1997 on new American agendas, the talk was all of crossracial, multiethnic, and transnational intersections causing fissures in conventional boxes of ethnicity, religion, race, and gender. I heard arguments about the character of emergent traditions for interracial, interfaith, and international families. The border crossing in American cultural studies, sometimes invoked as the "California model," came out in the discussion of cultural cross-fertilization between Asia and the United States as air travel and media regularly bring Pacific cultures into view as never before. The gut issue in the revised debate is about the choices that individuals make about their expressions and identities, and those imposed upon them. It brings into relief the meaning, indeed the worth, of a variety of American cultural projects to uphold or change traditions in daily local practice set against the limits of national polities.
A significant contribution has been made to all this by American folklorists and, I hasten to add, notables not identifying themselves as "folklorists" but who use the stuff of tradition to rationalize American history and culture. They have consequentially given form and expression to tradition. Laboring over the authenticity of examples given in folklore's name, they have given recognition to the "right stuff" of tradition. They have encouraged cultural literacy in the texts of folklore and opened debate to proper representation in a canon of American tradition. They have shaped a discourse about the meaning of culture, modernity, and community that has become a major force in the intellectual construction of America. Their collections of specimens from the "field"—somewhere out there—have inventoried the cultural environment close to home. In their many portrayals of groups showing cultural vitality, they have framed a multilayered picture of social diversity and often spotlighted its relation to nation and state. Once devoted to what was spoken and sung, they moved to expand and democratize American arts by extending the creativity of tradition in material and performing expressions. They have monitored the cultural impact of novel forms of communication such as photocopiers and computers and thereby established tradition as a fundamental process of being human, indeed of being modern.

As independent as folklorists have sometimes been in scholarship, they have ceaselessly made interdisciplinary connections, joining their evidence to history, literature, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, and art. Folklore has been a hardy stream irrigating many fields in American learning. Like members of other learned professions pointing to society and culture, folklorists and their fellow travelers have perpetually fretted about their inadequate numbers, intellectual authority, and popular force. Yet in a cascade of book, gallery, film, and festival before various publics, they have conveyed folklife as American life, renewed folklore into the present, and elevated tradition to art. All told, they have impressively spread a consciousness of tradition as a vital cultural feature of America. This has come with some organizational cost to the great scholarly crusade of Beckwith, Shoemaker, and Dorson up until the late twentieth century to chart American folklore studies on its own course. Some of folklorists' success has meant a loss for the independence of folklore as a prophetic disciplinary lens on tradition, since the opening of the subject to an orientation toward local and native expressions within modernizing society has offered imperial academic realms like history and literature broadening opportunities to gain work from the social bottom up, and to see relatively from the inside out.

The American idea of tradition folklorists assembled before the end of the twentieth century differs from that of the Japanese and English, who have primarily taken their sense from an ancient past and common racial stock. By emphasizing that tradition emerges from social connection, many American folklorists located tradition without a long time line or a rooted place. That activities draw attention to themselves as repeatable, variable signs of some shared identity
increasingly qualified them as cultural expressions. The social connections defined loosely as communities could be overlapping and temporary. That made it possible to simultaneously conceive of community traditions being maintained intact for private purposes and also being changed in the swirling midst of different communities for various publics to experience. American tradition could therefore be enacted, kept flexible, as symbolic action, rather than set in distant time, entrenched in place, or fixed in form. It involved everyone in the process of folklore even as it identified the special groups that thrived on it. If the United States was not group oriented, as the Japanese insisted, the nation nonetheless grew to believe that it cherished myriad communities and tendencies toward organizing belonging around them.

American individualism showed in folkloristic ideas that people could choose traditions, even create them, to express themselves. While the image of time, or more appropriately continuity, still could frame tradition, it usually did not have to be ancient or geographically rooted to be culturally significant. By viewing tradition as a function of human needs for deriving meaning from life, instead of a result of remote existence, then Americans could more fully contemplate their identity within globalized mass culture, their diversity within a nation-state, and their creativity in industrialized, consumer society. While this allowed more expressions of the situated self in the sense of tradition appropriate to a mobile, modernized society like the United States, it also permitted tradition to be future-oriented. It promised that traditions would continue to emerge to establish identity even when people pull up roots. To be sure, tradition as a heritage from the past may still be called inspiring relics, but in progressive America, it often draws its meaning from being popularly directed to the future by alteration and adaptation. In rhetoric taken from a physics of speeding, transforming atoms, many references to “dynamics” and “interactions,” which threaten to overshadow a biology of cultural soil, underscore the future orientation of tradition. And like atoms of the nuclear age, traditions can be redirected, recombined, and reformed, and the immense results of human intervention contemplated.

Tradition and the folklore that gave it form became significant to the contestation of American social visions because variously defined they provided the historical precedent and cultural basis for charting uncertain roads ahead. Maybe that is why everyone is talking about culture. As culture has appeared more indefinite, it has become more manipulable and apparently more necessary to actualize. To bring it into reality has frequently meant to bring it into display so as to publicize it, emotionalize it, politicize it. As institutions of family, church, and state that had their holds upon socialized behavior, or praxis, diminished with the rise of modernity, culture became a hot commodity in a public marketplace where diversifying organizations vied for production of meaningful symbols and values (see Eagleton 1997, 2B3). Reference to tradition helped rationalize the many claims for culture through the twentieth century. Often these claims became the basis for social and

Folklore frequently served to narrate images of "following tradition" at the heart of culture, to signal the values parents inculcated in children, the legacies that the nation defends, the environments humanity and nature require, and the differences that communities protect. It could be made apparent in popularized rhetoric spread in schools and media, in various forms of display from galleries to festivals, in the tourist productions of preindustrial tradition from the Amish to Zuni. Because folklore gave tradition its form and expression, it permitted reproduction in the public marketplace. Traditions could be peddled to legitimate forms of social praxis represented in campaigns ranging widely from "traditional values" to "gay rights." The payoff was institutionalization of ways of doing things, of thinking about values for the future inherent in tradition. The situation is not America's alone, but it became especially noticeable there because of highly vocal, widely publicized flaps over qualifying, multiplying identities of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender, among others.

Everyone is talking about culture because it has an expressive, symbolic value in directing attention, and organizing roles, in a public marketplace where competing social visions and often clashing political orders are hawked. People believe that it reduces to a core the dizzying array of contentious modern issues to resolve. In addition to symbolizing culture in discourse, their talk invites judgment of it. Arguments over its character, indeed its fate, seem to inevitably lead to cries for its rehabilitation. Objectifying tradition and thereby leaving it open to critical analysis is risky but can help advance the evaluation of possible social unities in American society. In a decentered America, a contest is discernible for the authority that will lead the discussion of culture and guide the decisions that really matter. They involve nothing less than the nation's recentering.

As political investment in the enterprise of culture increases, speculation turns to the ways that tradition writ large has been, and will be, followed. Catapulted into the public eye, tradition attracts interests from scattered quarters, academic and otherwise. The turf of tradition, once the recognized domain of folklorists, has become common ground. Challenging academic authority, public agencies and private organizations retread tradition as the way to rationalize culture and
legitimate social vision. The public marketplace has become crowded with bidders for the role of explaining American culture, and in the process clashes are apparent over the groupings that constitute, indeed exemplify national culture. Folklore has been a subject used to record and realize culture with the object of presenting it, and ultimately controlling it. Questioning tradition’s purpose and power for social grounding, the discourse of American culture in the modernizing twentieth century has summoned the past and present in tradition to confront, sometimes direct, the future of experience.