Tradition: Three Traditions

Abstract: This article traces “tradition” as a keyword of Western modernity, circulating between general and scholarly usage and between analytic and ideological applications. After a historical overview, I identify three main orientations: tradition as a communicative transaction, tradition as a temporal ideology, and tradition as communal property. I conclude by proposing that scholars explore yet another working definition of tradition: the transfer of responsibility for a valued practice or performance.

Author’s note: The following article was originally written as the entry “Tradition” for the Enzyklopädie des Märchens. Intimidated by the responsibility of contributing to that monument of scholarship, I strove to counterfeit the ideal of density and comprehensiveness we Anglophones like to project upon German research. After a summer spent frantically amassing citations and jettisoning verbs, I produced an entry twice the allotted length; it had to be radically cut and refocused to concentrate exclusively on folk narrative scholarship. The editors of the Enzyklopädie have generously agreed to allow the full version to be published here in JFR. And in order to spare the reader a hailstorm of author-date citations, the editors of the JFR have kindly consented to a variance in their usual practice: citations will be found in a note at the end of each paragraph.

Despite the bibliographic delirium, I hope not to strain either the reader’s patience or my own competence beyond the breaking point. Due to the original focus on oral narrative, I have not surveyed important literatures on custom and on the transmission of craft knowledge. The cultural scope is likewise restricted. I do my best to reconstruct the lineage of the Western concept that has informed European and American folklore research, but I make no attempt to identify
what comparable concepts in South Asia, East Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, the indigenous Americas, or elsewhere might look like. Such a comparison across a fuller range of social structures, communicative practices, and historical situations would be of enormous interest to all of us trying to come to terms with the inevitably provincial character of our analytical tools, and, as one JFR reviewer noted, with the more immediately relevant question of the circumstances under which tradition surfaces as a metacultural problem.¹ I hope that colleagues with the requisite expertise will step forward to liquidate the lack.

As both word and concept, tradition is inescapably ambiguous. Like other keywords of Western modernity, “tradition” circulates between general and scholarly usage and between analytic and ideological applications. Keywords traverse these boundaries most fluidly and thus accumulate most ideological weight when not interrogated too closely. But in the wake of the Second World War and decolonization the problematization of the concept of tradition became unavoidable. Thus it was examined and made reflexive by 1968–era folklorists and more influentially in 1983 by Hobsbawm and Ranger. Since then, this concept so bound to the identity of the ethnological fields has fostered intensive self-examination among academic folklorists and ethnologists as well as among public cultural practitioners and been surveyed in indigenous studies, law, theology, sociology, philosophy, and social theory. Underlying these contemporary metacommentaries, we can identify a tradition of talking about tradition: not so much a progression of ideas as a continual reworking of base meanings and a continual interaction between theory, policy, and vernacular practice. After a survey of early usage, I explore what seem to me three principal orientations towards tradition: communication, ideology, and property.²

1. Historical usage

The core meaning of traditio in classical Latin is “handing over” or “delivery”; clustered around this are notions of entrusting, betrayal, surrender, recounting, and oral teaching. All of these resonances persist as the word moves into the Romance languages and is borrowed into the Germanic (fifteenth century) and the Slavic languages sixteenth–eighteenth centuries). Comparable semantic clusters may be found for the Greek
paradosis, its Russian calque predanie (eleventh century in Old Church Slavonic), and, in early modern usage, the German Überlieferung.

In Roman property law, traditio referred to a mode of transferring ownership through the intentional hand-to-hand transfer of the property itself, a part of it, or a symbol of it. Contracts were executed by public traditio through the Latin Middle Ages, and the word was also associated with the handing on of authority, as in the early Christian iconographic motif of the traditio legis (Christ replacing the emperor as law-giver) or the traditio instrumentorum, the handing of the chalice and paten to the new priest in the medieval rite of ordination.3

Even more than law, religion has shaped the concept of tradition. Each of the “religions of the book” conceives of scripture as being supplemented by tradition, a parallel track of oral teaching that provides context, interpretation, and elaboration of the sacred texts. Thus, in Judaism, the Rabbinical tradition distinguishes between written and oral Torah, both understood as originating with Moses. Church Fathers such as Tertullian and Irenaeus identify apostolic teaching descending from Christ’s own oral instruction as a source of divine authority. In Islam, the hadith are said to preserve the sayings of the Prophet. This valuing of tradition, however secondarily, has fostered the preservation in writing of rich bodies of oral narrative in the Midrash and the hadith, and in Christianity with the legends of saints and shrines. At the same time, the long concern with authenticity stems from this religious context: Muslim scholars give careful attention to the chain of oral transmission connecting a given hadith to the Prophet, and the Church from the beginning relies on the mechanism of apostolic succession to police what it considers genuine tradition against the “superstitions” of the people and the “heresies” of the educated.4

Tensions over the authority of tradition in Christianity explode during the Reformation. Reformers cite the incident in which Jesus criticizes the paradosis of the Pharisees as in direct contradiction to the divine logos. They denounce the “human tradition” of the Church as meaningless custom, “un amas infini et importable” (an infinite and unbearable mass, Calvin) that oppresses individual spiritual freedom. The Church responds by pointing to other New Testament passages in which scripture itself is represented as one part of the “tradition” handed down from the apostles and thus from Christ and the Holy Spirit. The Council of Trent explicitly asserts “libris scriptis et sine scripto traditionibus” (written books and unwritten tradition) as joint sources of
divine authority. But Protestant scholars work to widen the gap between the two, developing philological tools by which to cleanse those same written books from the corruptions of scribal and oral tradition.5

The Reformation critique of tradition is developed by Enlightenment philosophers. In 1682, Locke argues that the reliance of "the Jews, the Romanists, and the Turks" on tradition to interpret scripture results from a "defect of language" that makes the authority of the past inherently unreliable. Tradition is thus easily abused by power: hence the necessity of a turn towards natural religion as grasped by individual reason. David Hume and Adam Ferguson explain that traditions are adapted in the retelling to the needs of the present so that the historical fact contained in them erodes from generation to generation. In general, as Bauman and Briggs demonstrate, Enlightenment critics construct an understanding of tradition as the negative mirror to an ideal of transparent language, purified and stabilized and subject not to the test of authority but that of reason and the senses.6

Romantic thinkers, in turn, secularize the Catholic defense of tradition, now the fount of access not to divine truth but to the Volksgeist. Herder speaks of language and tradition as stemming not from a priesthood but from the Volk as a whole, though only the lower classes have kept faith in the modern period. Henceforth the referent of the word folk will veer uneasily between class and nation. From the Grimms' famous account of Dorothea Viehmann to the influential work of Richard Weiss, this counter-Enlightenment discourse will characterize the common people not by their intellectual submission to priestly authority but by their Traditionsgläubigkeit, fidelity to tradition: the vehicle is now itself sacred. Herder and his followers treat tradition not as a process of corruption, but as a dynamic process of individual assimilation, and more broadly as the vital life course of an organism, the nation. Herder further explains that oral tradition does not obstruct direct sensory perception but rather provides an inherited explanatory context for it, developing in active response to a given lifeworld. This debate—tradition as an instrument of oppression imposed from above versus tradition as an active force of self-creation organically engaged with the environment—will continue to inform modern scholarship as well as modern politics. Crucially, both the denouncers and the proponents construe tradition as vulnerable to disturbance. Thus it will be increasingly associated with social actors
on the defensive and invoked in projects of reaction or revindication rather than as the idiom of ascendant power.\(^7\)

2. Tradition as communication

Scholarship focusing on tradition as a communicative transaction often turns to more apparently objective terms such as “transmission” (English and Romance) or Überlieferung (German); the Finnish school, concerned with geographical spread, referred to “diffusion.” The concern with process fosters a dialectic of attention to global dynamics and single performances.\(^8\)

In the late nineteenth century folklore theory in northern Europe moves generally from a model of tradition as inheritance (the Grimms and other Romantic nationalists) to one of migration, with tradition spreading in waves from its point of creation (Benfey, followed by the Finnish school). Von Sydow’s critique marked the transition to a functionalist approach emphasizing the adaptation of tradition to a local ecology, which fostered its stability and resistance to outside influences. Von Sydow’s attention to the differential importance of social roles, milieu, paths, and situations in the spread of tradition was developed by Goldstein and others and fully realized in Schenda’s complex history of oral narrative in modern Europe. Studies of individual performers and of families began to examine the role of biography and of small-group dynamics. The turn to context in the 1960s and ‘70s showed that ritual settings might favor the retention of archaic elements while more ludic situations encouraged free reworkings of tradition. Oral historians began to understand narratives of the past as community process in the present, which both conditioned their evidentiary status and might even transcend it. American folklorists started to concentrate on single performances of tradition as active and often agonistic transactions among participants, insisting on creativity in the moment, while scholars working on professional storytelling traditions began to study the mechanisms of apprenticeship.\(^9\)

Attention to specific oral genres provided deeper insight into the tradition process. Jakobson and the Prague structuralists identified both parallelism and a special relationship of langue and parole as distinctive features of oral tradition. Scholars of epic, taking their cue from the Homeric question, began to explore the logic of orality, with Parry and Lord formulating the influential oral-formulaic theory of
composition, later developed, modified, and challenged by Finnegans, Honko, Nagy, Foley, and others. The enduring contribution of this school was to validate tradition as “multiform,” existing in its varying realizations rather than decaying from a single Ur-form. French Africanist scholarship and the American ethnopoetics debate, emphasizing the internal organization of oral texts, provided further models, and classicists and medievalists developed notions of mimesis and *mouvance* as integral to oral poetic process.\(^\text{10}\)

Legend and rumor provided a focus for closer attention to social networks and dynamics in oral transmission. Sociological, psychological, and communications studies as well as folkloristic work proliferated after the Second World War, profiting by the currency of these protornarrative forms in contemporary society. Following the pioneering work of Bartlett, Anderson attempted to validate his “law of self-correction” experimentally, claiming that a normative version of the text stabilizes as each listener synthesizes the variants heard from different sources. Several scholars attempted to reproduce or improve his experiments. Dégh and Vászonyi formulated an alternative “multi-conduit hypothesis”: tradition follows conduits constituted of like-minded individuals that tend to conserve normal form. An important body of scholarship followed, examining the role of social networks, social difference, and political contexts in the transmission of rumor and legend. The scientistic bent of the earlier work continues in other applications of psychological methods to the study of oral memory and more recently of cognitive science and evolutionary theory seeking to understand what makes culture stick; the theory of memes was recently applied by Zipes to the classic *Zaubermärchen* or magical fairy tale.\(^\text{11}\)

Märchen scholarship has, however, taken a different path because of the visibility of the literary tradition. Röhrich, Schenda, Lavinio, and others have long examined the interplay of oral and literary transmission, and Ziolkowski argues that this interaction was vital to the medieval diffusion of folktales. Assuming the extremist position of Wesselski, Bottigheimer has asserted not merely the literary but the single-authored origin of the “rise tale.” Zipes, Bacchilega, Tatar, and many others have explored the modern literary and cinematic transmission of the fairy tale, showing how individual authorship, new media, and changing social contexts reshape traditional material. Indeed, Bausinger—followed by many studies of folklore in new media—shows folklore expanding to fill the new environment of the
“technical world,” and Uther et al. argue specifically for a boom in the Zaubermärchen, thanks to the multiplicity of channels of transmission: film, comics, cartoons, local monuments and tourist performance, self-help and therapeutic movements, celebrity culture, advertising, the storytelling movement, and literary reworkings. A more general literature explores the centrality of mediation and objectification to cultural transmission.12

Many studies challenged the degeneration hypothesis by challenging narrative form as a criterion of successful transmission. Coffin and Paredes argue that the ballad sloughs off its narrative content as the historical incident that gave it birth loses its relevance, retaining a lyric “emotional core.” Dégh, followed by others, shows that contemporary legend is typically co-constructed in debate or acted out in ostension rather than told as a well-formed narrative. Even the Zaubermärchen does not persist in well-formed narratives alone: Schacker demonstrates that in nineteenth-century England the normative form of the tale was domesticated in children’s literature while its subversive potential was maintained in popular pantomime. Conrad argues that the full texts of the best-known Zaubermärchen have become merely background to an intertextual universe of transmission through advertisement, celebrity journalism, and other cultural references.13

The larger thrust of recent American scholarship has been to unfold the “natural history of discourse.” A dialectic of contextualization and entextualization—the formalizing and framing processes that convert a segment of discourse into a bounded reproducible object—moves traditions in and out of steady states. Metacultures of tradition or of newness accelerate cultural objects into circulation. Whereas earlier scholarship assumed continuity and tried to explain change, today flux is assumed and it is stability for which we must account.14

3. Tradition as temporal ideology

The idea that tradition has been handed down through time sometimes differentiates the concept from broader conceptions of cultural transmission. It implies separation as well as continuity: in Hungarian, hagyomány, the word for tradition, refers to both a bequest and a divorce. The theory of tradition is elaborated in tandem with the theory of modernity, to which it provides the binary contrast. Tradition is thought inevitably to decline as modernity rises; both cannot occupy a common
space. Within modernity, isolated traditions can be identified as relics or survivals signaling the distance of the present from a lost lifeworld. Neither traditions nor their bearers are admitted to coevalness with the modern subject.¹⁵

This devolutionary premise promotes two kinds of reactions, both calling for salvage fieldwork. Nationalists, following Herder, collect traditions in order to save them: they cannot be allowed to die because they are the spirit of the people. Rather, they must be restored from their fragmentary form among the peasantry to an integrated whole in modern form—that is, printed text—that can be recirculated across the nation. They will at the same time be “purified” of presumed corruptions and made suitable for a more refined age (the Grimms) or restored to their “authentic” national form after foreign overlays (the Greeks), often reworked into a standard language to foster national integration around common texts (e.g., Asbjørnsen and Moe’s Norske Folkeeventyr). The middle classes are key agents of this transformation as well as its intended audience, and their intervention is authorized by the organic ideology of the nation: they too are Volk.¹⁶

Evolutionists, such as the British anthropologists who followed Tylor, would declare the necessity of documenting tradition for scholarship while eradicating it in practice, both in the colonies and among the lower classes. “The science of Tradition” proclaimed by Hartland in 1899 demanded not the sympathetic participation but the objective distance of the scholar-observer. At the same time, this scientific approach laid emphasis on accurate transcription that would not interfere with the evidentiary status of the material. To be sure, the metadiscursive practices declaring the transparent folk status of the recorded text were employed by Romantic folklorists as well; either way, traditional process was not allowed visibly to disrupt access to traditional content.¹⁷

Sociologists elaborated theories of a great divide between modernity and its predecessor: Marx’s three-stage model identifying tradition with feudalism, the Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft of Tönnies, the mechanical and organic solidarities of Durkheim. Max Weber’s ideal types of traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal authority would have a long afterlife in the sociological commonplace of the “traditional society,” imagined as based in inherited positions, stable hierarchies, and personal ties. U.S.-led post-conflict reconstruction and economic development programs from 1918 into the twenty-first
century would apply a presumed universal checklist of features charting the transition from traditional society to liberal democracy; the Soviets had a comparable checklist for the advance to socialism. Other great divide theories, informed by Enlightenment linguistic ideology, defined traditional mentalities or language as a distinct ideal type: Lévy-Bruhl postulated primitive thought as mystical and participatory rather than logical and Lévi-Strauss proposed his famous distinction between “bricolage” and “engineering” as rooted in different relationships to environment, an argument later historicized by Scott. Weber’s typology was transmuted into discursive context by Habermas in his “ideal speech situation” and with a Marxist bent by Maurice Bloch, who argued that traditional authority was sustained by discursive and performative formalizations impeding referential understanding. Havelock found a comparable divide between traditional poetics and classical philosophical discourse in ancient Greece.18

Folklore scholarship from the mid-nineteenth century forward was often elaborated in opposition to the modernizers, typically in alliance with conservative politics. The semantic associations of tradition with respect and duty promoted “traditionalism” as a defensive posture in both religion and politics arguing for the submission of the people to authority. National tradition was defined as pious and patriarchal, in part to discredit workers’ movements as foreign and inauthentic. A folk in danger of seduction by such movements as well as by modern consumerism, or demographically threatened by immigration, was encouraged and policed in its traditions, often taught how to perform them authentically. Like the European avant-garde in general, left and right, Fascist movements drew their immediate activist energies from an ahistorical primitivism rather than from the proximate traditional culture. Nonetheless, Fascist regimes cultivated folklore scholarship and encouraged the “folk”—that is, the working classes—to be faithful to their traditions, supporting these through organized corporate activities. On the other side, socialist and popular-front regimes, while in their initial stages often rejecting tradition wholesale as “feudal,” found it a necessary tool for communicating with and mobilizing the masses. They too created curators of tradition to purge it of ideological contamination, identify its genuinely popular and progressive aspects, and compose new texts on traditional models.19

Popular traditionalism arises in contexts of stress from rapid transformations of the lifeworld. In a manner open to denunciation
by scholars as Folklorismus, provincial Western communities develop custodial institutions in defense of tradition, merging insider and scholarly perspectives and actively reconstructing traditions perceived as decayed. Although often proclaiming a localism free of any larger ideology, in practice traditionalism takes a political tinge in opposition to the perceived prevailing ethos. American conservative populism makes much of “traditional values” and the “traditional family” as regulatory mechanisms, but tradition has a liberating valence in many decolonizing, indigenous, and post-Soviet societies subjected to disruptive modernizing regimes and the stigma of backwardness. In reaction to a perceived detraditionalization, new regimes will institute “oral literature” in the curriculum, undertake active revivals that bring about a charismatic and sometimes traumatic return of presumably repressed tradition, restructure legal systems according to “custom,” reconstruct epics as the basis of national unity, and once again set out to purify traditions of foreign influences, as if romantic nationalism had never been challenged.20

Civil rights movements, anticolonial movements, and postfascist Vergangenheitsbewältigung have a transformative impact on conceptions of tradition among academic folklorists. A discipline newly suspicious of both romanticism and empiricism undergoes its own 1968. Younger folklorists turn away from the humanities and toward the social sciences as model. They begin to seek an authentically contemporary subject, resorting first to immigrant and urban traditions. Later they seek to dissociate themselves from tradition altogether, sometimes with changes of name emphasizing communicative processes in the present: “folklore” to “ethnology” or Empirische Kulturwissenschaft; “oral tradition” to “verbal art.” Ben-Amos’ celebrated 1967 redefinition of folklore as “artistic communication in small groups” explicitly rejects both tradition and oral transmission as criteria. Bauman’s introduction to Toward New Perspectives in Folklore lauds “creativity and innovation” in scholarship and repeatedly characterizes the “tradition” of folklore studies as ossified and restrictive. American folklorists wrestling with their own Oedipal “anxiety of influence” turned away from the seemingly conservative domestic-based traditions of rural America studied by their predecessors toward the transgressive street culture of young African-American men, inaugurating a long romance with all that is not pure but creolized, not normative but carnivalesque, not of the heartland but of the borderland, and not submissive but resistant, In the
performance turn, American folklorists embraced charismatic rather than traditional authority as the fount of the field’s authenticity.\textsuperscript{21}

German folklorists, unable to slough off history or imagine an authentic subject position, turned directly to an often ironic reassessment of the disciplinary past, with Moser, Bausinger, Brückner, Scharfe, Köstlin, and others interrogating the taken-for-granted concepts of continuity, tradition, and even the much-abhorred Folklorismus. Bausinger and Köstlin note that the holistic conceptual superstructure of tradition emerges as a compensation for the apparently fragmented and residual character of its empirical referent. Generally in this work there is a push not to purify the disciplinary object of scholarly, commercial, or political influences, but to recognize these as integral to the inquiry, themselves part of the tradition of tradition in Western culture.\textsuperscript{22}

A less sophisticated but more contagious formulation came in 1983 with Hobsbawm and Ranger’s \textit{The Invention of Tradition}, a collection of historical essays arguing that the nineteenth century became a key ideological moment in which social custom was made self-conscious and modified or invented outright by nation-states and colonial powers. The former sought to construct national identity or pacify their working classes with mass-produced traditions, while the latter attempted to legitimize their rule through supposedly indigenous rites of sovereignty adapted to the putative understanding of a non-modern society. Innumerable case studies followed, sometimes as part of a critique of a current nationalist project and often with a debunking tone; a comparable impulse in Märchen studies may be found in Ellis’ challenge to the authenticity of the Grimms’ texts. In the 1990s, Nora’s monumental study of \textit{lieux de mémoire}, with a volume devoted to tradition, provides a less polemic model for future scholarship.\textsuperscript{23}

Partially in response to this broader intellectual attention, American folklorists began to catch up to the Germans in their reexamination of disciplinary history. But in a political climate of emerging multiculturalism and the turn of many university-trained folklorists to the public sector, it was necessary to rehabilitate the concept of tradition rather than scrutinize it under a critical lens. Dell Hymes had already argued in 1975 that “traditionalization” was a basic cultural process, in which all people selected valued aspects of the past for cultural attention and custodianship. Others sought to democratize Hobsbawm and Ranger, arguing that communities themselves continually reinterpreted the
past for present purposes, staging their culture for themselves and others. This emphasis on conscious manipulation both rejected the old idea of the folk as mindless “tradition-bearers” and distinguished tradition from such broader conceptions as mimesis, reproduction, and habitus, all terms that still seemed to reproach ordinary people for a lack of self-aware agency. Rather than “invention,” the term “appropriation” came to be favored in English-language scholarship to recognize the agonistic dimension of the handover of tradition: power takes over the symbolic forms of the subaltern, while individuals borrow from the larger culture and make it their own.24

But the folk in question tended not to welcome this constructivist turn, which seemed to impute untruthfulness. Sometimes more than reputation was at stake in the reinterpretation: the historical narratives of indigenous communities often served as the basis for claims to land and other resources, just as the testimonial narratives of indigenous peoples and refugees were the only available evidence of persecution, each in the absence of documentation. Both types of narrative lost evidentiary status in Western institutions when they were shown by scholars to be actively shaped according to generic conventions. The equally well-developed scholarly critique of documentary evidence finds less resonance in a world that depends on documents to maintain order and in which tradition has so long been discredited. In a material world, subaltern actors often find it necessary to invoke a positivist epistemology.25

While the main tendency of scholarship has been to examine the modernity of the category of tradition, several other streams reject the great divide altogether. Thus, for example, local traditions are shown to gain vitality, distinctiveness, and formal elaboration with the growth of trade in early modern Europe; the Zaubermärchen is less a survival of pagan myth than a narrative of entry into capitalism; colonized societies recuperate their historical experience into established oral genres; and, most consequentially, indigenous traditions can be mobilized to legitimate new practices and construct “alternative modernities.”26

Just as the traditional is modern, so the modern is traditional. A Durkheimian sociological tradition shows ritual to be as central to the nation-state and global community as it is to “traditional societies,” and myth is also a recognized instrument of modernity. Quintessentially modern institutions of science, politics, and law have been shown to depend on habit and precedent as much as on codified protocols. La-
tour argues that all self-consciously modern forms are in fact hybrids. Just like oral narrative, single-authored literary texts call on precursors, generic horizons, intertexts, and inherited discursive resources bearing the resonance of prior uses. Avant-gardes endlessly replace themselves in a “tradition of the new.” A “metaculture of newness” is made viable through the reproduction of familiar commodities beneath the framing, creating in fact less cultural flexibility than in a “metaculture of tradition” that assumes continuity. Closely examined, all culture is recycled.27

4. Tradition as communal property

Popular traditionalism points us to a final tension in the concept—that between identity and commodity. Just as in the traditio of Roman law, conceptions of folk tradition are not purely processual, but give material form to human relationships. The great epic compilations such as the Kalevala and the great tale collections such as the Kinder- und Hausmärchen and the Biblioteca delle tradizioni popolari siciliane provided an encapsulation, an “objective correlative” to the nations they sought to bring into being. But the vehicle that turned the national treasure into common property was the printed book, a commodity exchanged for money and not dependent for its diffusion on face-to-face relations with their attendant social control. The anxiety over folklore’s authenticity was in direct proportion to its easy alienability in a capitalist economy.28

Tradition’s specificity, passing per manus between particular senders and receivers, attached it early to conceptions of cultural identity, and this association is perhaps its most automatic today. In early modern usage, traditions are mentioned in relation to a given social group or locality: their circulation is understood as restricted. As modern thinkers begin to privilege the rationality of educated European men, tradition is sociologized, understood as proper to women, children, the rural population, and ethnic minorities. For some scholars this is a trickle-down inheritance from elites, as in Naumann’s gesunkenes Kulturgut. Gramsci understands folklore as the heterogeneous scraps of learning salvaged and kept over time by people in a scarce-resource cultural environment. His Italian followers will assert that folk tradition retains ancient practices in rejection of an oppressive social order in the present. Less concerned with peasants as keepers of the past, Chicago sociology understands the peasant community as a “part-society”
whose “little tradition” stands in a contemporaneous but dependent relationship to the “great tradition” of the metropolis. Boasian cultural relativism, enhanced by concern for the cognitive dignity of the folk, will have a stronger effect on American folkloristics, encouraging the representation of “folk communities” as coherent and autonomous and oral genres as organized in an integrated system. This functionalist scholarly discourse in fact is calqued upon the normative discourse of peasant communities, which privileges the cohesive authority of the elders.29

But fieldworkers’ practical dilemmas often reveal the presence of gendered traditions, women in same-sex gatherings telling stories distinct from those of men. These separate traditions can display quite a different evaluation of women’s roles from the male discourse formerly taken as normative, and low-status women’s folktale may even demonstrate a rejection of dominant ethical and cosmological understandings. Traditional modes of expression, with their lack of easy referential transparency, could be seen to provide women, slaves, serfs, and colonial subjects with a code allowing not only the expression of discontent but even direct challenges to authority without fear of reprisal. The same could be said for local communities, for whom self-conscious local tradition became an important vehicle of political communication to the metropolis as early as the seventeenth century. Folk voice, constrained as it was, could provide a vehicle for entry into the public sphere for actors not entitled to speak with Habermasian freedom.30

Folk voice offered commercial as well as political opportunities. Already in the eighteenth century, European peddlers and migrant laborers knew the value of traditional performance as a marketing tool. Middle-class cultural entrepreneurs also learned how to “distress” traditional poetic forms with signs of archaism and indigeneity to appeal to a market. Bourgeois Europeans took their holidays from modernity in those peripheral regions in which the national essence was said to reside, and tradition, objectified along with landscape and antiquities as Erbe, patrimoine, or heritage, became valuable to the development of a tourist trade.31

The paradoxes of heritage are well understood: it recuperates a dead tradition of the lifeworld (or even kills off a living one) in order to bring it to a second life in print, in the museum, or onstage. There the tradition no longer serves ordinary social purposes but is an ob-
ject of veneration in its own right, a monument of cultural identity; its form, “protected” from decay or corruption, becomes frozen in time. It has often been observed that representations expand as the lifeworld contracts, and tradition became increasingly visible as a folk concept in rural Europe as populations and opportunities moved to the cities. Just as a would-be nation justified itself by demonstrating the existence of an autonomous culture, so smaller communities asserted their distinctiveness and antiquity against a perceived existential threat. The consequent intensity of rural traditionalizing has encouraged groups of scholars in the Nordic countries, Occitania, and elsewhere to propose that the proper scope of the concept of tradition is not cultural continuity per se but this vernacular consciousness and that the object of folklore studies is the “ethnotext,” the local community’s body of discourse about itself. To be sure, now that the folk concept of tradition has found institutional backing in both the multicultural policies of nation-states and the treaties of intergovernmental organizations, the 1968–era critique has become increasingly difficult to articulate in the public realm.³²

Inalienably bound to land and essence as tradition is said to be, the disturbing fact of tradition’s mobility remains. Some communities recognize this as an opportunity. Musical and religious practices are increasingly repackaged as world culture or New Age therapy rather than folk tradition, but control of the profits is difficult. More common is resistance to circulation. The most learned academics can come nearly to blows over the origins of a beloved but migratory tale character such as Nasreddin Hodja, and competitive claims to ownership begin as soon as tradition becomes an economic or a political resource. In the twenty-first century, with folk tradition recognized as an instrument of economic development, these disputes have entered the legal realm. Some Latin American and African governments have attempted to mobilize the quintessentially modern tool of intellectual property to solve the problem of tradition’s alienability: with copyright they can both own it and sell it. Indigenous groups, more concerned with protecting their integrity, are exploring the legal concept of moral rights to prevent even well-meaning outsiders from having access to secret traditions; and entrepreneurial India, selling yoga and pharmaceuticals to the world, is creating a “prior art” database to preserve the prerogative of developing its traditional knowledge into commodity form. Not even the Brothers Grimm are immune: entered
into UNESCO’s “Memory of the World” registry as universal treasures in 2005, the Kinder- und Hausmärchen became the subject of bitter dispute in Kassel between a tourist authority seeking to promote them as a city trademark and a museum trying to preserve them as sacred heritage. The World Intellectual Property Organization, charged with mediating among all such initiatives, is struggling with how to define ownership across the loose networks in which traditions travel and how to fix intangible processes into objects whose reproduction can be controlled. As it was for the ancient Romans, traditio has once more become a question of property.33

So much for the encyclopedic view. What about carving a clean and usable notion of tradition out of this shaggy amalgam? If not a definition, I’ll leave you with an image, conjoining as best I can ideology, communication, and property. Since ideological concepts demand a scene of origin, let us return to that Roman act of tradition: the hand-to-hand transfer of—something. A practice, a body of knowledge, a genre, a song, anything sufficiently framed and internally structured to be entextualizable or objectified or named: in Urban’s term, a cultural object. Let us agree that what is being transferred through the object is not in the first instance authority, which fetishizes the giver, nor property, which fetishizes the object while eventually debasing it into a commodity. Rather, the transfer is of responsibility. For many of us this term is tied to the famous Hymes-Bauman definition of performance as “the acceptance of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence.” More than that, it resonates with the awareness of every performer I’ve ever encountered that the tradition is not at bottom either a badge of pride or an inheritance to display but a job that must be done. Performers may hope to hand on their knowledge to inheritors authorized by blood or formal affiliation, but above all they look for those who will be willing and competent to do the work. That hand-to-hand transfer we may take as a metaphor for the transmission of metaknowledge along with the practice itself: what it means, how it is to be used, everything that is shaven off when it is packaged as a product or an entry in a database.

Recall the Roman requirement of conscious intention on the part of both giver and receiver. In that touching of hands, real or virtual, responsibility is assumed towards both past and future as personified in particular individuals. The receiver must respect, but the giver must let go. The constraint is thus mutual, as is the room for maneuver. As an ideal type of social transaction, we can contrast tradition to the total control of authoritative institutions (including inheritance) and the total freedom of commodity circulation. Both
of the latter, while not uniquely modern, are fantasies modernity chose not to recognize as such, attempting both to naturalize them in language and realize them in practice. Both are easily discredited, though not easily dismantled. It is tempting to propose that tradition is foundational, closer to the ground of both cultural process and actor consciousness than are accounts of institutions or commodities. Interaction, we could argue, precedes both system and item.

But that would be to treat our own fantasies in turn as transparent representations or transcendent ideals. We know where that leads. Rather, assuming responsibility to our own past and our own hoped-for future, we have a particular body of knowledge and metaknowledge to transmit. Unavoidably constrained by its own dispersed and often stigmatized tradition, our accumulated disciplinary knowledge offers some insight into the nature of hand-to-hand transfers.

The Ohio State University
Columbus

Acknowledgements

My thanks to the two anonymous JFR readers and Moira Smith, to Ulrich Marzolph of the Enzyklopädie des Märchens, and, for linguistic assistance, to Dan Collins and Margaret Mills.

Notes

Note from author: “Tradition” has throughout been abbreviated as “t.”

1. See Noyes ed. 2005 for my first approach to this question.


References Cited

Abrahams, Roger D.
1993 “Phantoms of Romantic Nationalism in Folkloristics.” Journal of American Folklore 106:3–37

Abrahams, Roger D., ed., and George Foss, music ed.

Alexander, Jeffrey C., ed.

Allan, George.

Allport, Gordon, and Leo Postman

Anderson, Walter
1951 Ein volkskundliches Experiment (Folklore Fellows Communications 141). Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia.

Anttonen, Pertti

Arias, Arturo, ed.

Asadowskij, Mark
1926 Eine sibirische Märchenerzählerin (Folklore Fellows Communications 68). Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia.

Babcock, Barbara, ed.
Bacchilega, Cristina  

Balina, Marina, Helena Goscilo, and Mark Lipovetsky, eds.  

Baron, Robert, and Ana Cara, eds.  

Barthes, Roland  

Bartlett, F. C.  

Bauman, Richard  


Bauman, Richard, and Roger D. Abrahams, eds.  

Bauman, Richard, and Charles L. Briggs  


Bausinger, Hermann  


Bausinger, Hermann, ed.  


Bausinger, Hermann, and Wolfgang Brückner, eds.  

Ben-Amos, Dan  


Bender, Mark  
Bendix, Regina
Bendix, Regina, and Dorothy Noyes, eds.
Bendix, Regina, and Gisela Welz, eds.
Bendix, Reinhard
Blackmore, Susan
Bloch, Maurice
Bloom, Harold
Bogatyrev, Petr, and Roman Jakobson
Bohmer, Carol, and Amy Shuman
Bolter, Jay David, and Richard Grusin
Bottigheimer, Ruth
Bourdieu, Pierre
Bouvier, Jean-Claude, ed.
Bowen, John
Boyer, Pascal
Braun, Rudolf
Briggs, Charles L.
1999 “Rethinking the Public: Folklore and the Contestation of Public Cultures.” In Bendix and Welz, eds., 283–86.

Bronner, Simon J.

Bronner, Simon J., ed.

Brown, Michael

Brückner, Wolfgang, ed.
1971 *Falkensteiner Protokolle.* Frankfurt am Main: Universitätsverlag.

Calame-Griaule, Geneviève

Calvin, Jean
1560 *Institution de la religion Chrétienne,* XIII. Geneva.

Cantwell, Robert

Carril, Ángel, and Ángel B. Espina Barrio.
2001 *Tradición: cien respuestas a una pregunta.* Salamanca: Diputación de Salamanca.

Cassirer, Ernst

Cid, Jesús Antonio

Coffin, Tristram P.

Colovic, Ivan

Concilium Tridentinum
1546 IV, Decretum de Canonicis Scripturis.
Congar, Yves  

Conrad, JoAnn  

Coombe, Rosemary  

Dayan, Daniel and Elihu Katz  

Debray, Régis  

Dégh, Linda  

Dégh, Linda and Andrew Vászonyi  

De Grazia, Victoria  

Del Giudice, Luisa  


Dow, James and Hannjost Lixfeld, eds. and trans.  

Dundes, Alan  


Dundes, Alan, and Carl Pagter  
1975 *Urban Folklore from the Paperwork Empire.* Austin: University of Texas Press.

Durkheim, Émile  
1897 *De la division du travail social.* Paris.

Eliot, T. S.  
Ellis, Bill
Ellis, John M.

Fabian, Johannes

Falassi, Alessandro

Feld, Steven

Ferguson, Adam

Fine, Gary Alan, Chip Heath, and Véronique Campion-Vincent

Finnegan, Ruth

Foley, John Miles

Foster, Roy

Gaonkar, D. P., ed.

Geiger, Klaus, Utz Jeggle, and Gottfried Korff, eds.

Glassie, Henry

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von

Goldstein, Kenneth S.
Gossen, Gary  

Grabar, André  

Grafton, Anthony  

Gramsci, Antonio  

Green, Archie  

Green, Richard Firth  

Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm  

Habermas, Jurgen  

Hafstein, Valdimar Tr.  


Handler, Richard  

Handler, Richard, and Jocelyn Linnekin  

Hanson, F. Allan.  

Harkin, Michael E., ed.  

Harlow, Ilana, ed.  
Hartland, Edwin Sidney  

Havelock, Eric  

Heelas, Paul, Scott Lash, and Paul Morris, eds.  

Hejaiej, Mounia  

Hemme, Dorothee  

Hemme, Dorothee, Markus Tauschek and Regina Bendix, eds.  

Herder, Johann Gottfried  
1778 Über die Wirkung der Dichtkunst auf die Sitten der Völker in alten und neuen Zeiten. Munich: Münchner Akademie.


Herzfeld, Michael  

Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger, eds.  

Hofer, Tamás  


Holbek, Bengt  

Holmes, Douglas R.  

Honko, Lauri, ed.  

2000 Thick Corpus, Organic Variation and Textuality in Oral Tradition (Studia Fen-nica Folkloristica 7.) Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura.

Honko, Lauri, and Orvar Löfgren, eds.  
Honko, Lauri, and Pekka Laaksonen, eds.  

Hoppàl, Mihaly  

Hume, David  
1757 *Natural History of Religion.*

Hymes, Dell  


Jacobeit, Wolfgang  

Jaffee, Martin  

Jakobson, Roman  

Jauss, Hans Robert  

Jeggle, Utz, and Gottfried Korff  


Juaristi, Juan  

Keesing, Roger M  

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara  


1998b *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage.* Berkeley 1998


Klein, Barbro  
Klusen, Ernst  

Köstlin, Konrad  

Kristeva, Julia  

Krohn, Kaarle  
1926  Die folkloristische Arbeitsmethode. Oslo.

Krygier, Martin  

Lanternari, Vittorio  

Latour, Bruno  

Lavinio, Cristina  

Lerner, Daniel  

Lévi-Strauss, Claude  

Lévy-Bruhl, Lucien  

Lindahl, Carl  

Lixfeld, Hannjost, ed.  

Locke, John  

Lombardi-Satriani, Luigi  

Lord, Albert  

Marfany, Joan Lluís  
Marx, Karl
1867 Das Kapital. Hamburg.

Marzolph, Ulrich

Mathias, Elizabeth, and Richard Raspa, eds.

Mauzé, Marie, ed.

Melanchthon, Philip
1530 Augsburger Konfession.

Mills, Margaret


Mohrmann, Ruth

Morin, Edgar

Moser, Hans

Mullen, Patrick B.

Nagy, Gregory

Naithani, Sadhana

Naumann, Hans

Nora, Pierre, ed.

Noyes, Dorothy


Noyes, Dorothy, ed.


Oakeshott, Michael


Oberman, Heiko Augustinus


Ó Giolláin, Diarmuid


Oinas, Felix J., ed.


Oring, Elliott


Ortiz, Carmen


Otten, Bernard J.


Paredes, Américo


Paredes, Américo, and Richard Bauman, eds.

1972 *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Paredes, Américo, and Ellen J. Stekert, eds.

1971 *The Urban Experience and Folk Tradition*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Pelikan, Jaroslav


Pentikäinen, Juha


Philips, Mark Salber, and Gordon Schochet, eds.

2004 *Questions of Tradition*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Pieper, Josef

Polanyi, Michael

Portelli, Alessandro

Pouillon, Jean

Prats, Llorenç

Prior, Daniel

Radner Joan N., and Susan Lanser, eds.

Ramanujan, A. K.

Redfield, Robert

Reynolds, Dwight

Richl, Wolfgang
1851  *Die bürgerliche Gesellschaft*. Stuttgart.

Roberts, Leonard

Röhrich, Lutz

Rosenberg, Harold

Rosnow, Ralph L, and Gary Alan Fine

Rubin, David
Rüütel, Ingrid, and Kristin Kuutma, eds.
1996  *The Family as the Tradition Carrier: Nordic-Baltic-Finno-Ugric Conference*. Tallinn: Folklore Department, Institute of the Estonian Languages and Nordic Institute of Folklore.

Saeed, Abdullah

Salomone-Marino, Salvatore
1879  *Costumi e usanze dei contadini di Sicilia*. Palermo: Forni.

Sandars, T. C.

Schacker, Jennifer

Scharfe, Martin

Schenda, Rudolf


Schneider, Jane

Scott, James C.

Shepherd, Eric
2007  *A Pedagogy of Culture Based on a Chinese Storytelling Tradition*. PhD. diss., The Ohio State University.

Shibutani, Tamotsu

Shils, Edward

Silverstein, Michael, and Greg Urban, eds.

Singer, Milton
Sperber, Dan, and Deidre Wilson  

Spivak, Gayatri C.  

Stewart, Susan  

Tatar, Maria  

Taussig, Michael  

Tedlock, Dennis  

Thomas, Gerald  

Tonkin, Elizabeth  

Tönnies, Ferdinand  

Torras i Bages, Josep  
1892  *La tradició catalana*. Barcelona: Trask, Haunani-Kay.


Tuleja, Tad, ed.  

Turner, Patricia Ann  

Turner, Stephen  

Urban, Greg  

Uther, Hans-Jörg, ed.  

Vansina, Jan  
Velasco, Honorio  

von Sydow, Carl W.  

wa-Mungai, Mbugua  

Weiss, Richard  

Wesselski, Albert  

Westerman, William  

Whisnant, David  

White, Luise  

Williams, Raymond  

Willis, Paul  

Wilson, William A.  
1976 Folklore and Nationalism in Modern Finland. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

World Intellectual Property Organization, Intergovernmental Committee on Traditional Knowledge, Genetic Resources and Traditional Cultural Expressions/Folklore, http://www.wipo.int/tk/en/

Zanic, Ivo  

Ziff, Bruce H., and P. V. Rao  

Ziolkowski, Jan  
Dorothy Noyes is Associate Professor of English and Comparative Studies and Director of the Center for Folklore Studies at the Ohio State University. She studies the traditional public sphere in Romance-speaking Europe, the social organization of vernacular creativity, and the careers of sociocultural concepts. (noyes.10@osu.edu)