Tradition, Genuine or Spurious

Like many scholarly concepts, "tradition" is at once a commonsense and a scientific category. In its commonsense meaning, tradition refers to an inherited body of customs and beliefs. In the social sciences, an ongoing discourse has attempted to refine this understanding of tradition as it has proven empirically and theoretically inadequate. Recent efforts to clarify the concept of tradition, most notably those of Edward Shils (1971, 1981), do much to add nuance to our conventional understanding but leave unresolved a major ambiguity: does tradition refer to a core of inherited culture traits whose continuity and boundedness are analogous to that of a natural object, or must tradition be understood as a wholly symbolic construction? We will argue that the latter is the only viable understanding—a conclusion we have arrived at by comparing our independent investigations in two quite disparate ethnographic situations. In our attempts to analyze national and ethnic identification in Quebec and Hawaii we have concluded that tradition cannot be defined in terms of boundedness, givenness, or essence. Rather, tradition refers to an interpretive process that embodies both continuity and discontinuity. As a scientific concept, tradition fails when those who use it are unable to detach it from the implications of Western common sense, which presumes that an unchanging core of ideas and customs is always handed down to us from the past.

As many writers have noted (e.g., Eisenstadt 1973; Rudolph and Rudolph 1967; Singer 1972; Tipps 1973), one inadequacy of the conventional understanding of tradition is that it posits a false dichotomy between tradition and modernity as fixed and mutually exclusive states. M. E. Smith (1982) has pointed out that "traditional" and "new" are interpretive rather than descriptive terms: since all cultures change ceaselessly, there can only be what is new, although what is new can take on symbolic value as "traditional." Following Smith's lead, we can see that designating any part of culture as old or new, traditional or modern, has two problematic implications. First, this approach encourages us to see culture and tradition naturalistically, as bounded entities made up of constituent parts that are themselves bounded objects. Second, in this atomistic paradigm we treat culture and its constituents as entities having an essence apart from our interpretation of them; we attempt to specify, for example, which trait is old, which new, and to show how traits fit
together in the larger entities that we call "a culture" and "a tradition." The task of a naturalistic science of tradition is to identify and describe the essential attributes of cultural traits, rather than to understand our own and our subjects' interpretive models. The prevailing understanding of tradition, both in our commonsense notion and in scholarly elaborations of it, embodies these premises.

The naturalistic conception of tradition can be traced to a lineage of Western social-scientific thought that dates at least from Edmund Burke and the reaction to the Enlightenment (Mannheim 1953). The 19th-century concepts of tradition and traditional society, used (whether as ideal types or as empirical generalizations) as a baseline against which to understand social change and "modern society," were embodied in such well-known dichotomies as Maine's status and contract, Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, Durkheim's mechanical and organic solidarity, and, into the 20th century, Sapir's genuine and spurious culture and Redfield's folk-urban continuum. In American anthropology, the received understanding of tradition is exemplified by A. L. Kroeber's classic definition: tradition is the "internal handing on through time" of culture traits (Kroeber 1948:411). Kroeber's definition accords with the commonsense view of tradition as a core of traits handed down from one generation to the next. Kroeber also enunciated premises that have proven tenacious in scholarly discussions of tradition, especially the identification of a society with a particular tradition, and the notion that temporal continuity is the defining characteristic of social identity. Kroeber's concept of tradition found its most logical application in American archaeology, where tradition refers to "single technologies or other unified systems of forms" characterized by "long temporal continuity" (Willey and Phillips 1958:37). The archaeological concept points up the implications of modeling the phenomenon of tradition after natural objects. We would argue that tradition resembles less an artifactual assemblage than a process of thought—an ongoing interpretation of the past.

In contrast to Kroeber's conception of tradition, the merit of Edward Shils's approach is his insistence that tradition changes continually. Shils (1981:19) acknowledges that the unchanging folk society never existed, and is careful to build variation into his definition of traditional phenomena: "they change in the process of transmission as interpretations are made of the tradition presented" (1981:13). Since Shils recognizes that tradition changes incessantly, it is surprising to find that his understanding of tradition depends nonetheless upon the notion of an unchanging, essential core. He thereby perpetuates the naturalistic paradigm, which defines objects by specifying their temporal, spatial, and/or qualitative boundaries. In spite of his insistence that tradition changes ceaselessly, Shils offers an unambiguous, basal definition: "in its barest, most elementary sense . . . it is anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present" (1981:12). To distinguish tradition from "fashion," Shils (1981:15) posits objectively verifiable temporal criteria: "it has to last over at least three generations . . . to be a tradition." Change
itself is discussed in terms of the accretion of new cultural elements that leave other pieces in recognizably unchanged form. As Shils (1981:14) phrases it, the “essential elements” of tradition “persist in combination with other elements which change, but what makes it a tradition is that what are thought to be the essential elements are recognizable . . . as being approximately identical at successive steps.”

The notion of an approximate identity suggests change, however minimal, but if an object changes does it not become something new and different? One way to escape this dilemma is to invoke organic metaphors, to suggest that traditions are like organisms that grow and change while yet remaining themselves. Shils does not resort to this device but, as we will show, the organic analogy is a common element in nationalistic theories of tradition. For the moment we wish only to point out that the notion of approximate identity poses inescapable problems. As David Schneider (1968:67) has suggested, the problem with viewing cultural phenomena naturalistically is that the boundaries of such things are inevitably “fuzzy” for both actors and observers. Having chosen to describe social facts as if they were natural objects, one is embarrassed to find that one cannot definitively bound them in space and time, although such boundedness is necessary to satisfy our understanding of what a natural object is.

Both the scholarly and commonsense understandings of tradition have presumed that a society is identified by its traditions, by a core of teachings handed down from the past. The very identity of a society rests on this continuity of the past with the present. As Shils writes: “It would not be a society if it did not have duration. The mechanisms of reproduction give it the duration which permits it to be defined as a society” (1981:167). Shils does not claim that the legacy of the past is immutable, but he stresses that an essential identity persists over time throughout modifications. This is the fuzzy boundaries problem writ large. In a section titled “The Identity of Societies through Time,” Shils (1981:163) notes that in spite of ceaseless change, “each society remains the same society. Its members do not wake up one morning and discover they are no longer living in, let us say, British society.” This unity over time derives from a shared tradition: “Memory leaves an objective deposit in tradition. . . . It is this chain of memory and of the tradition which assimilates it that enables societies to go on reproducing themselves while also changing” (1981:167).

The notion of an “objective deposit” is fundamental to the commonsense understanding of tradition, and it provides a telling contrast to our view of tradition as symbolically constituted. As much as Shils and other scholars have refined the concept of tradition, the one “ineluctable” fact, to use a word that Shils favors, is that the past leaves some objectively definable inheritance, a “substantive content” (1981:263). Shils’s discussion of the processes of change in tradition reveals the drawbacks of his paradigm, which in spite of its apparent sophistication bears striking resemblance to Kroeber’s historical-particularist model. Shils (1981:273ff.) even invokes the same processes of
change identified by Kroeber: addition, amalgamation, diffusion, absorption, fusion.

Shils recognizes that traditions usually have ideological content, and that views of the past may be changed through self-conscious interpretation. He notes (1981:195) that the "perceived" past is "plastic" and "capable of being retrospectively reformed by human beings living in the present." And he recognizes that nationalist movements often change the traditions they attempt to revive (1981:246). Nonetheless, he differentiates real and "fictitious" traditionality (1981:209). He contrasts nationalist versions of tradition, for example, with "actually existing syncretic traditions" (1981:246). Shils explores the breadth and depth of the received understanding of tradition. Yet, as in the works of prior theorists, tradition in Shils's framework has the qualities of givenness and boundedness. In spite of Shils's insistence that tradition continually changes, there is no doubt that in his formulation a real, essential tradition exists apart from interpretations of that tradition.

It is at this point that we take issue with the naturalistic conception of tradition. We suggest that there is no essential, bounded tradition; tradition is a model of the past and is inseparable from the interpretation of tradition in the present. Undeniably, traditional action may refer to the past, but to "be about" or to refer to is a symbolic rather than natural relationship, and as such it is characterized by discontinuity as well as by continuity (Handler 1984). It is by now a truism that cultural revivals change the traditions they attempt to revive (cf. Linton 1943:231). We would broaden this insight and argue that the invention of tradition is not restricted to such self-conscious projects. Rather, the ongoing reconstruction of tradition is a facet of all social life, which is not natural but symbolically constituted. This conclusion has grown out of our analyses of national and ethnic identification in Quebec and Hawaii. These ethnographic materials offer a range of representations of tradition, from the most self-conscious to the apparently unconscious, from the obviously reconstructive to those that seem to be naively inherited, and therefore genuinely traditional.

Creating Tradition in Quebec

The status of tradition in Quebec can only be understood by reference to the ethnic opposition characteristic of the area since the conquest of New France by the British in 1760. The Conquest doomed (the word is obviously ideologically weighted) French-speaking Quebecois to minority status within Canada, which developed as a predominantly English-language territory. The significance of this minority status lies not in the oppositional quality of Quebecois collective self-definition—after all, most ethnic or national identities are constructed in opposition to collective others—but, rather, in its characteristic defensiveness. Surrounded, as Quebecois say, by a sea of anglophones, ideologies of collective identity have been concerned, from the beginnings of French-Canadian nationalism in the early 19th century, to protect and preserve
national culture and traditions and, indeed, the existence of the group itself.

The relationship in Quebecois nationalist ideology between visions of the nation, on the one hand, and of culture, tradition, and heritage, on the other, is crucial to our thesis. Nationalism in Quebec is not a unitary social fact, and nationalist ideologies have varied and proliferated in relation to changing historical and sociopolitical circumstances (Dion 1975; Fenwick 1981). Yet all versions share an understanding of the nation as a bounded entity whose distinctiveness depends upon national culture, tradition, and heritage. This idea is, of course, deeply ingrained in Western social science as well as in nationalist thought; collective units, be they nations, cultures, or ethnic groups, are envisioned as consisting of all those individual human beings, and only those, who share sufficient traits, traditions, and values both to bind them socially and to distinguish them culturally from outsiders. Such shared features are thought to produce a field of social interaction that is integrated and a cultural distinctiveness characteristic both of individual culture-bearers and of the collectivity. In this ideological perspective, shared culture and traditions establish the nation as a bounded unit, creating national distinctiveness which in turn both demonstrates and guarantees national existence. As Quebecois informants phrased it, “we are a nation because we have a culture.”

This indigenous insight is central to the analysis that follows, which is based upon fieldwork carried out between 1976 and 1983. This research focused on Quebecois conceptions of national identity, with attention both to ideologically self-conscious discourse and to the more informal perceptions of people in daily life. As fieldwork progressed it became clear that people’s understanding of “nation” in relation to “culture,” “tradition,” and “heritage” was a crucial element in their construction of a national identity. In their discussions they relied upon a series of metaphors that establish national boundedness as the boundedness of a natural object. These naturalistic metaphors are used at three levels of abstraction in reference to: (1) the collectivity as an entity, a “collective individual,” as Louis Dumont has called it (1970:33); (2) the collectivity as a “collection of individuals” (Dumont 1970:33); and (3) the human individuals who, in their capacity as culture-bearers, constitute the collective individual. Metaphors of the collective individual as a living creature are common both in ideological pronouncements and in less self-conscious discourse. For example, people speak of national will, soul, and destiny, or speak of the nation as a tree, a knight, a peasant, and so on. Such metaphors endow the nation with the boundedness and integrity of an organism, suggesting, in particular, the ability to make political choices as a unified collectivity. Thus when Quebecois speak of the nation as a living creature they create a rhetorically powerful sense of a complete and self-contained entity set off equally against its environment (in this case, the national territory) and other such entities (other nations).

Envisioning the nation as a collection of individuals, Quebecois have recourse to a second naturalistic metaphor, that of the national species—“l’homo québécaensis” (Rioux 1974:3). In this metaphor, the nation is a
natural type, or species, and each individual member of the nation is a representative of the type. Thus, as a collection of individuals the nation is precisely and naturally bounded in the way that a species is often imagined to be bounded, for it is constituted by individuals who share a set of traits that definitively separate them from other types of individuals. To imagine the collectivity as a species eliminates the problem of fuzzy boundaries: people can claim that any individual either is or is not a member of the nation—is or is not a “typical Quebecois.” There are no ambiguous or divided affiliations, and the nation, as a collection of individuals, is as definitively bounded as a natural species.

Finally, when people speak of individual Quebecois and attempt to define what it is that constitutes their “québécitue,” they resort once again to naturalistic metaphors. They find it difficult, if not impossible, to describe the group-based differences of individuals in precise terms—how Quebecois differ from Americans, from French, from Eskimos. Quebecois see themselves as being different from the people of other nations because each Quebecois individual “possesses” Quebecois culture, traditions, and heritage. Yet it is difficult for most people to specify the particular traits that distinguish them from other national types. Speaking French, for example, distinguishes Quebecois from other North Americans, but in most other aspects of daily life definitive differences are less easy to isolate. On the other hand, speaking French does not distinguish Quebecois from other francophones, which leads to attempts to isolate the distinguishing characteristics of Quebecois French. Most people can enunciate the premise that differences of culture and traditions distinguish Quebecois from people of other nations, but cannot specify the content of national differences in any detail. In the absence of such specification, they often fall back, again, on naturalistic metaphors, and speak of the “Latin blood” of the Quebecois, or of the indelible imprint that birth in a particular land leaves on a person. In sum, if Quebecois are different, it is due to substances like blood and land, and events like birth, all of which are conceived to be natural.

We might speak here of the naturalization of culture and tradition: both are “in the blood” of individuals, whose culturally unique traditions are thus natural to them. In similar fashion, the metaphors of the nation as a living creature and as a natural species allow culture, tradition, and heritage to be naturalized. When Quebecois discuss the nation as though it were a person with soul, will, and destiny, they speak of its distinguishing characteristics as a “personality” that has been “fixed” in the (collective) individual during a process of personal growth and maturation. Or, when Quebecois imagine the nation as a species, they explain its specific characteristics in terms of natural selection and adaptation. Such rhetoric transforms national history into a natural history in which an isolated group of settlers became “fixed” in its adaptation to the New World. Establishing both metaphors allows people to claim that what has been fixed will not and cannot change; a set of basic dispositions or traits establishes the nation as an entity in relation to all other national entities, and any future developments must build upon this base. To
change the base would destroy the national entity, making it something other than what it has been. In sum, in the world view of Quebecois nationalists, it is assumed that the nation has an essential identity, a core of fixed characteristics that makes its existence analogous to that of a bounded natural object.

While the foregoing discussion of nationalist ideology may seem either abstruse or quaint, it is important to realize that such discourse is basic to the image that Quebecois nationalists entertain about themselves. And this image is not remote from everyday consciousness, for nationalism has consistently been a prominent concern for Quebecois since the early 19th century. Given such an ideology, and the defensive posture of Quebecois keenly aware of their minority status in North America, there has long been a self-conscious concern to preserve national culture and traditions, or what Quebecois call *le patrimoine* (heritage). As the historian Mason Wade has written,

> Nowhere in North America is the cult of the past stronger than in French Canada. . . . French Canada has a sense of tradition unique in North America, and the French Canadians live in and on their past to a degree which it is difficult for English-speaking North Americans to appreciate. [1968:1]

The cult of tradition follows understandably from the premises of nationalist ideology, but it suggests a counter-intuitive interpretation: national culture and tradition come after the fact. Nationalist ideology requires the existence of a culture—"we are a nation because we have a culture"—but most people are hard put to specify the traits and traditions that constitute that culture. It then becomes the business of specialists to discover and even to invent national culture, traditions, and heritage.

The invention of tradition, typified during the late 1970s by widespread concern for *le patrimoine*, has been a prominent activity in Quebec since the mid-19th century (Handler 1983a). Tradition is invented because it is necessarily reconstructed in the present, notwithstanding some participants' understanding of such activities as being preservation rather than invention (cf. Hymes 1975:355–356). For example, a common method for presenting tradition to the public is the folklore display or demonstration. At festivals, fairs, and museums, folk dances are performed and folk crafts exhibited against a backdrop representing the interior of what is presented as a traditional farm-house. Marius Barbeau (1920:1–5) claimed to have organized the first such performances in Canada. Following British and French models of folklore demonstrations, Barbeau and his colleagues presented two "public soirées" of folklore performances in Montreal in 1919. Their goal was both to teach the urban public about the indigenous folk sources of their culture and to generate support (financial and otherwise) for folklore research. Barbeau's description of these soirées shows their conceptualization and staging to have been nearly identical to performances witnessed 60 years later. What had changed, however, by the 1970s, was the important presence of government as a central ac-
or in the preservation of tradition. Since the early 1960s the government of Quebec has devoted significant resources to the preservation of historic buildings, the creation of an inventory of patrimonial objects and their collection in museums, and more recently, to the promotion of St. Jean-Baptiste day as the national holiday of Quebec and of a semaine du patrimoine (heritage week) featuring special museum exhibits, public school projects, and the like.

In his study of nationalism and folklore in Finland, Wilson (1976:120) observes that "celebrations of folklore . . . became folklore ceremonies themselves, ritual dramas in which time was suspended and modern Finns could participate in the events of the past." This remark could be applied to the Quebec case, but with an important clarification. The performers and spectators at Quebecois folklore celebrations do not so much participate in a preserved past as they invent a new one. The public presentation of private life is a juxtaposition that suggests why we must speak of invention rather than preservation. First, those elements of the past selected to represent traditional culture are placed in contexts utterly different from their prior, unmarked settings. A family party presented on stage, or a child's toy immersed in a museum, are not, in these new contexts, quite the same things that they were in other settings; juxtaposed to other objects, enmeshed in new relationships of meaning, they become something new. Second, these newly contextualized pieces of tradition take on new meanings for the researchers, craft-workers, dancers, spectators, and consumers who participate in folklore activities. Reconstructed or reinterpreted as "tradition," they come to signify national identity. Whoever danced those dances or used those toys in the past did not do so with a self-conscious awareness that such activity signified "Québéçitude." Finally, the invention of tradition is selective: only certain items (most often, those that can be associated with a "natural," pre-industrial village life) are chosen to represent traditional national culture, and other aspects of the past are ignored or forgotten. In sum, traditions thought to be preserved are created out of the conceptual needs of the present. Tradition is not handed down from the past, as a thing or collection of things; it is symbolically reinvented in an ongoing present.

Nor are Quebecois unaware of these subtleties of reinterpretation. In 1978 the government brought together citizens and specialists to reconsider its activities in the Place Royale project. The government had begun the historical reconstruction of Place Royale (Quebec City) in the early 1960s. The project became the largest of its kind in Quebec, and as it developed it encountered growing criticism concerning the wisdom of transforming a residential neighborhood into a museum for tourists. The 1978 colloquium debated the various models of urban renewal and historical reconstruction that had influenced the project. For example, some participants favored restorations that would privilege the French colonial era to the exclusion of all other periods, while others argued for recognition of the evolution of architectural styles. Still others, citing the provisionality of all historical interpretations, insisted that restoration be "reversible," so that future research, which might change
people’s understanding of the history of the area, could be incorporated into
the presentation of the site (Gouvernement du Québec 1979).

Explicit discussions of how to preserve tradition, as well as the commer-
cialization and staging of folklore, might be taken as instances of spurious
tradition, such as those recognized by Shils in his discussion of the “fictitious”
pasts created by nationalist ideologues at the expense of “actually existing syn-
cretic traditions” (1981:209, 246). Yet it is impossible to separate spurious and
genuine tradition, both empirically and theoretically. In the Quebec case, for
example, the work of folklore popularizers is almost as traditional as tradition
itself. Almost from the beginning of European colonization, observers have
written about folk life in Quebec, and their descriptions have become absorbed
into the sense of identity that the folk entertain about themselves. Folklore col-
collectors have been at work in French Canada since the mid-19th century at least
(Lacourcière 1961; Carpenter 1979), and their work too has been thoroughly
disseminated among Quebecois, rural as well as urban. Thus when the an-
thropologist Horace Miner set out to describe the folk culture of St. Denis, he
learned that it was not naive in the way some had imagined: “I just got track
of a story-teller in a neighboring parish,” he wrote Robert Redfield from the
field, “and am arranging to get some of his old tales, anything he has not got-
ten out of a book” (Miner 1937). And Madeleine Doyon found that her rural
informants argued among themselves about whose version of a particular
dance was “authentic” (1950:172). In sum, it is doubtful that Quebec ever ex-
isted as a folk society in which traditions were unreflectively handed down in
unchanging form (Handler 1983a).

If genuine, naive, or pristine traditions are difficult to discover empirically,
they are even more difficult to justify theoretically. The creation of tradition in
Quebec, motivated as it is by nationalist ideology, points to the theoretical
flaws in the traditional social-scientific understanding of tradition for, like
social science, nationalist ideology depends on the notion of society bounded
by objective tradition, with both society and tradition understood as objects or
sets of objects in the natural world. In other words, the social-scientific model
of tradition, like the nationalistic, rests on a naturalistic and atomistic
paradigm in which those aspects of social life that are considered traditional are
endowed with (or reduced to) the status of natural things. But in our view, to
posit a distinction between genuine and spurious traditions is to overlook the
fact that social life is always symbolically constructed, never naturally given.
All handing down, for example, depends upon the use of symbols and is thus
continuously reinvented in the present. In the limiting case we may unreflec-
tively perform some action exactly as we learned it from our parents; yet the
performance is never completely isomorphic with past performances and, more
important, our understanding of the performance is a present-tense under-
standing, generated from the context and meanings of the present. To do
something because it is traditional is already to reinterpret, and hence to
change it.
Tradition in Modern Hawaii

It may seem paradoxical to speak of tradition in modern Hawaii, the most Westernized society in Polynesia. What links to the past could survive in this land of McDonald's restaurants and mass tourism? In the islands today, anthropologists and Hawaiians alike are engaged in a quest for Hawaiian tradition, which is simultaneously a search for Hawaiian cultural identity. The varying definitions of authenticity that have resulted from this pursuit reveal that "traditional" is not an objective attribute of cultural practices, but a designation that is always assigned in the present. Modern definitions of Hawaiian tradition range from the eclectic version promoted by Hawaiian nationalists to the presumably more authentic life-style of small rural communities. This discussion of Hawaiian tradition is based on fieldwork in Keanae, a taro-growing village on the windward side of Maui that is widely considered to represent traditional Hawaiian life. The nationalist experience is a more obvious example of a tradition constructed according to the demands of ethnic politics, but the rural life must be examined as a possible limiting case for our thesis: a naively inherited, unselfconscious tradition, containing much that is handed down from the past.

In search of an authentic cultural identity, nationalist movements frequently employ tradition to challenge rather than to "ratify" (Williams 1977:116) the social and political status quo. The Hawaiian cultural revival looks to rural settlements such as Keanae for examples of genuine tradition. The symbolic value of such communities is enhanced because most Hawaiians today are city-dwellers with more than their share of social problems (Howard 1974:x). The current conception of Hawaiian identity does not depend upon biological descent, but is based on the premise of a shared body of customs handed down from the past. Yet for most Hawaiians, alienated from the land and the rural life-style, the content of that tradition has been problematic. Because of a long history of intermarriage with other ethnic groups, very few Hawaiians can claim "pure" Hawaiian ancestry. And until the cultural revival, few but the elderly were fluent in the Hawaiian language. Hawaiian nationalism began as an urban movement in the late 1960s, primarily attracting young part-Hawaiians, and following models established in American ethnic politics. The nationalists have explicitly linked their struggle to that of other colonized and dispossessed peoples: Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Micronesians (Protect Kaho‘olawe ‘Ohana 1981:17).

The focal symbols of Hawaiian nationalism have varying relationships to past cultural practices. Initially emphasizing the Hawaiian language and Hawaiian culture, a selection of crafts and performance arts, the cultural renaissance came to focus on tradition as represented by the life-style of rural Hawaiians. Politically, the movement has focused on the land, the 'aina, and demanded reparations for the lands that commoner Hawaiians lost in the last century. The taro plant, source of the staple poi, is featured prominently in the movement's publications. The archetype of the despoiled Hawaiian landscape has
become the barren, uninhabited island of Kahoolawe, used for naval bombing practice since World War II. Protestors have occupied the island several times, asserting on the basis of folk legends that it is sacred ground. Historically, Kahoolawe’s claim to sacredness is tenuous. Early sources portray the island as a desolate and inhospitable place; it was a penal colony in the early 19th century (Kuykendall 1938:125–126), and was later leased as a cattle ranch until confiscated for use as a bombing target (Ritte and Sawyer 1978:113). It is not the facts of Kahoolawe’s history that have imbued it with its present-day meaning as a political and cultural symbol. Kahoolawe has become the embodiment of the Hawaiian land. As such its significance for Hawaiians is undeniable, but this meaning derives from the modern context, even though it makes reference to an idealized past (Linnekin 1983).

Another focus of Hawaiian nationalism was the voyage of the double-hulled canoe Hokule’a from Hawaii to Tahiti in 1976. Although conceived by haole (white) scholars as a test of the accidental voyaging theory of Polynesian settlement, the project was embraced by the Hawaiian cultural revival as a celebration of Hawaiian identity. The canoe’s designer, Herb Kane, was a half-Hawaiian who was brought up and educated in the Midwest, and only returned to Hawaii in 1972 (Finney 1979:21). Yet he identified his “‘home valley’” as Waipio on the island of Hawaii (Kane 1976:475), thus consciously linking himself to an ancient settlement area that, like Keanae, is recognized as a stronghold of Hawaiian tradition. Kane proclaimed that the voyaging canoe was “‘the central artifact of Polynesian culture’” (Finney 1979:29), and in a National Geographic article (Kane 1976), portrayed the Hokule’a’s voyage as the reenactment of a time-honored Hawaiian tradition. The canoe’s launching was marked by carefully researched ceremonies that attempted to recreate ancient Hawaiian rites; anthropologists from the Bernice P. Bishop Museum were on hand to validate the authenticity of the proceedings. One Hawaiian participant wore a full-head gourd mask copied from a 1779 engraving by John Webber, the artist who sailed with Captain Cook (Kane 1976:472). A kava circle modeled on the kava ritual of Samoa was incorporated into later ceremonies (Finney 1979:31). Hawaiians drank the mildly intoxicating ‘awa,5 but they did not make a social ceremony of consuming it, as did Fijians and Samoans. Kane’s article portrays such a ritual, using a large Fijian or Samoan kava bowl, with a caption beginning “‘In rites unpracticed for generations. . . .’”

The above examples demonstrate that nationalist versions of tradition are selective and may be consciously shaped to promote solidarity in the present. Is there a more genuine, unselfconscious Hawaiian tradition to be found in the islands? Islanders of all nationalities believe that traditional Hawaiian culture survives in a few remote communities on Maui, Ni‘ihau, Molokai, and in Kona on the island of Hawaii. The residents identify themselves as kama‘aina, “‘children of the land,’” the descendants of the common people, and describe a life based on fish and poi, the traditional staples. Keanae is one of the few places in the islands where Hawaiians have retained ownership of land and still grow taro. In many ways, of course, Keanae’s traditionality is superficial. No
one subsists solely on fish and poi; most householders have full-time salaried jobs and grow taro for the market as a supplementary source of income. Rice has supplanted poi as the most commonly served staple, and some elderly residents who have given up taro farming eat poi no more often than a resident of Honolulu. Nevertheless, for Hawaiians, Keanae represents life “in the real old style,” and an integral cultural identity.

When Keanae villagers differentiate their lifestyle from that of outsiders, they speak of fish and poi, and the practice of exchange-in-kind (“In Keanae, you give, don’t sell”) as opposed to the impersonal, commercial transactions carried on in town. And it is true that exchange-in-kind as practiced in Keanae bears striking resemblance to the forms of gift giving described by Marcel Mauss (1967) for “archaic” societies. Interpersonal relationships are played out in cycles of reciprocity involving Polynesian commodities: pork, fish, bananas, service (see Linnekin 1984). For villagers and outsiders alike, the most dramatic enactment of tradition in Keanae is the luau, the Hawaiian redistributive feast. The luau is today understood as a quintessentially Hawaiian activity, and Keanae is known as a place where people know how to “make a luau” properly. A luau entails the preparation, consumption, and giving away of large quantities of food. Work parties of family and friends are occupied for several days in advance, preparing dishes that they consider to be traditional and distinctively Hawaiian. The accounts of Kamakau (1964:13, 96–98) and Malo (1951:87–88, 151–153, 157–158) reveal that luau foods are indeed historically related to pre-Christian practices. Many of today’s conventional luau dishes recreate the standard ritual offerings of the Hawaiian religion, which was abolished in 1819: kalua pig, roasted in the underground oven, and kūlolo, taro-coconut pudding, are examples. The most popular food used to compensate luau workers is laulau, steamed bundles of greens and either pork or beef, wrapped in ti (cordyline) leaves. Offerings made to the gods were similarly wrapped in ti leaves.

Many of the foods that weight today’s luau tables are thus demonstrably related to past practices. In the Hawaiian religion, red was a ritually high color. One of the conventional offerings to the gods was the kūmū, a red fish. Kūmū is not served at luaus today, but a luau would not be complete without lomi-lomi salmon. “Lomi” salmon is made from the red flesh of imported, salted salmon, massaged between the fingers and mixed with tomatoes, crushed ice, and green onions. All these ingredients are foreign introductions; certainly the ice is relatively recent. Very few modern Hawaiians are aware that lomi salmon is probably a surrogate for the kūmū fish; indeed, for Hawaiians today this historical relationship is irrelevant, and lomi salmon is just as traditional, just as meaningful, as kūlolo or laulau. A luau is also marked by slack-key guitar and ukulele playing. Both represent introduced musical styles, but islanders of all nationalities recognize these activities as characteristically Hawaiian.

The luau is certainly a candidate for an objectively definable, inherited tradition. But Keanae Hawaiians are not naive about the luau’s significance; they
tie laulas by splitting the stem of the cordyline because it is definitively Hawaiian to do so. They are not even naive about exchange-in-kind, a practice that perhaps most closely approximates an unselfconscious heritage. Keanae villagers are not unaware of their status as upholders of Hawaiian tradition; most have chosen a life that they perceive as traditional. This identity has developed over at least the past hundred years through an ongoing interaction with the larger society. The windward areas of the islands were called the kua'a'ina or "back land." A secondary meaning for this term is "ignorant, uninstructed people... the back-woods people" (Andrews 1865:296). Early missionaries similarly viewed the Keanae region as backward and prone to recidivism. Inaccessible by land until the late 1920s when the state highway was completed, the remote windward coast of Maui attracted early travel writers, who saw it as "picturesque" (Ayres 1910; Hardy 1895). More recently, a Honolulu journalist in search of the traditional Hawaiian life-style published a story on Keanae as "the Hawaii that used to be" (Lueras 1975). The community is noted on tourist maps as an official attraction; a Hawaii Visitors Bureau marker used to stand alongside the highway overlooking Keanae with the legend, "Hawaiian village."

The larger society's notions of tradition and cultural identity thus become part of the rural community's self-image. And this influence is not restricted to the modern era, when nationalists, tourists, and political leaders tend to idealize the rural "folk." The evolution of Keanae's traditional identity can be traced at least to the early 19th century, and the development of a country/city opposition—a contrast that is today embodied in the villagers' use of the terms "inside" and "outside" to differentiate the rural countryside, inhabited primarily by Hawaiians, from the towns where whites and Orientals predominate. In the historical interchange between Keanae and the larger society, the most important recent development has been the positive value attached to the term "traditional," which now connotes purity and authenticity rather than rural ignorance. Although the content of the categorical oppositions has altered over time, it is unlikely that Keanae villagers were ever pristine and unselfconscious, that is, that they ever failed to interpret their identity in terms of a wider social context. Today taro growing and exchange-in-kind are objec-
tified as they are used to define the Hawaiian identity. These practices have become a means by which modern Hawaiians differentiate themselves from the islands' other ethnic groups.

Seemingly disparate versions of Hawaiian tradition—the nationalist and the rural—converge in Hawaii today. The two images influence one another; both variants contain elements of invention and conscious construction as well as correspondences to previous Hawaiian practices. Tradition is never wholly unselfconscious, nor is it ever wholly unrelated to the past. The opposition between a naively inherited tradition and one that is consciously shaped is a false dichotomy. Traditional activities like preparing laulas or building an underground oven may have affinities with the past that a scholar can discover, but they need not. The crucial point for our purposes is that their value as
traditional symbols does not depend upon an objective relation to the past. Like the kava ceremony in the voyaging canoe’s launching rites, traditional practices may be recently borrowed. The scholar may object that such customs are not genuinely traditional, but they have as much force and as much meaning for their modern practitioners as other cultural artifacts that can be traced directly to the past. The origin of cultural practices is largely irrelevant to the experience of tradition; authenticity is always defined in the present. It is not pastness or givenness that defines something as traditional. Rather, the latter is an arbitrary symbolic designation; an assigned meaning rather than an objective quality.

Conclusion

We have argued that the dominant social-scientific understanding of tradition is built upon a naturalistic metaphor. Although some would restrict the persuasiveness of metaphor to poetic language, its rhetorical force can sway scientific discourse as well. The prevailing conception of tradition, both in common sense and in social theory, has envisioned an isolable body or core of unchanging traits handed down from the past. Tradition is likened to a natural object, occupying space, enduring in time, and having a molecular structure. Society, since it is defined by a distinctive tradition, is similarly modeled after a natural object—bounded, discrete, and objectively knowable. This naturalistic view of tradition, and of society as constituted by tradition, has dominated Western social thought at least since the time of Edmund Burke, who was the first modern theorist of tradition. In his attack on the French Revolution, Burke likened both the state and society to an “antient edifice,” a “noble and venerable castle” (1968:106, 121) which could be repeatedly renovated to remain forever the same. According to Burke, the French revolutionaries had acted unnaturally by destroying rather than preserving and reforming. In contrast, English reformers adhered to “the method of nature in the conduct of the state”; they respected “the mode of existence decreed to a permanent body composed of transitory parts” (1968:120). Like the work of later theorists of tradition, Burke’s discussion is dominated by the idea of an object—as concrete as a castle, as natural as a body—that changes incessantly yet nonetheless maintains an essential identity.

Against the naturalistic paradigm, which presumes boundedness and essence, we argue that tradition is a symbolic process: that “traditional” is not an objective property of phenomena but an assigned meaning. When we insist that the past is always constructed in the present, we are not suggesting that present-day acts and ideas have no correspondence to the past. But we argue that the relation of prior to unfolding representations can be equally well termed discontinuous as continuous. Ongoing cultural representations refer to or take account of prior representations, and in this sense the present has continuity with the past. But this continuity of reference is constructed in the present, and, as Herzfeld (1982:3) has argued in his account of nationalism and
folklore in Greece, the construction of continuity is never "a question of pure fact." Rather, the establishment of continuity depends on "the observer's . . . presuppositions . . . about what traits really constitute acceptable . . . evidence for some sort of link." On the other hand, because continuity is constructed, it includes an element of discontinuity. To refer to the past, to take account of or interpret it, implies that one is located in the present, that one is distanced or apart from the object reconstructed. In sum, the relationship of prior to present representations is symbolically mediated, not naturally given; it encompasses both continuity and discontinuity. Thus we can no longer speak of tradition in terms of the approximate identity of some objective thing that changes while remaining the same. Instead, we must understand tradition as a symbolic process that both presupposes past symbolisms and creatively reinterprets them. In other words, tradition is not a bounded entity made up of bounded constituent parts, but a process of interpretation, attributing meaning in the present though making reference to the past.

To speak of tradition as a process brings us close to the approach of Hymes and before him, to that of Sapir. Sapir's discussion (1949) of genuine culture bears romantic overtones akin to those that motivate discussions of genuine tradition as pristine folkways. But Sapir's notion of genuineness refers to the possibility of creativity. Genuine cultures provide individuals both with a rich corpus of pre-established (traditional) forms and with the opportunity to "swing free" (1949:322) in creative endeavors that inevitably transform those forms. For Sapir, genuine culture has a dialectical quality, for it embodies the seeds of its own transformation. Similarly, Hymes (1975:353-355) speaks of "a universal dialectic between the need to traditionalize and other forces in social life" (those that he terms "situation" and "creativity"). Hymes chooses the term "traditionalization" to purge the concept of tradition of its static, naturalistic implications. For Hymes, as for us, it is best to think of tradition as a process that involves continual re-creation.

This understanding of tradition implies that society, commonly perceived as the largest unit of social reality, is, like tradition, a meaningful process rather than a bounded object. Social identity is always formulated in interaction with others, and depends upon evolving distinctions between categories that are symbolically constituted, a process that Singer (1972:12) has dubbed "conversations of images." Shils's "British society" is not an objectively ascertainable entity but an attribution of identity. The Western ideology of tradition, with its correlative assumption of unique cultural identity, has become an international political model that people all over the globe use to construct images of others and of themselves. In Quebec, patrimonial traditions, self-consciously constructed by both indigenous and foreign observers, have become an integral component of the sense of national identity that Quebecois entertain about themselves. In Hawaii, the larger society perceives the rural life-style as a mirror of the Hawaiian past, and country-dwellers in turn attribute a new, traditional signification to previously unmarked practices. In both cases, the self-image of rural villagers develops through a dialogue with a variety of tradition-
seekers, ranging from romantic journalists to urban nationalists, not to mention social scientists. One of the major paradoxes of the ideology of tradition is that attempts at cultural preservation inevitably alter, reconstruct, or invent the traditions that they are intended to fix. Traditions are neither genuine nor spurious, for if genuine tradition refers to the pristine and immutable heritage of the past, then all genuine traditions are spurious. But if, as we have argued, tradition is always defined in the present, then all spurious traditions are genuine. Genuine and spurious—terms that have been used to distinguish objective reality from hocus-pocus—are inappropriate when applied to social phenomena, which never exist apart from our interpretations of them.

Notes

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1 Dumont’s discussion of the cultural presuppositions that interrelate nationalism and individualism in modern Western culture is central to the analysis of nationalist ideology presented here. According to Dumont, “the nation is the normal form of the global society in the individualistic universe. That is to say, it is in principle two things at once: a collection of individuals and a collective individual” (1970:33; emphasis in original). It is important to understand that Dumont is here referring to indigenous conceptions of what a nation is; he is not offering a scientific definition.

2 The idea of “Québécidité” was influenced by the celebration of “négritude” on the part of French-language West Indian and African writers during the 1940s. As we argue below, such borrowings suggest that the self-images of national and ethnic groups around the world develop through mutual interaction; rather than isolated groups whose identity stems from particular historical experiences, we find an international sociopolitical discourse, shared by those who use it to proclaim their uniqueness.

3 Diacritics and glosses for Hawaiian words are taken from Pukui and Elbert (1971).

4 Poi is a paste made by boiling and grinding the root of the taro plant.

5 Known as kava in other Polynesian societies, ‘awa is Piper methysticum, a shrub related to pepper and native to the Pacific islands. The beverage is made from the root.

6 Sapir’s use of the term “genuine” to indicate creative possibilities must be carefully distinguished from the more common understanding of genuine as meaning uncorrupted and pristine (cf. Handler 1983b). The notion of a genuine tradition attacked in this paper stems from the second concept of genuineness, not from Sapir’s.

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