

Some critical thoughts on the concept of tradition

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Abstract

Anthropologists as well as plain people often use the concepts of tradition/traditional values/traditional culture. They both suppose that tradition is something contraposed modernity/contemporaneity. Really any culture is base on certain traditions. Traditions are actually regularly performed practices so any culture is base on certain traditions since any culture always supposes certain set of regularly performed practices. Also we should keep in mind that tradition also supposes invention of new issues. Also we should keep in mind that the activity of anthropologists, i.e.: the fact that they pay much attention to traditional societies and contrapose so called traditional societies to modernity provide help to the forces of obscurantism.

Keywords: tradition; anthropology; history

Anthropologists as well as plain people often use the concepts of tradition/traditional values/traditional culture. At first sight they use these words differently; however, really they use them rather similarly. Both categories of people: anthropologists as well as plain people (i.e.: people who are not engaged in cultural anthropology) actually suppose that tradition is something that is contraposed to modernity/contemporaneity.

When plain people speak about traditions or traditional values they usually mean something that existed in rather distant past. Tradition (traditional society, traditional values) is usually considered as something unchangeable and stable/conserved. Modernity is usually considered as something non-traditional, i.e.: as something changeable and unstable. Despite most of plain people actually don't follow so called traditional practices in everyday life, but they often consider such practices as an ideal model as a standard of social behavior. Also should be noted that the concept of tradition in most cases has positive connotations, while the concept of modernity usually has negative connotations.

Anthropologists also actually have very peculiar attitude toward the concept of tradition, in general their imagination of tradition is almost the same as that of plain people. They usually consider traditional societies and traditional cultures as contraposed to modern societies and modern cultures. It can be seen from, for instance, numerous academic books which are named "X people: traditions and modernity". Anthropologists usually consider traditional societies as normal and modernity as something flawed, something that evades the normality. Also should be noted that in universities anthropologists are mainly taught to like so called traditional cultures and traditional societies and to pay most attention to such societies; and sometimes anthropologists become simply representatives of certain culture: they are immersed in love with the studied culture and can't see any negative issues of it and anything else outside of their material. Also I am to note that anthropology of contemporaneity still is mainly considered as something marginal.

Thus, in this aspect there is no serious difference between plain people and anthropologists, between everyday life and academic discourse.

Needless to say that the concept of traditional society in everyday life and in academic discourse is actually nothing else, but an ideal construct. When they speak about certain society or culture as of traditional it means that they take certain stage of this culture outside of due historical context and use this particular stage as the only source of notions about certain culture.

Sometimes a particular historical stage of a culture really can be rather representative face of it; however, often they simply take the best described stage of a culture and suppose it as principal representative face of considered culture.

Issues that are usually considered as characteristic and typical actually are rather marginal. I suppose it can be useful to give an example for illustrative purposes.

If we take a look at, for instance, Japanese studies we can see a legion of scholars who speak and write much about traditional Japanese issues. Usually when they speak or write something about so called traditional Japanese values they necessarily add that it's a pitiful issue, that in contemporary Japan those so called traditional values have been undergone a spoilage and aren't maintained anymore. Values of medieval epoch (i.e.: the period that lasted from the end of Heian till the beginning of Meiji) are considered as traditional Japanese values, while values of post-war Japan are usually considered as deeply alien.

The fact that Japanese society easily accepted values of West usually isn't interpreted properly. Actually values of contemporary Japan can be considered not as a borrowing of something new, but just as restoration of values of Late Jōmon and early Yayoi; while values of medieval Japan are rather alien since they were mostly products of so called cargo Confucianism (for more details see Nonno 2016: 42 – 43).

Thus, all values of medieval Japan actually can be considered as alien to the true traditional values of Japanese culture which are well piled by different late borrowings and cargo cults.

I suppose it's a good illustration of what can be if historical context isn't defined in an appropriate way. If we speak about traditional values we always should define historical context, i.e.: determine location and period. For instance, if someone speaks about medieval Japanese values he/she should directly say that the discourse is about medieval values and avoid to call those values traditional. Also, if we speak about traditional values of certain culture we should take whole its history and take the most stable values.

Moreover, should be noted the following: tradition is certain regularly performed practice so there are no cultures without traditions, there are no so called non-traditional cultures, since any culture (even a newly created) is based on certain regularly performed practices, i.e.: modernity also has traditions.

From the other hand we should keep in mind that tradition actually isn't something conserved and unchangeable, but any tradition (even a very backward one) always supposes the possibility of changes and invention of new issues.

If we consider tradition as something unchangeable/something that is strictly contraposed to contemporaneity we actually provide support for the ideas of so called Tradionalist School that is responsible for many social troubles happened during 20th and which ideas now inspire many people belonging to right wing to struggle against social progress and positive changes. I would not even name this movement with use of term school since anti-intellectual movement hardly should be named school and also because it's not an organized structure, but just a set of rather separated obscurantists who are afraid of social progress and enlightenment.

Many anthropologists sympathize so called left movements and left ideas. However, the activity of anthropologists, i.e.: the fact that they pay much attention to traditional societies and contrapose so called traditional societies to modernity actually provide help to the forces of obscurantism since obscurantists always welcome any discourse about traditional societies which are contraposed to modern.

References

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