



# Tradition and Agency

## Tracing cultural continuity and invention

*Edited by Ton Otto & Poul Pedersen*

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## Preface

Tradition has been a key concept in anthropology, sociology and history since the inception of these disciplines. Its primary meaning is to capture continuity in human affairs, as it refers both to the activity of handing down the cultural heritage from one generation to the next, and to what is actually handed down: customs, beliefs, rituals, rules. About twenty years ago an anthology with the provocative title *The Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) highlighted that traditions often were an element of change as well. The authors showed that new institutions of governance both in Europe and its colonial dependencies frequently were imbued with status and legitimacy through the creation of 'traditional' ceremonies and identities. The book stimulated an enormous research activity on invented and imagined traditions in Europe and many other parts of the world. An independent discovery of this field of research occurred in the Pacific region, marked by the publication of a special issue of the journal *Mankind* (Keesing and Tonkinson 1982). The ensuing research into traditions, both in the Pacific and other ethnographic 'areas', has produced rich data on similar processes all over the world but has also tended to become regionally oriented and inward looking, focussing on the cultural dynamics of local inventions and reactions to global developments.

In this book we want to highlight the geographical extension of the invention and revival of traditions. We have collected case studies that range from Western and Eastern Europe, via Africa and Indonesia to Australia and the Pacific. Each chapter presents a striking case study that tells its own captivating story but, at the same time, illustrates one or more general aspects of these related phenomena. In the Introduction we have endeavoured to capture how these phenomena are related from the perspective of their relevance for understanding human cultural activity in general. We do this by reviewing the discussions on the invention of tradition and assessing their contribution to questions of cultural continuity and discontinuity, agency, and the use of cultural resources. In the Postscript, one



of the editors of *The Invention of Tradition*, Terence Ranger, links the chapters in another way by tracing connections established through nationalism and imperialism (which formed the context of the *Invention* book) as well as globalised exchange and borrowing.

As sometimes happens with anthologies – partly due to the vagaries of publishers' policies – this book has been in the making for quite some time. Most chapters derive from papers that were originally presented during the 5<sup>th</sup> biennial EASA conference in Frankfurt in 1998. The editors of the book convened a three-day workshop on the theme of 'Anthropology and the revival of tradition', that generated an overwhelming interest and a large number of contributions. Another selection of revised papers from this workshop was published in 2000 in *FOLK: Journal of the Danish Ethnographic Society* 42, bringing together seven articles on Western and Eastern Europe, and two on the Pacific region and Australia. The present book has profited from further discussions and workshops, among others a PhD workshop in Aarhus in May 2003, organised by the Danish Research School of Anthropology and Ethnography, in which both Terence Ranger and Bob Tonkinson participated. We would like to thank all the participants in the Frankfurt and Aarhus workshops for their active contributions.

We owe special thanks to Sally Laird for revising most of the chapters, Stacy Cozart for improving our introduction, Toke Bjerregaard for assisting the editing process, Mary Lund for proof reading and Louise Hilmar for drawing the maps and taking care of the final typesetting. In addition, we are grateful for the generous financial support from the Danish Research Agency, the University of Aarhus Research Foundation, the Department of Anthropology and Ethnography and the Faculty of Humanities, University of Aarhus.

Ton Otto and Poul Pedersen  
Aarhus, February 2005

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