

How do you interpret Eric Hobsbawm's concept of "invented traditions" and how useful is it for helping understand contemporary heritage practices?

Introduction

That traditions have all been 'invented' at some point (ref) while a possible truism is to misrepresent Hobsbawm's influential 'Invented Tradition' theory (Ranger, 1993). Hobsbawm (1983) is specifically concerned with invented traditions as "responses to novel situations which take form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition" (p.2). Although not without challenges (Plant, 2008), the pervasiveness of "invented traditions" across disciplines and contexts, including contemporary heritage practices, lends itself to some productive analysis.

The following essay will provide a brief overview of Hobsbawm's theory of 'invented traditions' to enable interpretation and evaluation of its applications in contemporary heritage practices. Two case studies will then be explored to illustrate how the theory has been applied in contemporary heritage practices. Finally, the theory will be evaluated as to its application and usefulness in the heritage context.

Overview

The 'invented tradition' is defined by Hobsbawm as:

A set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values or norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. (Hobsbawm, 1983 pp.1)

The theory differentiates 'invented traditions' from routines and customs. Routines as "any social practice carried out repeatedly" (Hobsbawm, 1983, pp.3) do not necessarily have any 'ritual or symbolic function' and are easily distinguished from traditions in that they are necessarily invariant given their technical, practical role and absence of ideology. Less clearly distinguished though are customs which according to Hobsbawm "[dominate] so-called 'traditional' societies" (Hobsbawm, 1983,p.2). They have limited flexibility given their role is to set and then follow precedent. Customs can be presented as contrary to historical fact but useful in justifying change (or resistance to it). However, the exact implications of this distinction are vaguely drawn.

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As a theory proposed by an historian, it is perhaps unsurprising that it is temporally bound to some extent. Although not limited to the industrial era, it is this period and the periods since which Hobsbawm posited as ‘especially prolific’ in the generation of the invention of traditions given:

we should expect to see it to occur more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which the 'old' traditions had been designed [or] when such old traditions and their institutional carriers and promulgators no longer prove sufficiently adaptable or flexible, or are otherwise eliminated. (Hobsbawm, 1983 pp.4)

‘Invented traditions’ are thus a response, deliberate or otherwise, to brutal social change that attempt to create a continuity (Hohmann, 2010, p.145) by shaping “at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant” (Hobsbawm, 1983, pp.2).

In this context, ‘invented traditions’ are relevant to the modern nation state, that “imagined political community” (Anderson, 2006). Indeed, this is the predominant theme throughout the rest of Hobsbawm and Ranger’s “The Invention of Tradition” 1980’s collection and has been reiterated frequently since then (REF). Invented traditions can be viewed as instruments that help define or redefine national identity, implement or maintain social cohesion and articulate power structures and social norms.

More recently however, these themes have been considered within heritage discourse (Askew, 2010, in Wakefield, 2018) and illustrate some of the reciprocal influences and impacts that the invention of traditions has on local, national and transnational heritage practices, which in turn interacts with nation building such as “through state-perpetuated national narratives about citizens’ shared history and common identity” (Freer and Kherfi, 2020, pp.6).

The Gulf states are useful illustrations of this phenomenon. Reacting to the challenges encountered through recent independence, oil wealth, economic change, civil unrest and rapid globalisation, top-down heritagization strategies are employed as acts of self-preservation, achieving or restoring social cohesion, and nation- and identity-building (ref).

Harnessing romanticised notions of “Arabian Bedouin desert traditions” and a “Bedouin-style cultural past” (Freer and Kherfi, 2020, p.18), the Gulf states create a national trope central to the narrative of their heritage discourse that portrays pre-oil as ‘original and more authentic’. Thus by situating ‘traditions’ in this context, they look to foster recognisable senses of history and meaning, a real or invented shared tribal past “in which tribes have come together, under the leadership of ruling families, to create singular nation states”(Freer and Kherfi, 2020, p.18).

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Therefore, examining a selection of ‘national identity formation’, its ‘power structures’ and ambitions for ‘economic diversification’ GULF become evident. (feers)

Focussing on the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as an exemplar Gulf state, this 'singular nation' contains multiple citizenships: national (mostly settled) citizens whose home 'was once the desert', and non-national citizens, a majority multi-ethnic, multilingual, ex-patriate population. As such, issues of national identity and social cohesion have come to the fore and where 'heritage' is one of the instruments used in address. Indeed this is to such an extent that the "veritable 'heritage revival' has become a significant social, cultural and political process in the UAE" (Picton, 2010, p.69).

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No clearer can the role of invented traditions in this heritage revival be witnessed than "the ancient aristocratic pursuit of sport, transformed into a system of formal contests against antagonists selected as worthy on social grounds" (Hobsbawm, 1983, p.297).

Camel Racing

As detailed in Khalaf (2000), appropriating ideas and rules from horse racing, a hitherto local, festive Bedouin recreation, the heritage of camel racing has been (re)invented as a large-scale, institutionalised and hierarchical annual sporting fixture in UAE since the 1980's. As such, it employs the pervasive notions of the camel and its ecology as stalwarts of Arab heritage (where identities of Bedouins as 'people of the camel' have been generalised to 'Arab') and locates 'old' desert life in contemporary settings. In highly elaborate and orchestrated events, state leaders use literal and figurative arenas to communicate, directly and indirectly, their politics, ideologies and the components of national identity through a heritage narrative. Reflecting those of society, races are managed according to heavily stratified systems: sheikhs own the camels and the camel farms, host guests at races and welcome the president to the final race; Bedouin are retained as 'keepers of traditional knowledge' and charged with managing animal husbandry, although they now own few camels and instead reliant on employment by the sheikhs; labourers are foreign migrants. The race as a 'cultural performance' is staged to connote the desert and Bedouin life befit with tents and oases, participants in 'traditional' dress and 'traditional' Bedouin music and poetry specially written for the events. The only place women are permitted is the 'expatriate section'.

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Declarations of wonder and gratitude are broadcast in the stadium but also nationally, where the 'modes of transmission' are also suitably (re)invented. Through state-control, UAE's national media retains its role of "integrating populations into national units of audience" (Attonen, 2005, p.95). Television, radio and newspapers make these 'performances' more accessible, ensuring messages conveyed via the pageantry of the races: the greatness of the Emirati leaders and people, their role in apparent safe guarding the nation's heritage and traditions, while "marginalising the contribution from

foreign actors and forces” in case “messages may get subverted” such that attention given in their direction (Khalaf, 2000. p.260).

Falconry

As a quintessential hallmark of Hobsbawm’s invented nation-ness, the falcon has become an official symbol of the UAE state since its formation. It permeates citizen consciousness via prolific displays throughout private and public spaces. The falcon can be found on its flag, in the doorways of homesteads and in the architecture and contents of the new Zayed National Museum (Wakefield, 2012). Indeed, as the frontispiece of Saadiyat Island (Abu Dhabi’s “Bilbao”), the Zayed National Museum can be seen as the culmination of the UAE’s heritage revival, simultaneously placing the UAE nation, its heritage and culture literally and symbolically amongst the great cultures of the globe while locating it in its desert inheritance: a feat of the nation’s cultural, political and technological power.

UAE’s mastery of the desert is further displayed through the (re)invention of falconry as a heritage sport. Once a means of survival for the Bedouin, similar imaginings of ‘the primordial Arab way of life’ inherent in camel-racing, are drawn upon in the new falconry tradition. This ‘modern tradition’ of falconry is significant in how UAE defines its national identity and citizenship, both as it constituted within and without the state (Wakefield, 2012). Accordingly, Koch (2015) purports that by employing this ‘homeland narrative’ in the (re)invention of the sport and emphasising its heritage values, it is this way of life – the *Arab* way of life – that is inherited and to be preserved and celebrated, hence the national identity is ethnicised. By being situated in the male-dominated desert landscapes, and with its media and publications containing imagery of only male participants, the sport is coded as masculine, hence the national identity is gendered. So, while non-citizens and women are not excluded outright, the positioning of falconry as heritage classifies the type of citizen that is required.

Koch (2015) also illustrates that its placement on a global stage differentiates it - as a *Gulf* heritage sport - from other global prestige sports such as Formula 1 and the FIFA World Cup in which the nation is also engaged. Here falconry is used as a national trope and political construction situated in transnational power structures. Insofar as falconry provides a “set of concrete practices that link falconers, birds and resources to places and transnational network” (Koch, 2015, p.2) it enables a nuanced geopolitical analysis. For example, The UAE led the initiative to have falconry recognised by UNESCO as Human Living Heritage (Khalaf, 2009). Eleven countries, including a number of other Gulf states, participated in the process from 2005-2009 in which the UAE “played the shaping and channelling role associated with the general definition of cultural diplomacy” (Gerent, 2019, p123). Establishing its authority via its falconry community, positioning itself as an ambassador of UNESCO

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•a ‘new tradition with new meanings within a modern context’ to create a ‘collective representation’ and ‘the shared sense of memory of an imagined community’ (Anderson) while appearing to safeguard traditions (Khalaf).

•By focussing on and “perpetuating” their culture and distracting from the reduced economic value of camels, state leaders

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values and within the global authorised heritage discourse, the UAE increases its soft power and legitimacy both transnationally and nationally. This exercise culminated in UAE's falconry heritage being inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010 (UNESCO, 2010, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Decision of the Intergovernmental Committee), around the same time the Arab Spring protests had started.

It is pertinent to observe while falconry is apparently heralded with such reference and esteem, the 'new' falconry tradition involves some crucial reinventions of the practice. Falcons are now bred in captivity and traded as opposed to captured from the wild. Despite investment in numerous conservation programmes and a dedicated falconry hospital, the Saker Falcon (*falco cherrug*) is registered as endangered on the (IUCN Redlist, Birdlife, 2017) with illegal trafficking the prime cause motivated primarily by falconry hunting (Stretesky et al, 2018). In addition, hunting in the UAE is now illegal due to the falcons' prey being vulnerable to extinction (IUCN Redlist, Birdlife, 2017). As such, falconers now travel to other countries in the Middle East and Asia to partake in hunting expeditions.

This ensures the national sport is only available to the ideal citizen: Men with the both the financial and cultural capital to take part in hunting expeditions. They also are the only one who can benefit from the financial rewards of taking part, which are in the scale of \$millions. The and costs of taking part in and executing the hunt (estimated to exceed xxxxxx) # has moved beyond the reach of the average emirati. How meaningful is a national sport if it is not only available to an elite and entitled few much beyond its original means.

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Evaluation

Thus, as evidenced above, where the invention of a tradition can be tied back to "officially instituted and planned ceremonies" because they "likely to be well documented", Hobsbawm's theory can be applied productively to elucidate, for example, a state's political machinations at play in heritage discourse i.e. "the process and agency by which such invention is accomplished" (Ranger, 1993, p.63).

However, there are a number of assumptions present in Hobsbawm's theory which need to be considered. Firstly, examining traditions from a historical perspective thus relying on that which is "empirically and historically observable" (Hobsbawm, 1983, p.12) implies a burden of proof that is practically impossible across time and cultures. Traditions certainly exist that are executed privately or informally or indeed contain "discrepancies between observed action and thought" (Plant, 2008,

p.179) so as are not sufficiently recorded to be accessible to scholars. This, at best, leads to incomplete scholarship, or at worst, leads to incorrect conclusions and their implications. Secondly, by its very definition the concept necessitates a binary choice: invented versus original; invented versus authentic; old versus new. This inserts an 'either or' dichotomy into the analysis and raises implications of 'falsity' and 'contrivance' which necessitate questions around who and how such comparisons are made and for what purpose (Plant, 2008). Thirdly, the theory assumes a linearity and a coherence using a somewhat reductive logic that traditions are essentialist and bounded (Handler and Linnekin, 1984). This negates or lessens their symbolic and dynamic characteristics which in turn risks diminishing and misrepresenting a tradition's meaning and function (Plant, 2005). An alternative, constructivist approach is proposed by Handler and Linnekin (1984) in which they seek to de-historicise and de-objectify traditions. Here "traditional is not an objective property but an assigned meaning" (p.186), traditions are not comprised "constituent parts" but instead are "a process of interpretation, attributing meaning in the present through making reference to the past" (p.287) and where "the ongoing reconstruction of tradition is a facet of all social life" (p.276) that can be "equally well termed discontinuous as continuous" (p.286).

Hohmann (2010) provides a useful case in the assessment of the 'invented tradition' of traditional medicine in Uzbekistan in the post Russian, then post-soviet era. At the national scale, the scenario has similarities to the UAE – a newly formed nation looking to define its identity under new political and economic conditions – albeit a challenging economy and struggling welfare system are the drivers here. As such, the Uzbek government is appropriating and institutionalising a selection of traditional medical practices to supplement its healthcare system. Evidencing the peoples' perspective, Hohmann shows that this tradition was not 'eliminated', instead it "survived by sliding into private practice" (p.142). Accordingly, through the government's attempts to legalise and legitimise a selection of traditional practices and practitioners, the community are faced with reinterpreting the contradictions now present between their 'ancestral heritage' and the 'scientific' methods being imposed. To do so, the community itself defines and redefines the meaning and value these practices hold to "adapt to [the new] reality" therefore ensuring "the persistence of the preserved tradition" (Hohmann, 2010, p.148). Hohmann (2010) considers this support for a 'hybridised' model, adding to the theoretical debate.

Perhaps though, more importantly from the perspective of heritage practice is the significance and implications of this debate 'on the ground'. As Hohmann (2010) illustrates, the agency and perspective of *all* the actors are to be considered if we are to attempt a full understanding a specific paradigm. Indeed, the very act of interrogation can, in some cultures, be considered "a wholesale affront to one's cultural identity and authority" where "historical traditions are inseparably bound up with contemporary questions of identity, belief, rights, and proprietorship" (Plant, 2008, p.181).

Further Hobsbawm's theory indoctrinates and perpetuates **Western epistemologies** that are then used as justification or defence. Whether it is the inscription of a tradition with UNESCO, attempting to preserve the 'old ways' throughout continuous change or indeed resolving legal disputes between indigenous communities and governments, there is a trend for greater credence to be given to "earlier sources" and rely on "expressions of 'primitive' tradition" (Haley and Wilcoxon, 1997, in Plant, 2008, P.182).

Conclusion

With his 'invented tradition' theory, Hobsbawm provides a useful tool to help frame analysis concerned with the development of traditions within a community. If even just by drawing attention to the patterns and processes by which traditions take shape, the theory can be applied usefully in heritage contexts to help elucidate the social structures and power dynamics at play in any given setting. Caution is required however, when looking at any meanings and interpretations ascribed through its applications. As such, scholars and practitioners are urged to employ the multidisciplinary methods available through contemporary in heritage practices.

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