

# Editorial Foreword

*Changing Tradition.* Fifty years ago, Ralph Barton Perry observed in his famous study of puritanism and democracy that “the essential role of tradition is to define the present.” And almost from the very first, commentators on American society wondered about the absence of tradition or worried about the presence of multiple traditions or wittily described the insouciance with which Americans announced their adoption of new traditions. Scholars of nationalism, necessarily students of tradition as well, have long noted that many of the traditions most affectionately observed, in nations old and new, had been but recently contrived. In current scholarship, then, renewed attention to tradition needs to go beyond these familiar points to explore why and how societies construct particular traditions and how they do so in ways that make them malleable (for an early discussion in *CSSH*, see Shils, 13:2). Such questions can also stimulate some incisive comparisons. Selim Deringil’s fascinating account shows how in the nineteenth century the Ottoman Empire (compare Findley, 28:1, and Mardin in 11:3 and 3:3) imported from Europe made-to-order symbols of nationalism, believing them essential to its own legitimacy and strength. In the course of doing so, however, officials affected by the claims they advertised came to fear European influences, missionaries as well as armies, and began to redefine the Ottoman state’s relationship to Islam. Like those who claim to follow tradition, those who write about it used the concept in varied ways; and in studying the meanings given it and the ways of employing it among the Okiek of Kenya, Corinne Kratz distinguishes three approaches to the understanding of tradition. She then uses these to reveal how, in a period of marked economic and social change, tradition permits new conditions to partake of continuity and old roles to be made adaptable. Such an achievement requires a notable social effort, including selective forgetfulness, more expensive and elaborate ceremonies, and hortatory speeches allowing the maintenance of established distinctions, especially gendered ones, even without the structures that once supported them (on the adaptability of belief systems in Africa, see Dixon on the Yoruba, 33:1; Kenny on kingship, 30:4; and Rigby on the Maasi, 25:3).

The law, of course, is one of the most explicit of such structures; and Michael Peletz begins with that in his exploration of cultural rationalization in Malaysia. By selectively codifying customs, a classic early step in state making, British colonial rulers gave *adat* a meaning and eventually a life of its own. Nationalists intent upon modernizing their society then made it an instrument of organizational and ideological rationalization (compare the use of law in India, Fuller, 30:2; Khare and Galanter, both in 14:1; and of Buddhist Karma and social control, Gombrich, 17:2). The results, Peletz argues, demonstrate the importance of politics in a cultural change that redefined tradition to sharpen ethnic boundaries and build an Islamic state. Beneath familiar themes of nationalism, identity, resentment of missionaries, international influences, and politics lie complex local processes that Peletz explores through field work and his personal experience. If power can change tradition, so can the people who seem merely to experience its effects. Liliana Goldin and Brenda Rosenbaum study oral traditions (as did Slater, 33:3; also note Crumrine, 12:4, on change and ritual drama), suggesting that among the Maya local variations in the stories people tell may well reflect the ecology in which the story-tellers and their audience lived and the capitalism that pressed upon them (see Taussig, 19:2). Comparing differences within the popular Earth Lord stories as recited in two distinct regions, Goldin and Rosenbaum find evidence that these tales do indeed incorporate in their representations of

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social practice experience embedded in history and ecology. The satisfying persistence of tradition requires its constant reconstruction.

*The Politics of Peasants and the State.* The study of state making, long central to political theory and the discipline of history, flourished anew with the vast literature on modernization and then in a notable array of neo-Marxian analyses; but research into state formation in Southeast Asia has proved especially fruitful, not only for the understanding of that region but as evidence that the topic's significance extends well beyond the Eurocentric preoccupations from which it sprang. Reflection on the states of Southeast Asia has revealed a telling continuity from precolonial history through colonial dominance and into the modern era (Lieberman, 29:1), demonstrated the indigenous importance of bureaucracy (Evers, 29:4; De Vere Allen, 12:2), emphasized the role of legal systems, exposed the complex creation of ethnic and social boundaries (Stoler, 31:1), and helped to establish peasant resistance as a subject in its own right (Scott, 29:3; Adas, 23:2). Peter Vandergeest's article on Thailand brings much of this together. Using current categories of hegemony, discourse, and resistance, he offers a fresh look at the history of political development in Siam and Thailand and then turns to the modern effects of legal codes and institutionalization which stimulate peasants to identify rights that apply to them and to seek new means for pressing their case (compare Hoston on Brazil, 33:4). A Southeast Asia example may once again suggest an even broader conclusion; perhaps academic explanations for the growth of the state need more generally to move beyond hard-headed emphasis upon military needs, economic interests, and class ambitions—beyond taxes, bureaucracy, and nationalism—to include the power of demands for justice in launching a reciprocal process in which the need to respond to such demands both furthers the institutional expansion of the state and reshapes its political base. The outcome of that process, which enabled Thai peasants to reformulate ageless demands, is not predestined, however, although politics may be crucial elsewhere, too, in determining the position of the rural poor elsewhere. That is certainly Goren Djurfeldt's conclusion in his study of agriculture in Andalusia. Despite the reform programs and increased prosperity of modern Spain, the landless of the south remain landless; and older patterns of landholding persist. This result, Djurfeldt shows, in his meticulous microeconomic analysis of production, markets, and labor cannot be explained in economic terms alone (on agricultural reform, see Tuma, 21:1; on change in European agriculture, Goodman and Redclift, 30:4; on capitalism and family farms, compare Llambi, 31:4; Adams, 30:3; Lehmann, 28:4; Friedmann, 20:4; on Spanish farmers, Asano-Tamanoi, 30:3; Lozano, 26:2). It follows, rather, from the paradoxical effects of state policies.