• Research Note •

Alleviating Folkloristics Theory Anxiety:
What Can Folklorists Learn from Conceptualizations
of Tradition in Anthropology of Islam?

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Abstract: The perceived "folkloristics theory anxiety" may partly result from the fact that one of the grandest theoretical paradigms in the field of folk studies—traditionalization—does not address critical concerns of folklorists in regards with the omnipresence of political and ideological discourses in everyday life. I propose that by studying and learning from the concept of “discursive tradition,” theorized by Talal Asad in the field of anthropology of Islam, folklorists may be able to navigate ways to re-conceptualize traditionalization as a process influenced by political, ideological discourses that generates power in the vernacular life. Such reformulation of traditionalization as a discursive process can address folkloristics’ concerns pertaining to interventions of political and ideological discourses in everyday life.

A few months ago, during my candidacy exam, I argued that Dell Hymes’ concept of traditionalization as a paradigm has become folkloristics’ grand theory which—despite folklorists’ legitimate theory cynicism (Noyes 2008: 40)—has served to shape their theoretical frames and has become a means of theorizing and understanding everyday life. My committee approved my assertion but asked if that was the case, why did folklorists
still suffer from theory anxiety? I dared to claim that folkloristics theory anxiety results, at least partly, from a disconnection between the grand paradigm of traditionalization and the omnipresence of political and ideological discourses in everyday life. At least since the mid-1970s a growing number of folklorists in both applied and academic sectors have become concerned with the ways in which state politics and ideological discourses meddle in everyday life. In recent years, rarely have I sat in a panel at the American Folklore Society’s annual meeting where politics, power or ideological discourses and their impacts on the lives of individuals and communities were not discussed. Particularly during the 2016 and 2017 meetings, the high number of presentations concerned with the ways political and ideological discourses intervene in the vernacular social processes indicate that folklorists are increasingly uneased and alarmed by these interventions. Despite these concerns, one of the grandest paradigms of folklorists—traditionalization—seems indifferent to the influence of state politics and ideological discourses in everyday life equations. The concept of traditionalization is a theoretical frame that functions as a means of registering social realities and theorizing everyday life. It is not, however, sensitive to all of what many folklorists observe and the focus of their concerns. Traditionalization is a theoretical tool that does not live up to the expectations of many folklorists who utilize it, and that functionless-ness can cause theory anxiety.

My suggestion is not to discard the concept of traditionalization; I instead propose that by studying and learning from the conceptualization of tradition in the folkloristics’ neighboring fields, folklorists may navigate ways to re-conceptualize traditionalization as a process which is guided by ideological discourses and generates power in everyday life. Scholars in other fields have theorized the role of political and ideological discourses in
processes that are akin to traditionalization. Talal Asad, one of the most influential figures in the field of anthropology of Islam, conceptualizes Islam using the concept of "discursive tradition." Discursive tradition describes the same processes as traditionalization, but unlike traditionalization, it is sensitive to power relations and ideological discourses in everyday life. Therefore, it can be a source of inspiration for folklorists. Marrying the concepts of "traditionalization" and "discursive tradition" yields a conceptualization of traditionalization as a discursive process that addresses folkloristics’ concerns pertaining to interventions of ideological discourses in everyday life.

Marriage requires an affinity which in this case stems from the fact that traditionalization and discursive tradition outline same processes. Traditionalization was introduced during Hymes’ 1974 American Folklore Society presidential address in which he defended the concept of tradition and suggested to use the term in the verbal form of "to traditionalize" that conveys dynamism, performativity, and re-creativity (Hymes 1975). His play on words blew a new spirit into the aging concept that four years before was left out of Dan Ben-Amos’ concise and eye-catching definition of folklore. Since then an army of American folklorists have put their trust in the revenant that died as tradition and returned as traditionalization. The concept faced such a tumultuous welcome that it marked a "paradigm" shift in American folklore scholarship since the mid-1970s (McCormick and White 2011: 1203).

Almost ten years after Hymes’ introduction of traditionalization, Talal Asad theorized the concept of discursive tradition to explain what Islam is. He observed that Muslims have always been involved in a discussion over Islamic beliefs and practices, and it
is that very discussion that we can call Islam. Central religious figures such as the Pope never existed in Muslim societies, but Muslims with different levels of Islamic knowledge weighed in on the discussion about their religiosity. Islam, Asad argues, is this discussion—what he termed “discursive tradition”—which bears a few principles based on which numerous discussions are constantly produced and reproduced through time and space. Asad contends that discursive tradition is a process through which the past and future are addressed, “with reference to a particular [...] practice in the present” (Asad 1986: 14). In other words, discursive tradition is a process whereby people negotiate true beliefs and practices via dynamic engagement with some set of principles and with each other, connecting past, present and future (Asad 1986).

From this perspective, discursive tradition is an interpretive behavior which involves constant readings of the past and never-ending attempts to en-contextualize its various segments, including beliefs and behaviors, in the emerging contexts of the present and the future by negotiating their aptness.

An example of discursive tradition can be seen in the infinite number of discussions about hijab. In debates about the hejab that take place in all Muslim societies, Muslims have and continue to come up with all kinds of understandings of the hejab, which range from the hejab as covering all body parts including face and eyes to the hejab as an internal and mental state that is not violated by wearing bikinis. The theological and jurisprudence entries to this discussion are beyond the scope of this writing, but all sides of the discussion refer to the Quran, hadith, and the conduct of the Prophet Mohamad and the twelve Imams’ lives. The discussion refers to the past behaviors and events, contextualizes them in the
past, picks up some historical references, and juxtaposes them with the words of the Quran and the Prophet, all to construct coherent narratives of the past to corroborate their stance on the issue. These narratives are meant to convince their audiences to conduct themselves in accordance with the discourse they represent. The active agents of the processes of discursive tradition who compose these narratives of the past responsibly attempt to extend the past by recreating it in the emerging contexts of present and future.

Similarly, performers, or what I call active agents of traditionalization, extend the past through en-textualizing dated behaviors and ideas in the emerging contexts of present and future. Hymes noted that traditionalization happens when "parents tell children about their own childhoods, or of what old-timers explain to newcomers to an office or department or discipline." (Hymes 1975: 354) What parents and old-timers do in these episodes is to narrate the past to children and newcomers; they narrate the established ways of life, regulations, and why those regulations should be extended to emerging contexts. They "explain [italic mine]" how the past was, and why and how the past or segments of it should be continued and en-contextualized in the present.

Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs mention that this en-textualization—which is initiated by the active agents of traditionalization—requires “negotiations” (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 61) that occur when active agents take responsibility for the “correct doing” (Bauman 2004: 10) of a dated behavior and simultaneously attempt to tailor it for audiences who are passive agents of traditionalization. (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 77, 78) They engage in a negotiation process with the passive agents, attempting to persuade them that what they do is correct, makes sense, and should be extended to the emerging contexts.
of the future. In other words, active agents of traditionalization attempt to turn passive agents into active ones. In this negotiation process, the behavior whose traditionalization is intended becomes modified to make sense in the emerging contexts and for its new audiences.

Thus, Asad and Hymes describe the same processes with two different but similar terms. Discursive tradition and traditionalization are processes in which active agents try to extend segments of the past into emerging contexts of the present and future through negotiations with passive and potential agents who would take on the practice and en-contextualize it in other contexts.

Despite these similarities, there exist aspects of the process that are not captured by Hymes’ conceptualization of traditionalization, but are addressed by Asad. Asad notes that endless discussions and en-textualization attempts—which happen in all levels of Muslim societies—are guided by political and ideological discourses that are formed through relations of power, and simultaneously, become sources of power. For Asad, the processes of discursive tradition are guided by Foucauldian discourses that provide frames and means of understanding, negotiating, and interpreting "the past" (Mahmood 2005: 115) on behalf of "institutions" (Awass 2017: 36) that centralize power. Besides, through the negotiative process of discursive tradition, the knowledge constructed through relations of power trickles in everyday life relations. (Asad 1986: 15) This distributed knowledge becomes a source of power for agents who utilize it, as it gives them a means to instruct or inspire others about how to interpret and frame the reality and act upon it. (Dreyfus, Rabinow, and Foucault 1983: 219-222)
To use Foucauldian terminology, discursive tradition distributes and generates “power-knowledge”—the term Foucault uses to signify that “the reorganization of knowledge [is]...intertwined with new forms of power and domination.” (Rouse 2005: 95) According to Foucault, power relations “are indissociable from a discourse of truth, and they can neither be established nor function unless a true discourse is produced, accumulated, put into circulation, and set to work. Power cannot be exercised unless a certain economy of discourses of truth functions in, on the basis of, and thanks to, that power.” (Foucault 2003: 24) Thus, knowledge or “discourses of truth” define, organize, contextualize and frame the real, and legitimize the power relations as “normal.” Besides, these discourses—or knowledge—inspire individuals to act in accordance with power relations, and that are forms of power—what Foucault terms power-knowledge. Discursive tradition spreads the institutional and ideological power-knowledge in everyday life. Also, it produces agency for individuals who “engage” with discourses and act upon them and inspire or instruct others to do the same. (Mahmood 2005: 115-118)

For the sake of clarity, I break the process of discursive tradition into two sub-processes. First, ideological discourses guide the negotiation process of discursive tradition, which in return serves to disseminate them in everyday life. Second, in the process of discursive tradition, agents acquire power by creating power-knowledge with which the perception of reality is produced and acted upon.

I argue that traditionalization involves both these processes. First, processes of everyday traditionalization may very well be guided by ideological discourses that easily camouflage themselves in everyday life. For instance, in *Banal Nationalism*, Michael Billig
conceptualizes American Nationalism as an "ideology" that does not have a grand and overt presence in American life; on the contrary, it is so deeply engraved in American daily life that it is not even "registered" as a nationalistic ideology. (Billig 1995: 8) American nationalism is an ideological "habit" or what I call "vernacular ideology" that does not play out in the conspicuous image of "a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; [it is exemplified in] the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building." (Billig 1995: 263) American nationalism and other vernacular ideological discourses can provide categories and cognitive means with which subjects perceive reality, and that is why they are endowed with power. As Peter Zima discusses, "a vast majority of ideological discourses" offer "monologic and dualistic language patterns" that "drastically reduce the complexity of the everyday life." (Zima 2015: 18) It is through the constant application of these patterns in daily life that ideological discourses trickle in the vernacular level, become vernacular ideologies, and shape subjectivities.

These vernacular ideological discourses are involved in our daily operations, one of which is the traditionalization of events, behaviors, and beliefs. As can be implied from Hymes' examples of traditionalization, the process operates based on its active agents' narratives of the past. In other words, it is up to these active agents how to frame and narrate the past. (Estiri 2018: 123-126) Decisions of active agents of traditionalization concerning what to, or not to narrate are not immune to vernacular ideologies. Which childhood narratives should be represented to the next generation? If parents intend to tell stories about family interactions at holiday gatherings, which holiday do they choose to talk about? Family gatherings on weekends, 4th of July, Thanksgiving, or Christmas? Choosing any of these options has ideological connotations. As Roland Barthes notes, communicative
behaviors do not only “denote” on their subject of communication which may seem neutral and non-ideological; they also “connote” meanings that are ideological but covered by what is blatantly denoted in the context of the communication. (Barthes 1977: 15-51) For instance, telling a childhood memory about weekend family gatherings in which the narrator denotes on “women flocking in the kitchen” and “men sitting in on the deck” has ideological connotations that contribute to the recreation of gender role expectations; but this personal narrative of the past is represented in the form of a family tradition, a practice that the narrator—the active agent of traditionalization—intends to traditionalize in the emerging contexts of the present and future. Similarly, innocent stories about how family members greeted each other, what clothes they had on, the semantic make-up of snide remarks, or insults and jokes may easily have racial, gender, political or ideological connotations. (Pérez and Greene 2016) Although vernacular or trivialized, these everyday life practices of traditionalization contribute to the sustenance of ideological discourses. Thus, similar to Asad’s approach, the study of processes of traditionalization should take note of these vernacular ideologies.

Besides, like discursive tradition, traditionalization is a process through which knowledge is created. Such a creation is also implied in Hymes’ examples of traditionalization: “parents [who] tell children about their own childhoods, or […] old-timers [who] explain [the past regulations] to newcomers to an office or department or discipline.” (Hymes 1975: 354) In both examples, parents and old-timers, the active agents of traditionalization, pick up certain aspects of repetitive past realities and compose their own narratives of the past. These narratives of the past do not transfer the entire past reality to the present but pick up and draw attention to some segments of it—or frame the
past—and leave out other segments of the dated reality—or “outframe” them. As Jack Balkin argues, these framing narratives of the past create a new past reality in accordance with the narrator’s subjective intention. (Balkin 1998: 188–215) Thus, traditionalization involves producing knowledge about the past, by framing and outframing different aspects of dated realities.

The knowledge produced through traditionalization fits Foucault’s power-knowledge concept. Active agents of traditionalization not only frame the past for the passive agents but require them to internalize the frames and responsibly act upon them. “Old-timers” who narrate the past regulations to “newcomers” not only inform but urge them to conform to those regulations and behave in certain ways. Their framing narratives of past regulations—their produced knowledge of the past—is a form of power or what Foucault would call power-knowledge. Thus, traditionalization, like discursive tradition, endows its agents with power, which is constructed based upon their subjective framing narratives of the past—their knowledge of the past—not the past per se. In this sense, traditionalization is a power-knowledge producing process.

As Tom Mould suggests, the concept of traditionalization needs to be subject to more deliberation (Mould 2005), which I have briefly attempted to do in this writing. By comparing Asad’s discursive tradition with Hymes’ traditionalization, I claim that these conceptualizations correspond to the same processes. Thus, traditionalization should be considered a discursive process—what may be called "discursive traditionalization"—that addresses the interventions of political and ideological discourses in traditionalization processes and the ways in which they produce power-knowledge.
Such a conceptualization can partially alleviate folklore’s theory anxiety by providing a framework that connects the omnipresence of dominant political ideologies in everyday life with one of the grandest scholarly frames of the American folklore scholarship. Discursive traditionalization satisfies the long-lasting folkloristics tendency to consider any extension of past to present as dynamic, creative, and performative. It also maintains sensitivity to the ways in which ideological discourses slip into the vernacular and turn it into a site of power-knowledge production.

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**References**


1 “Folklore is artistic communication in small groups.” (Ben-Amos 1971: 13)