

Pascal BOYER, *Tradition as Truth and Communication: A Cognitive Description of Traditional Discourse* (Cambridge, University of Cambridge Press, 1990, 154 p., ISBN 0 521 37417 0 (coll. "Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology", 68)

Anne Brydon

Volume 16, Number 1, 1994

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083311ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083311ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Brydon, A. (1994). Review of [Pascal BOYER, *Tradition as Truth and Communication: A Cognitive Description of Traditional Discourse* (Cambridge, University of Cambridge Press, 1990, 154 p., ISBN 0 521 37417 0 (coll. "Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology", 68)]. *Ethnologies*, 16(1), 207–209. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083311ar>

moiety gathers to proceed to the mourners' longhouse. Its speaker's prologue reminds his kin (and us) that knowledge is always vulnerable and being lost, within as well as across cultures, as the generations pass. It is a lament for the loss of the ritual knowledge which the founding ancestors have taken back with them, "using it as a pillow in their graves to cushion their heads", and a plea for the ancestors to help revitalize the laws of the Confederacy (p. xxxvi, 547).

Although the text was dictated, not performed, its oral qualities emerge in the language rhythms and repetitions, and the substantial introductory discussions and textual annotations provide rich details that help readers envision the power of the Tradition and the ceremonies at which it was recited. For all that, non-linguists are likely to be deflected from the book by its size, price (\$80) and format. It much needs a smaller companion volume publishing the English text in connected form, and presenting the data and contextualization needed to bring the text to non-specialist scholars and students. Then, perhaps, the monumental efforts of Chief Gibson and his anthropologist amanuensis to record his Tradition eight decades ago will find the wider appreciation that they deserve.

Jennifer S. H. BROWN
University of Winnipeg
Winnipeg, Manitoba

Pascal BOYER, *Tradition as Truth and Communication: A Cognitive Description of Traditional Discourse* (Cambridge, University of Cambridge Press, 1990, 154 p., ISBN 0 521 37417 0 (coll. "Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology", 68).

Tradition as Truth and Communication opens new possibilities for investigating oral communication and the criteria by which privileged speakers of traditional truths are evaluated in ritual contexts. In this slim, densely-argued book, Pascal Boyer brings the rigour of cognitive psychology to bear on conventional anthropological discussions about tradition. He clarifies the linkage between people's actions and their mental representations of that action.

The book begins by noting the absence of any coherent theory about tradition within the social sciences. Often treated as self-evident, "tradition" may be used to gloss implausible (in terms of any psychological theory) assumptions about what occurs in people's minds. Although "theories of tradition necessarily imply some claims about mental representations and processes" (p. 108), rarely

are these claims made explicit. Instead, anthropologists and folklorists attribute people's penchant for repetitive behaviours to the "little black boxes" of cultural models, local theories, collective representations, or people's world-view. The search for normative laws or logics has led to ill-supported assumptions about what underlies occasion-bound behaviours and speech events. Non-Western peoples are the usual casualties of this convention, portrayed as if motivated by an anachronistic, underlying conservatism. Boyer recognizes that, for fieldworkers, such a conceptualization is highly problematic. Conservation, he argues, is not an observable fact, but an hypothesis to explain similarity over time.

A theory of tradition, the author argues, should "describe the general processes whereby the salient aspects of certain phenomena of social interaction are repeated or reiterated" (p. 3). As a point of departure, he defines tradition as "a type of interaction which results in the repetition of certain communicative events" (p. 23). Boyer then proposes a radically different hypothesis more attuned to fieldwork experience: what if "people repeat certain sets of actions and utterances, not because they hold the same 'theories' as former generations" (p. 13), but because the surface aspects of traditional interaction — the words, songs, gestures — are the focus of people's attention? People are not preserving underlying meaning; rather, it is the surface properties which are seen as salient and worth retaining. Tradition, therefore, is not a systematically-formulated body of knowledge, but rather an aspect of social action, a specific mode of authoritative, context-specific communication. In Boyer's discussion, tradition is repeated, psychologically salient (that is, demarcated for the natives), and a form of social action.

To illustrate his argument, Boyer focuses on oral communication. He highlights the privileged role given to sanctioned speakers as well as the ritual contexts in which traditions are characteristically communicated. What are the "attention-demanding" (p. 2) ritual gestures which demarcate truthful statements for the audience? Boyer's insight, that "tradition" is not an object of observation but a hypothesis about observed behaviours, distinguishes between ethnographic data and theorizing about them. Abandoning the idea of underlying meaning is radical but not unreasonable; it does, however, require greater focus on the form rather than the content/meaning of traditional speech. As well, it involves clearer methodological separation between actual behaviours and the reasons advanced by anthropologists to explain what people do. In the field, it demands that researchers attend to context over content, to the identity of the speaker and how the speech event is demarcated as special and truthful. Boyer's attention to the actual events and cognitive processes of traditional interaction is one of the strengths of this book.

In general, this text exhibits clear thinking. My two criticisms are minor. First, the argument would be more accessible if embedded in an extended ethnographic example. Although promised, it is not forthcoming. Second, use of

the terms "tradition" and "truth" I find problematic. Despite his acknowledging (p. 107) crucial questions about the opposition of "tradition" and "modernity", about "traditional societies" and "traditional mentalities", his continued usage of the term "tradition" still implies a distinction between "us" and "them". I doubt if Boyer would support such a distinction, yet by choosing conventional ethnographic examples from Fang society, he does not adequately challenge it. The term "truth" is equally loaded. Is he speaking of truth or the authority to speak? "Truth" in Boyer's discussion more properly belongs in quotation marks, to emphasize its provisionality. However, these are minor quibbles with an insightful, challenging, and wholly necessary re-thinking of an under-scrutinized concept.

Anne BRYDON
University of Winnipeg
Winnipeg, Manitoba

Gérard BOUCHARD et Serge COURVILLE, sous la direction de,
*La construction d'une culture: le Québec et l'Amérique
française* (CEFAN, Culture française d'Amérique, Les Presses
de l'Université Laval, Sainte-Foy, 1993, 445 p., ISBN 2-
7637-7306-0).

L'évolution de la culture française en Amérique du Nord depuis le XVII^e siècle est le sujet de l'ouvrage intitulé *La construction d'une culture: le Québec et l'Amérique française*, dirigé par Gérard Bouchard, avec la collaboration de Serge Courville. Cet ouvrage collectif fait état de la pensée contemporaine sur le développement de la culture française en Amérique en étudiant les représentations collectives de cette culture, telles que perçues par l'élite et par les classes populaires.

Nous trouvons réunis 19 textes d'historiens, de sociologues, d'ethnologues et de géographes, présentés lors du quatrième séminaire de la Chaire pour le développement de la recherche sur la culture d'expression française en Amérique du Nord (CEFAN). Quatre grands thèmes sont abordés: la géographie de la culture, le changement de la culture populaire en contexte québécois, les méthodes scientifiques utilisées pour l'étude de cette culture et l'expérience de la francophonie dans d'autres régions de l'Amérique du Nord.

La culture française en Amérique du Nord a longtemps été interprétée par l'élite qui a loué ses origines françaises et qui l'a folklorisée. C'est cette thèse que