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Introduction — Regulating Customs

Calendar customs help us make sense of the passing of time. We learn them by watching, doing, and taking part, but how do we know what to do, when to do it, and what not to do? The answer is regulation, the means by which customary practices are shaped, influenced, and controlled. From bottom-up evolving practices to top-down international, national, and civic guidelines, the range of regulatory forces is remarkable, as is their creative role in mediating the tensions between conservation and innovation that are central to traditional practices.

Calendar customs have been with us for millennia, emerging out of our need to live in some kind of known relationship to the world around us, whether that be knowing when wild foodstuffs will ripen, when and where animals can be found, or in knowing when to plant and harvest to best avoid the vagaries of climate and weather. We respond to the changing seasons and cycles, learning their nuances to take advantage of experience. Such accumulated practical knowledge gives us a modicum of control over the environment as we develop appropriate practices. Such is our necessity and characteristic desire to control the world around us that our customs inevitably develop an element of magical causation, whether through diverse vernacular beliefs, or formal religious thinking. Even the most basic act of marking an astronomical or seasonal milestone gives us a sense, or at least a hope, that we know what is happening. Ultimately, our calendar customs reflect an attempt to control the uncontrollable, to predict the unpredictable, in order to improve our odds of making it through another year. In effect, we feel that, in regulating ourselves, we regulate the world around us (and vice-versa), a wildly anthropocentric view which, ultimately, might not be as naïve as it seems, as can be seen in the unfolding climate apocalypse.

Early folklorists and scholars in related disciplines thought about tradition as a kind of monolithic cultural product, portable across time and space — vertical tradition. They were fixated on age, antiquity, and, of course, primitivity, the idea that rural traditions, particularly those practised by those less educated than the scholars, were a window into humanity's distant past. They looked for practically any scrap of be-

haviour that seemed sufficiently different from their own constrained upper class mores to be considered a purer version of humanity, uncluttered by the veneer of civilisation and the cold rationality of empiricist Enlightenment thinking. To them, apparently ancient customs were a deep and stable link to the past, connecting us directly to our ancestors through what they thought was unchanging ritual practice.

In some ways, customs *are* timeless, both in terms of their ultimate origins and within their ritual timeframes. Experientially, we know that enacting them invites us into an atemporal framework, where linear, civic time is irrelevant. We know that, in the midst of Scottish Hogmanay celebrations, an Orthodox Lenten ritual, or an Islamic pilgrimage, we are outside quotidian time, just as we are during the rites of passage associated with the cycle of life.[1]

Throughout our history, however, the initiation, development, and perpetuation of customs has required constant negotiation. In 2012, I looked at the Burning of the Clavie, a Scottish New Year fire festival from this point of view: how its practitioners and community members work out the ongoing shape of the event among themselves, and how they respond to those seeking to control it, in order to create a practice that meets their needs while not conflicting *too much* with external cultural and legal authorities who seek to control it for various reasons. These include, for example, the church, historically, for its supposed idolatrous purpose; the local police, for its potential danger; and different factions in the community, regarding different concepts of what is the 'right' way to do it).[2] Negotiation, a dialogic mechanism whereby behaviours are tested and embedded or discarded, is a practical way that decisions get made, consciously or subconsciously, and the process of tradition is perpetuated through performance and repetition, maintaining enough in common with past iterations to create what we call a stable tradition: What do we keep? Everything. What do we change? Nothing. Such stability is an illusion, however, for tradition is predicated on constant change, as long as it is not so fast that its entire 'content' changes in one generation. Each time a ritual is enacted, it is slightly different, just as a rendition of a song or tune is different with each iteration, but there is enough remaining to suggest continuity.

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[1] Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2019).

[2] Thomas A. McKean, 'Stewardship and Evolving Fidelity in a Scottish Fire Festival', *Traditiones*, 41, no. 1 (2012), 23–36.

Regulating Customs zooms out from these emic negotiations to focus on a wider, more diverse range of influences that shape how customs are practised, invented and reinvented, restored and revitalised. Communities and individuals need to know when innovation has gone too far, or not far enough, and for that they look to regulation, which constrains its compass, shaping participants' ideas of what is proper and within the bounds of acceptable change. Regulation, then, rather than being a constraining factor, is indispensable to the concept of tradition itself, mediating pathways among diverse forces from above, among, and below.

Regulatory systems have a traditionality of their own and can be found in individuals, families, communities, and in wider civic society. They include personal beliefs and belief systems, multi-valent relationships that define and control community behaviour, groups that constrain behaviour through example, policy, and practice, and systems embedded in constituted bodies such as local councils, police services, and formal legislative systems. Paradigms include historical precedent that guides or influences the practice or revival of a custom, 'insider' rules that govern behaviour, negotiation within communities, (attempted) regulation from outside, and motivations and resources germane to the revival of dormant customs. Together, these models traverse the space between innovation and ossification.

Tradition is often thought of as a noun — ritual, story, action, practice, idea — describing stable, quantifiable cultural products. But what binds them together are the *processes* that take us through liminal, threshold states of practice. Without these, ideas cannot become culture, realised in an act of performance, with each iteration constantly adapting to meet the challenges we face, from environmental knowledge tied to our past lives in close interaction with the seasons, planting, growing, and harvesting, to modern day calendrical punctuations of our sometimes featureless office-based lives. Divorced from the need to understand the environment as we once did, we look to evolving and new customs to divide the year, providing boundaries which start and finish, and measure development and change, as we navigate the dynamic relationship between the steadfastly cyclical year and our delimited linear lives.

Change is thus foundational to the notion of tradition itself, the process whereby knowledge is *practised, renewed and reshaped*, making it relevant for new times and new places. Ironically, then, it is a kind

of *in*stability that defines traditionality, one enabled by a strong mix of regulatory stimuli. Most customs that have been around for a while have this quality, a lithe ability to adapt to changing influences, pressures, and ideas, whether from within or without.

In *Regulating Tradition*, we examine the guiding forces that are brought to bear on customary practices old and new, from the authority of sometimes adversarial church calendars to the unspoken precedents of community and individual practice. I have loosely arranged the articles in order of widening scope and increasing scale, dealing first with belief and practice-oriented customs, next with tradition and innovation in rural and urban communities, and finally with socio-political modernities.

We begin on an intra-community level, where customary practices can take on a surprising degree of significance. In the close confines of a rural group, the members of which must work together, Nancy McEntire shows how Scottish Hogmanay (New Year) traditions perform a range of functions, from the practical aspects of binding people together socially to the more abstract, but equally important, desire to bring good fortune and prosperity for the coming year. Here, the regulatory urge comes from the weight of tradition, customary practice dictating that we do what has 'always been done', drawing on individual and collective reiteration of precedent. Tradition in and of itself can be curiously transient; without regular and filial enactment, the actions we take and the culture we transmit will simply not carry on. Thus, individual agency has a key role to play in the transmission, stability, and creative adaptation of cultural practices. Culture is our inheritance, but the process of enactment is what creates the next generation's legacy. This, in turn, accumulates into tradition, community, and, indeed, what we call civilisation.

My own article turns to the diverse regulatory influences on the choreography of a politico-seasonal calendar ritual in the North-East of Scotland, the Tarves Bonfire. Here, the community stakes its claim to regulatory power through the establishment of the Tarves People's Party, a counterbalance to regional and historical authorities. Today's iteration of the traditional mid-autumn bonfire is organised by a very informal committee, with a range of spoken and unspoken social goals behind it. The regulatory mission is subtle but firm, yet also provides an outlet for individualistic and almost anarchic subtexts promoted by some of the committee members.

Opening out our field of vision to intercultural regulatory influences, Irina Sedakova looks at the *Karakondzho*, pan-Balkan evil spirits that appear at Christmas and disappear at Epiphany, providing an insight into what happens when a tradition overlaps linguistic, community, and political boundaries. We have seen some of the regulatory effects of the individual and community on calendar practices, as well as wider institutional controls by states, towns, and religious groups, but here, looking at closely related examples found in neighbouring regions, Sedakova deftly unpicks ethnolinguistic evidence to reveal an unseen regulatory pattern deeply anchored in the cultural and linguistic connections of the past.

Moving on to Hristov's exploration of the *Youth Kurban* movement in post-socialist Bulgaria, we see a powerful contrast in regulatory authority between a ritual with origins deep within Orthodox tradition and its twenty-first century reinvention by young people in mid-western villages. The human need to counter personal misfortune and natural disasters with ritual finds its way to the surface in the form of community practices shaped by these wildly divergent regulatory paradigms. In the traditional *Kurban*, ancient traditions, rules, and practices are informed and enforced by the weight of tradition and by the established authority of a major hierarchical religious institution, whereas the mechanism is completely different in the modern-day rescension, with creation, adaptation, and regulation of 'new' practices guided by the participants themselves as they seek to mark the social and cultural boundaries of their ambit.

Taking our exploration into the realms of individual practice, Barmpalexis focuses on the idiolectal use of an ancient tradition in contemporary contexts: the Irish 'Wild Hunt' as enacted in contemporary North-East Scotland. Here, the regulator is Andrew Steed, a modern practitioner of shamanic healing, a syncretic ritual drawing on diverse spiritual and restorative practices from around the world. Steed plays the role of celebrant, passing on their accumulated knowledge, practices, and traditions, often, as Linda May Ballard suggests, out of respect for those from whom he learned, or with whom he experienced them.[3] Barmpalexis shows us the depth and complexity of geographic

[3] Quoted in Barbara Rieti, *Strange Terrain: The Fairy World in Newfoundland*, Social and Economic Studies, 45 (St John's: Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1991), p. 91.

and individual localisation, as Steed moulds the ritual to his own needs and those of his clients and followers.

Not all customs are rooted in the past, of course, and tradition is as much about innovation as it is about maintaining past practices. With this in mind, James Deutsch tackles the phenomenon of a custom within a custom: Thanksgiving Day sales in the USA. Fitting these into paradigms of both ritual and 'heroic' adventure, Deutsch looks at top-down civil regulation and its complicated relationship with rapidly evolving vernacular practice, itself a regulatory force defined by practice and execution, in other words, by custom. The increasingly embedded structures and practices associated with these sales have real-time impacts on society, our community interactions, and our seemingly inexorable move towards the virtual environments of online shopping and interaction, all the more so in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has polarised these live and virtual environments to new extremes.

This brings us to a suite of papers on urban practices, some imported from rural settings, others native to their metropolitan environments. Tatiana Minniyakhmetova looks at the effects of urbanisation — an immense regulatory influence in many walks of life — on customary practices among the Udmurt. Calendar rituals are some of humanity's most enduring manifestations of the dual need to mark and to control; in addition to their quotidian purposes, Udmurt calendar customs create community, like Scottish Hogmanay practices, as well as express it. But what becomes of traditional ritual practices when they are unmoored from environmental necessity? Having been cut adrift from the applied world and brought to the virtual environment of social interaction, these practices must find new roots, at the regulatory mercy of individuals and communities, places and spaces. Answering to human need, custom, like many other aspects of tradition, finds fertile ground in the human craving for ritual and routine, the known and the familiar, augmented when it links us back to a revered past.

In any conurbation, there is a layering of cultures and experience, as exemplified in Cozette Griffin-Kremer's study of the complex situation evident in the seemingly simple lily-of-the-valley May Day ritual. Reflecting on the wide variations that have come into the custom with its move from rural France, she explores urban dimensions which range from political marches to national laws governing the gathering of the flowers, from the participants whose activities maintain the life of the

festival to the civic authorities who try to capitalise on the 'local', the 'terroir' aspect of the associated festivities. Here, diverse sources of regulation vie to shape the practices for their own purposes, personal to commercial, revealing dimensions of function and meaning far beyond the earliest job of marking the changing year and coming of Spring.

Inevitably, as customs move through space and time, there will be change. In her paper on post-Soviet Lithuanian customs, Skaidrė Urbonienė tackles the fascinating question of survival and attrition. Which traditions survive and which do not, and why? This is a question that has intrigued scholars for generations from the earliest attempts at finding the oldest, 'original' layers of human culture. But here, in Soviet and post-Soviet Lithuania, we have a compelling case study of cultural adaptation and change in our own time, with plenty of first-hand evidence brought to bear. While both Cross-days and May Devotions celebrations were highly significant events in Lithuania's ritual year practices, only the latter survived the Soviet era. Using more than ten years of field research, Urbonienė explores how family and individual agency engaged to keep the May Devotions alive, and how this new regulatory regime impacted the identity of the festival and the adaptations necessary for its survival as a living practice.

Among the most dominant regulatory influences over the last few decades — at least in the minds of local authorities and governments, less so for communities on the ground — is undoubtedly UNESCO, with its 2003 'Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage'.[4] Lidija Nikočević tackles this massive bureaucratic influence on customary practices today, looking at the Convention's impact on seasonal bell-ringing communities and traditions in Croatia. For these, the mere fact of being listed creates social dynamics far beyond the professed motivation to 'safeguard' intangible culture heritage. But, most revealing are the effects of listing on individuals within the tradition, on their behaviour, their sense of self, and their sense of community. In this case, a top-down regulation regime has, due to its international gravitas and critical mass, altered the local power balance between cultural players and stratified previously relatively democratic practices.

[4] UNESCO, '2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage', https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/15164-EN.pdf [accessed 16 October 2020].

Although the pace of change continues to accelerate in our era, customs have always been subject to influences from other areas and cultures. Bringing our look at regulating customs full circle, Suzy Harrison looks at a prominent by-product of rapid transport and communication: the growth of critical-mass immigrant communities which leads to calendar practices from one culture getting firmly embedded in another. These usually start off with domestic, family observances, which develop into small-scale public facsimiles of the 'original', and finally into full-blown community events, which put down roots and soon hybridise into something new, often of equal potency and scale as the practice in its parent culture. Harrison looks at how the festival of Diwali has become embedded in Leicester, one of the most culturally diverse cities in England, with celebrations some of the biggest outside India, and traces its development since 1983 into the spectacle of today, the product of regulatory forces from the community and civic authorities working in concert.

Together, these essays explore myriad dimensions of customary regulation — how diverse forces, micro and macro, emic and etic, bottom-up and top-down, create, sustain, alter, and stabilise calendar customs, those enduring practices with which we mark the inevitable turning of the year.

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