

Traditionalism and Neoliberalism: The Norwegian Folk Dress in the 21st Century*

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Cultural property rights

The concept of cultural property rights is a recent one and one that raises several sets of problems. Some of them concern issues of copyright protection and royalties from cultural production; some concern the delineation of the object, namely what kinds of culture can be “owned;” and some have to do with the assignment of specific forms of cultural property to particular groups or individuals – who “owns” a certain tradition, the right to define it, to protect it from infringement and to benefit from its possible commercialization?

Commercialization of traditional cultural products entails a form of reification and “musealization” of living culture that is intimately connected to the history of nation-building and that is a close relative of the debate over culture and rights. Stable national identities presuppose the standardization of cultural expressions, and it is no accident that Anderson (1991), in the second edition of *Imagined Communities*, added material on museums, maps and censuses. Routinely associated with the Romantic movement in 19th century Europe and North America, the folk and national museums have later proven to be important elements of postcolonial nation-building worldwide. Moreover, as every anthropologist knows, the same concerns that gave the initial impetus to developing national museums in European countries are today at the core of a variety of projects aimed at profiting politically or commercially from a collective sense of cultural identity.

The issue of cultural property rights has emerged partly as the consequence of an increased global traffic in signs and goods, partly due to an increased reification of culture and concomitant recognition of its potential as a resource. Culture has become a widespread idiom for discourse about politics in the broader sense (including identity and life politics), tourism, the arts and so on. For twenty years, it has been a staple of what we may speak of as an ironic anthropology that aims to deconstruct and critically interrogate “native” reifications of, and manipulations with, their own presumed cultural productions. Following in the footsteps of historians like Hugh Trevor-Roper, whose research on the Scottish highland tradition revealed it to be a recent creation (Trevor-Roper 1983), numerous anthropologists (e.g. Handler 1988, McDonald 1989, Friedman 1993,

Eriksen 1993) have explored “native essentialisms” and showed them to be inscribed into political and sometimes commercial discourses.

Reacting to this ironic turn in anthropology, Sahlins (1999) complains that too many “anthropologists say that the so-called traditions the peoples are flaunting are not much more than serviceable humbugger” (Sahlins 1999, 402). He then goes on to argue that the “afterological” strategies so typical of contemporary intellectual life fail to take seriously the meaningful structures that make up people’s life-worlds, which continue to vary in discontinuous ways and not least, in ways that are crucial to the actors involved. In an earlier, parallel argument against radical constructivism in research on nationalism, Smith (1991) pointed out that although the reified symbols of nations may be recent constructions or even fabrications, this does not mean that the members of a nation do not have anything substantial in common. Being paranoid is no guarantee that nobody is after you. The point is well taken – the majority of people who live in a given country may have a lot of untheorized, unmarked and unpoliticized culture in common, despite the fact that the official national symbolism has been recently and perhaps even cunningly constructed. It is also true, as Sahlins (1999) says in a critique of the notion of the “invention of tradition,” that it is frequently impossible to distinguish between “fabricated” and “real” culture. Finally, conflating culture with identity politics, as de Heusch (2000) has uncharitably accused Roosens (1990) of doing, is clearly unacceptable (see also Eriksen 2000).

On the other hand, there are several strong arguments in favor of exploring commercialized or politicized expressions of culture as contestable acts of symbolic invention; we just have to make it clear that such analyses do not offer the whole story. First, as Keesing (1996) pointed out, the politics of tradition in societies studied by anthropologists now entails the appropriation of a vaguely anthropological (or perhaps nationalist) concept of culture: Anthropologists are no longer needed to identify other people’s culture, since they are perfectly capable of doing it themselves. The interest of the anthropologist then moves to an investigation of the ways in which a particular reified configuration of local culture is being trimmed and shaped to meet immediate political needs – however, it must be conceded to Sahlins that these reifications should not be mistaken for the real thing. Second, research on “ethnic art” (e.g. Graburn 1976) shows that both the form and content of symbolic production associated with particular cultures undergoes dramatic transformation when the products are incorporated into a wider system of exchange, such as the global arts market. Third, it must be said that whenever a particular use of symbols associated with a group is contested, asking the question *cui bono?* is less an act of

cynicism or ironic anthropology than an earnest wish to find out what is going on. Fourth and finally, it is sometimes both relevant and enlightening to distinguish between culture seen as the shared understandings of a particular collectivity of people, and culture seen as a commodity or political resource. If it is true, as rumor has it, that Irish theme pubs are becoming so popular these days that they are even appearing in Dublin, then no anthropologist worthy of his grant money would describe them without making a distinction between the generic, globalized Irish pubs and the ancient local on the corner.

The point is not that culture is reducible to its expression as commodity or political resource, or that it is meaningful to make an absolute distinction between “artificially created” and “organically created” culture, but rather that there is an important gap between the richness of lived culture and the more narrowly delineated area of reified or commercialized culture, and that this gap needs to be explored.

The argument to be developed in an empirical context below concerns the economics of cultural tradition, not its politics (although the two are sometimes nearly inseparable). The questions asked are simple and straightforward: Who invests what, how is the market perceived, how are market shares defended and expanded, and wherein do the profits consist? It should be emphasized that the present analysis is not meant to reduce a meaningful symbolic universe to a mere market mechanism. On the contrary, the market mechanism simultaneously presupposes and appropriates a pre-existing meaningful symbolic universe, but it twists it to meet its own ends as well. It is also obvious (*pace* Sahlins 1976) that the “profits” garnered from cultural commodification are just as meaningful as they are economic in a narrow sense. Before we begin, however, some additional context is required.

Causes of commodification

In the nascent stages of modern European nationalism, Johann Gottfried Herder developed a famous argument against the great Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire. In his youthful essay *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* (“Another philosophy of history,” Herder 1967 [1774]), Herder accused Voltaire’s universalism of being a provincialism in disguise. Voltaire, who held the view that there was but one universal civilization, to which all humans had the right of access, was in Herder’s opinion a promoter of Frenchness parading as a universalist. Against Voltaire’s universalism, Herder proposed that all peoples (or, at any rate, all *Kulturvölker*) were equal but different. Each *Volk* had its own genius, its own form of creativity and so on, and these were fundamentally distinct from those of other *Völker*.

In this argument, we can discern the origins of contemporary debates over national identity, culture and rights, and cultural commodification more specifically. As recent work on culture and rights has shown (see e.g. Cowan et al. 2001), human rights can only be successfully introduced in any society if they are adapted to local conditions. In other words, even the most universalist notion held in “the global ecumene,” and arguably the only shared normative dogma in contemporary world politics, is continuously subjected to local adjustments. Moreover, Herder’s view that – to use contemporary terms – culture matters and creates important discontinuities, has numerous sources of support in our day and age, ranging from grand theories of civilizational conflict, Huntington-style, to the marketing strategies of transnational companies. In a word, the relationships between individual rights and group rights, and between liberal universalism and cultural boundedness, are acutely relevant in today’s world, characterized as it is by commercialized and politicized culture. There can be no simple intellectual response to the Gordian knot that is posed by this issue. It cannot be cut through, but perhaps it can be untied, at least in part. Leaving questions of world politics aside, I shall begin the analysis by proposing distinctions between some interrelated features of the contemporary world that contribute to making culture a scarce resource, thus also making it a site of contention, before bringing them back together by presenting an empirical example.

Hegemonic capitalism and individualism

The exact degree to which capitalism (as a mode of production, distribution and consumption) and individualism (its ideological counterpart) have become universal at the onset of the 21st century – and what their diffusion entails in local terms – are issues that continue to be explored, and it would be preposterous to pretend to specify here the extent of capitalist penetration. Generally speaking, however, it is obviously the case that market exchange and consumer choice today form important parts of the economy both internationally and within most societies. Moreover, since the end of the Cold War, there have been few serious ideological challenges to the capitalist/liberal ideal posited by the World Trade Organization, the G7 states, NAFTA and the EU, or by major development agencies such as the IMF and the World Bank. Commodification takes place through deregulation of public services – postal services and hospitals are increasingly seen as businesses, educational reforms turn universities into enterprises (Strathern 2000) – and in other important arenas. Commodification also characterizes notions and practices related to cultural production,

perhaps especially in the tourist industry, but also in attempts by export industries to turn assumed national or ethnic traits into “trademarks,” e.g. by airlines or car manufacturers. The tendency to exploit national character in marketing has been described as using “the soul as a marketing idea” (Johansen 1991). Culture, then, becomes something that can be sold and purchased as an inherent aspect of goods and services.

Culture as a political resource

Perhaps the most obvious social field defined simultaneously by cultural creativity and the patrolling of cultural boundaries is that of ethnic politics. In ethnic politics, processes of exclusion and inclusion are framed by means of the idiom of cultural specificity – knowledge and skills associated with the group and only with the group. Emblematic expressions of cultural particularity in this well-researched area range from traditional practices couched in modern language, to creolized tradition, to pure fabrication. The point is that both the valorization of the group’s collective identity and the criteria for membership hinge on some notion of group culture. Such notions are often hotly contested – What does it mean to be a German Turk? Or how “Huron” do you have to be in order to be a Huron? – and the mere existence of these contestations shows their importance (see Baumann 1999). Strip away all the perceptible trappings of tradition, and what you get is something different from an ethnic interest group: The symbolic basis for ethnic identity will then vanish and the group members will organize themselves along divergent, non-ethnic lines, such as class. Some members of ethnic minorities are likely to be inclined toward this solution, but in so far as a leadership profits politically or otherwise from the maintenance of a clear group identity – or that identity is thrust upon the group from the dominant Other – it continues to exist, and notions of one’s own culture continue to be a key factor.

Keeping-while-selling

In settings where information or knowledge are valuable commodities that simultaneously function as capital and as means of production (Castells 1996), distinctive forms of knowledge acquire special economic value. The so-called knowledge industries, from software design to advertising, are often-mentioned examples, but the phenomenon is much more widespread in the contemporary world. Knowledge forms the decisive input and output in bureaucracies, in the legal system, and so on. In ethnography, professional informants have even emerged in some societies; that is, specialists who charge a fee for sharing their knowledge with the anthropologist.

Or, to put it differently: The scarcity that gives a commodity its value often consists not in scarcity of raw materials or production technology, but of particular kinds of knowledge. This economic logic certainly does not apply only to information societies. Godelier (1974) described the surplus value of salt among the Baruya as a result of scarce, protected knowledge, but in contemporary capitalist societies, the art of marketing specific kinds of knowledge as rare and indispensable has become central to many economic activities. Culturally specialized knowledge, therefore, can be a significant source of economic profit, provided it is successfully marketed. The formula is: Give away the menu, sell the food, and keep the recipe.

Seen from another perspective, the situation can be described as an extractive one. Rather than extracting sweat and cocoa, the new colonial masters extract ideas, sounds and colors. As Strathern points out in a discussion of intellectual property rights (IPR) and indigenous peoples: "The market ... disembods what is usable, whereas the thrust of the indigenous IPR movement is to re-embed, re-contextualize, indigenous ownership in indigenous traditional culture. *Tradition, we may remark, is an embedding concept*" (Strathern 1999, 167, my italics). This insight highlights the conflict at hand – between commercialism and traditionalism, between exchange-value and use-value.

Copyrighting culture

Both with reference to advertising and to identity politics, one of the scarcest resources in the contemporary world is the attention of, and recognition by, others. Although most indigenous movements still place a high priority on the classic issue of land rights, their cultural production and collective markers of identity are also, and probably increasingly, politicized (and often commercialized) resources. Demands for the repatriation of objects exhibited in foreign museums are typical expressions of this (Lührmann, *this volume*). "Ethnic music" and "ethnic arts" are also means of achieving recognition, simultaneously catering to cosmopolitan tastes and expressing local knowledge.

In a creative updating of the standard anthropological perspective on ethnic identity as a device for creating social boundaries (and thus controlling the flow of signs and resources), Harrison (1999) describes ethnic identity as a scarce resource, seeing it ultimately as an *inalienable possession* (following Weiner 1992; see also Kasten, *this volume*). As mentioned above, the menu can be given away (Look at us and our cultural wealth!), the food can be sold (Buy our products; learn our language!), but the recipe is sacred and must be kept secret (Don't dare to do the same things we do!).

In the cases discussed by Harrison, the boundaries are transgressed by the outsiders, who make “illegitimate copies” of a group’s cultural production, for political or commercial ends. Harrison’s perspective seems perfectly in tune with the constraints and incentives characteristic of an information society. For example, he analyses Maori land claims and their conflicts with white livestock farmers in a way that makes it tempting to draw a parallel to Microsoft’s perennial conflict with Asian software pirates. The white farmers have copied ways of relating to the land reminiscent of traditional Maori notions of land tenure, and claim similar land rights. The Maori see this appropriation of their cultural notions as piracy. Unlike forms of knowledge that, when shared with others, increase one’s symbolic capital – missionary activity and linguistic conversion are obvious examples – the Maori case is more similar to the Trobrianders’ practice of transferring magical incantations through inheritance, or the transmission of secret knowledge through initiation rites. Theft of a spiritual way of relating to the land can be seen as a form of industrial espionage.¹

The question that arises is whether, and to what extent, it is possible to copyright cultural knowledge that is publicly known. Is it, for example, possible to see mass-marketed instant Thai food as counterfeit food? Can the footballer Ronaldo’s haircut be copyrighted? Is it possible to copyright the spoken word? (Many readers doubtless know people who specialize in stealing the jokes of others.) For centuries in Europe, the problem was not that of software pirates but of pirate printers (Siegrist 2002). The efficient enforcement of copyright coincides with the era of the nation-state: before – and perhaps after – the predominance of the nation-state, there are serious difficulties with controlling flows and even identifying the copyright holder. Regarding “cultural property,” the problem of defining boundaries also becomes acute: who has the right to claim exclusive rights to a dance, a ritual, a cuisine, a craft?

Kasten (2002, 4) sums up the dilemma accurately: “On the one hand, the result of intellectual labor and time invested has to be acknowledged and rewarded; on the other hand, the free flow and use of ideas is the essential stimulus for human creativity and innovation. One of the basic problems of intellectual property law is, perhaps, that every product of intellectual labor or invention builds upon the ideas of predecessors. This often makes it difficult to define from what point onwards the innovation of a particular individual or team in a chain of numerous innovations begins or ends.” As I shall soon emphasize below, it is becoming increasingly difficult to protect oneself against piracy, or even to defend the term piracy, on the grounds suggested by Kasten.

The *copyleft* movement associated with Open Source (Linux) software represents a creative solution. Unlike the software giants who jealously protect every line of code, the code of Open Source software is freely available, and anyone is entitled to use it in their own applications. However, if someone copies your piece of code, they have to make their work freely available in the same way: *everyone* must be free to copy the copy. Violations could be compared to plagiarism, and the transgressor loses face. The *names* of all contributors to a piece of software should always accompany it. Recognition thus appears to be an important motivation for the programmers. If the Maori attempt to monopolize their spiritual relationship to the land can be said to be similar to copyright, secret knowledge and protection of source code, then the “copyleft” practices of Open Source are reminiscent of the *kula* trade (see Leach 2000 for a similar comparison). These contrasting ways of dealing with knowledge represent two opposite, and competing, views of cultural property: it should be shared with as many as possible, or it should be protected. Indeed, in his analyses of language and symbolic power, Bourdieu (e.g. 1982) has argued that the French academic system favors a high degree of protectionism regarding knowledge. A contrasting view is developed in Kasten’s (2002) analysis of repatriation in Kamchatka, where he concludes that rather than concentrating on moving objects, “if we are to deal with repatriation, we should concentrate on making appropriated local cultural knowledge available again to local communities” – not for them to monopolize it, but for them to be able to benefit from it. This view comes very close to the Open Source ideology in that it posits that knowledge should be freely available, but also that in using it, one has obligations to acknowledge its origin.

The *bunad*

We now move to the empirical case, which shows the essential unity of the phenomena described above, as well as the fact that the commercialization and the politicization of culture are frequently two sides of the same coin. The example also shows how symbolic universes expand and contract, how they open and close, in response to changing circumstances.

Considerable scholarly attention has been paid to folk costumes, most of it concerned with their place in identity politics (see Eicher 1995). It has been shown, for example, that the kilt has never been a popular garment in Scotland but gained symbolic significance for political reasons after 1745 (Chapman 1992), and that certain folk costumes have been “frozen in time” while others have been adapted and modernized to fit changing circumstances (Lynch 1995), always with the political project of group cohesion and boundary maintenance as the underlying force.

The present case deals with Norwegian *bunads*, a kind of festive folk costume. Instead of seeing them primarily in the light of nationbuilding, I shall analyze the *bunad* and a recent controversy surrounding it in the context of the above discussion of cultural property.



Bunad from Western Telemark
photo: www.husfliden.no



Bunad from Eastern Telemark
photo: www.husfliden.no

The *bunad* is a particular kind of festive dress. The term is a slightly archaic Norwegian dialect word that was introduced into urban circles by the author and nationalist activist Hulda Garborg in her pamphlet *Norsk klædebunad* in 1903. Writing during a feverish phase of Norwegian nationalism – the country became independent in 1905, and nationalism was an enormously powerful force at the time – Garborg argued the need for a truly Norwegian *and* regional kind of formal dress. She collected and systematized what she saw as intact and useful regional *bunad* traditions, and designed some *bunads* herself. Interestingly, Garborg never denied the syncretistic and partly invented character of the new, traditionalist folk costume. She nevertheless emphasized its role as a marker of rural, Norwegian identity. Very many Norwegian regions and even smaller valleys have their own *bunads*. Many were designed long after Garborg; the Bergen *bunad*, for example, dates from 1956 but gives the impression of being a very traditional kind of dress.²

A relevant distinction applies between a *bunad* and a folk costume. Folk costumes were everyday and festive clothes worn by peasants in southern Norway until the 19th century, and (like certain kinds of peasant food) have been recontextualized more recently as formal dress. *Bunads*, on the contrary, are reconstructed and re-designed – and some are very nearly purely invented – costumes designed from the early 20th century onward. They are used on formal occasions such as Christmas Eve, Constitution Day (May 17), and at weddings and other major social events, although not funerals: *bunads* are bright and joyful garments. Some *bunads* represent minor adjustments (“upgradings” and modernizations) of the original folk costume, while the link is less obvious in other cases.

The *bunad* is an important, traditionalist symbol of modern Norwegianness. Most of these costumes are clearly related to regional and minority folk costumes from Central and Eastern Europe, and the German influence has often been commented upon (Oxaal 2001). More importantly, the *bunad* confirms Norwegian identity as an essentially rural one, where personal integrity is connected to roots and regional origins. However, 18th and 19th century peasants would often wear European-style dress at formal occasions such as weddings, or they might wear a folk costume that gradually went out of use. In other words, there is a clear element of modern invention, which nobody denies, in the currently widespread use of *bunads*. Fashions changed and were often inspired by the big European centers. The *bunad*, which has therefore often had to be reconstructed from historical sources, signifies adherence to roots and traditions. Indeed, the then-prime minister of Norway, Mrs. Gro Harlem Brundtland, wore a *bunad* in what could be described as an ostentatious display during the Winter Olympics at Lillehammer in 1994. Later in the same year, Norway would decide on whether to join the European Union. Mrs. Brundtland’s dress could be seen as a way of overcommunicating Norwegianness. She was the leader of a pro-EU government trying to persuade a skeptical population, and by wearing a *bunad* she seemed to try to convince them that there was no contradiction between being European and being a good Norwegian.

Although *bunads* have been a common sight on festive occasions, not least on Constitution Day, for generations, they have become increasingly common during the last two decades. I can remember growing up in the 1970s in a coastal town near Oslo with hardly any connections to national romanticism past or present, and there were scarcely any *bunads* or folk costumes to be seen in town during the parades and public gatherings on May 17. The town had for centuries been a prosperous center of trade, shipping and whaling, and the fashions had always tended to be urban and

European. Returning to my hometown on that day in the mid-1990s, I was completely taken aback by the uniformity in dress. The regional *bunad* had been designed relatively recently, and was scarcely based on local traditions at all, since folk costumes had not been common in the region in the past. But they certainly were common now.

Patrolling the borders

The Bunad and Folk Costume Council (Bunad- og folkedraktsrådet) is a state-funded advisory body under the Ministry of Culture. The purpose of the Council is “to offer advice and to stimulate an enhanced understanding of the traditional dress practices that are the foundation of today’s *bunads*.” It has collected enormous amounts of knowledge about *bunads*, and boasts on its website that it has 55,000 different patterns of *bunads* and folk costumes in its database. The Council cannot legislate formally on patterns and designs, but its advice is taken very seriously. Often, a new or revised design is denied the designation *bunad*. There should be a strong historical element and a clear geographical provenance, and if these are absent it is instead simply called a regional costume (*drakt*), or – pejoratively – a “fantasy costume.”

Interestingly, the current policies of the Bunad and Folk Costume Council are based on a stronger version of Romantic notions of cultural authenticity than were Garborg’s views in 1903. Garborg emphasized that some degree of cultural continuity was desirable, and recommended that Norwegian *bunads* should be made from Norwegian fabrics such as wool, not from imported silk and linen. However, she also took a pragmatic stance on the issue of authenticity, admitting that the *bunads* needed to be modernized to suit the modern woman’s taste. The Bunad and Folk Costume Council, on the contrary, states that “The main objective in our day and age is that the *bunad* should be as good a copy as possible of a local folk costume as it was used in a particular historical period.”

It is estimated that more than 60 per cent of Norwegian women own a *bunad*; so do a growing, but much smaller, number of men. They are expensive garments, with hand-embroidered details, ornamental silver jewelry and accessories such as belts, sashes, ribbons and bands. Some of the more popular ones cost as much as NOK 30,000 (4,000 Euros). The total value of Norwegian *bunads* is estimated at 30 billion kroner (4 billion Euros). In other words, the *bunad* business has economic significance in addition to its strong connotations of political and cultural identity.³

As the above should have made clear, the *bunad* economy seems to be regulated by concerns other than purely economic ones. Notably, there are strict informal rules regulating the individual use of *bunads*. Some are

considered more beautiful than others, but a person has no moral right to wear a particular kind unless she – it is usually a she – has documented kinship links with the place of origin. In contemporary society, many if not most individuals have two, three or four options: they can legitimately wear a *bunad* designed in the place where they live, in the place where they grew up (which is often a different place, as urbanization has been widespread), or in one of their parents' places of origin. They cannot, however, legitimately wear a *bunad* from just any place they happen to fancy. They could, of course, buy such a garment, but their friends and relatives might react strongly. As one expert says: "I am aware of people in the heart of Bunad Norway (*sic*) who are deeply offended. They have no time for West End ladies who claim Telemark ancestry when they buy the perhaps greatest status symbol of all *bunads*, namely the expensive and exclusive East Telemark *bunad*. They also dislike how some people wear gold chains and earrings while they wear *bunads*."⁴

The degree of purism within the Bunad and Folk Costume Council is equally strong. The director of the Council comments, regarding the unhistorical, but (in the view of many) beautiful "fantasy costumes:" "Some companies use really aggressive marketing strategies to sell these fantasy costumes. They have nothing to do with old traditions. We just want to inform people that they have no business believing that they are wearing *bunads* if they buy this stuff."⁵

There are frequent conflicts over authenticity framed within the *bunad* discourse itself. In the valley of Numedal, competition between two alternative *bunads* actually led to the creation of two distinct factions in the May 17 parade of 2002. Family members fell out with each other; local politicians groped for compromises. One of the alternatives, a simple folk costume, is woven in dark fabrics; the other, a complex, reconstructed *bunad* sanctioned by the Bunad and Folk Costume Council is much more elaborate and colorful. The defenders of the simple costume argue that the new one, "overloaded with silver and embroidery," is inappropriate and clearly inauthentic for a traditionally poor mountain valley; the other faction sees the simple *bunad* as sordid and joyless. Both factions claim that their *bunad* is the more ancient. The one sanctioned by the Council is in any case the more expensive one. It is also an undisputed fact that embroidery and masses of fine silver jewelry came to be added to *bunads* in modern times, as people were increasingly able to afford them. Interestingly, embroidery was widespread on 18th century folk costumes, but went out of use with the availability of inexpensive (often imported) fabrics in the 19th century. Reconstructed *bunads* are therefore said, by their defenders, to be older than the 19th century folk costumes, even if they can also be said to be more recent.

The entrepreneur and the *bunad* police

The *bunad* industry stands, perhaps uncomfortably but very profitably, at the crossroads between traditionalist identity politics and business. The largest actors in the field, notably the mighty retail chain *Husfliden*, try to have it both ways; by guaranteeing the regional authenticity of the garments they sell, they are using culture as investment capital to justify exorbitant prices. *Husfliden*, which has outlets in many Norwegian towns and cities, contributes in no small measure to defining what a certain *bunad* should look like and to focusing the market on certain *bunads* and costumes at the expense of others. In one case, *Husfliden* organized courses for women wishing to save money by sewing their own *bunads*, but as a condition, the participants had to sign an agreement promising that they would only make *bunads* for themselves and for first-order blood relatives. Some talk about “the *bunad* police” (by analogy to Orwell’s thought police), while a particular region in North-Western Norway, known for its heartbreaking local conflicts over authenticity issues, is spoken of as “the Yugoslavia of the *bunad*.” The same region is also known for its unfaltering support of *nynorsk* (New Norwegian), a minority variation on the Norwegian language created by the remarkable self-taught linguist Ivar Aasen in the mid-19th century and based on the dialect words he considered most authentic (i.e. most ancient and most distinctive from the then-dominant Danish).⁶

The *bunad* definitely stirs up strong emotions. After the May 17 celebrations in 2001, Queen Sonja was criticized in public for wearing sunglasses along with her *bunad*; in the same year, Crown Princess Mette-Marit was severely reprimanded in the press for wearing a purely invented “fantasy costume” rather than an authentic *bunad* from her home region. Women are generally advised by the Bunad and Folk Costume Council not to wear makeup and earrings with their *bunad*.

Because of the wealth of detail, a proper *bunad* cannot be entirely mass produced by machine. This accounts in part for its high market price. Moreover, the knowledge and skill required to make a *bunad* is considered a cultural, local form of knowledge – a kind of inalienable possession. In the spring of 2002, a conflict erupted between the traditionalists and a young entrepreneur who wanted a slice of the market. This conflict inadvertently brought the implicit ideology underlying the *bunad* into public view.

What happened was this. A young Norwegian of Chinese origin, who originally worked as a cook, began to take interest in *bunads*. He took a *bunad* course, learning the basics of the craft. Before going into business, and realizing that he would have little credibility as a *bunad* salesman with a Chinese name, he changed his name from Aching to John Helge Dahl. He founded a company called “Norske Bunader” (Norwegian *bunads*),

and then did a truly outrageous thing by contracting dozens of Chinese seamstresses in Shanghai to do the stitching. The fabrics were sent from Norway, and the completed garments were returned – at a much lower price, of course, than those made by the Norwegian competition. He built the finished *bunads* from these garments himself. “To most people, it is the quality that counts,” he says, “not who has done the embroidery.”⁷ Of course, doing it this way he can offer *bunads* at a highly competitive price.

The Bunad and Folk Costume Council has reacted very strongly against Mr. Dahl, as has the *Husfliden* chain. At one point the latter threatened to sue him for plagiarism, but since *bunad* designs are not copyrighted, they were likely to lose the court case. Comparing *bunads* to dialects, their argument is that the craft amounts to a locally embedded kind of knowledge that does not travel well. With reference to the mass production and industrialization of *bunad* production, they argue that the use of foreign labor leads to cultural flattening. The resulting products, they claim, have no *hau*, to use the famous Maori term for the “soul” of an object (Mauss 1990).

A sociologist who defended the traditionalists argued that this was a matter of “personal knowledge.” *Bunad* embroidery, she added, was a kind of handwriting. “When anyone can take a pattern, send it abroad, and make a good profit from the product, people will ask: What is it that I am spending one or two months’ salary on?” Responding to her own question, she said that such a foreign-made garment would feel alienating, and that it would not satisfy people’s emotional need to build their own history into the garment.⁸

Another argument concerns the low salaries in China, with some claiming that it is immoral to hire “underpaid women” to do this kind of work. Dahl’s Shanghai seamstresses are paid about 2 € an hour, which he says is a good salary in China, but which is perhaps less than a tenth of a comparable Norwegian salary. Yet others have said, when pressed, that it may be acceptable to employ immigrant women living in Norway, who may have assimilated some local skill, but not to employ foreign women living abroad.

The defenders of tradition and Norwegian craftsmanship also fear a development that could be described as a McDonaldization of *bunad* production. Although the Dahl case was spectacular in that it simultaneously brought out both accusations of racism and controversy concerning criteria for authenticity, his business innovation was less original than it might seem. Several producers admit that they outsource some elements of their

production to the Baltic countries and elsewhere, where wages are low, and even *Husfliden* has admitted that parts of their *bunads* are made industrially because of the extremely high price of labor in Norway.

What is at stake?

Two separate *bunad* controversies have been presented:

- What makes a particular *bunad* or folk costume authentic in the eyes of the Bunad and Folk Costume Council and the business community, notably *Husfliden*? Age, continuity in use, or ... market value? (Aesthetic criteria are formally deemed irrelevant.)
- What kind of knowledge is required in order to make a *bunad*? Can it be acquired like any other technique, or is it by default locally rooted? (Is it *Zivilisation* or *Kultur*?)

It must be noted that none of the people involved question the terms of the controversies. The criterion of authenticity is unquestioned – except, of course, among the many Norwegians who do not and will not buy themselves a *bunad*.

Let us consider the case in the light of the general points made above about culture as a scarce resource.

First, how does the example fit with the argument about capitalism and liberal individualism turning culture into a scarce resource? The short answer is that the *bunad* market is undergoing deregulation. With a growing number of actors seeking to make a profit, and several of them seeing opportunities in transnational production, the oligopoly held by a few powerful producers is being undermined. As a result, the cultural product (the *bunad*) may soon become just another commodity.

Second, *bunad*-related issues also reveal that culture is a potent political resource, as the example of Mrs. Brundtland indicates. The Dahl affair also brings up normative issues about the nature of Norwegianness and the place of immigrants in society.

Third, both *Husfliden* and the Bunad and Folk Costume Council defend the view that the recipe belongs to the cultural group: they want to retain it while they keep selling the food. However, the recipe is not merely the pattern; it is, rather, the skill involved, which can apparently only be acquired in certain ways, some of which are only implicit.

Fourth and finally, both *bunad* controversies present cases of attempts to copyright culture. The authenticity issues are obvious. Although there is also a strong economic element (some designs are more expensive than others), the stern messages from the Council, and the deep moral resent-

ment expressed when someone wears a *bunad* she is not entitled to wear, create bounded entities; regions with a proud history. A South African anthropologist who has settled in Norway commented, after viewing a May 17 parade, that this seemed more like a lineage-based tribal society than a modern nation (Kramer 1984).

Conflict over the use of symbols is not new to anthropology. When A. P. Cohen (1985) argued that symbols fuse the practical and meaningful aspects of identity, he was not only pointing out that important things are at stake when symbols fail to unify. He was also drawing upon a glorious anthropological past of sociosymbolic analysis, dating back to Victor Turner's early work. One of the aims of this paper however, has been to show that the practical aspect has two dimensions, a political and a commercial one, and that the aspect of meaning is in itself contested, including its relationship to practical issues. May I wear a fantasy costume if I think it is pretty? May I buy a lavish Telemark *bunad* even if my ancestors came from Oppland? And may I support economic globalization and EU membership, and still wear my *bunad* with pride?

The *bunad* controversies, moreover, indicate that commercialization may "contaminate" the meaningful dimension of the symbol, in so far as the latter is conceived as an inalienable possession, as something that you either have or don't have, and which you cannot give away (or pretend to have done so), without losing face.

Questions of ownership of symbols of culture that are used in a political context are probably no less common than issues arising from commercial concerns. In the early 1990s, small, but very energetic extreme right-wing groups nearly succeeded in discrediting the Swedish flag among ordinary Swedes; the flag acquired connotations of racism and supremacism, and since the emotional attachments of most Swedes to the flag were weaker than their moral values, the flag faded into the background of Swedishness for some years. Similarly, in the years following the Second World War, references to the Viking age and admiration for the Viking gods, leaders and so on became exceedingly problematic in an otherwise Viking-loving country like Norway. The reason was that the detested Quisling government had only a few years earlier used Viking symbolism extensively in its Nazi imagery. Moreover, any commercial use of culture may serve to discredit it politically. In Hawaii, for example, local identity politics employs few of the stereotypical Polynesian symbols that are used to market the archipelago to tourists.

There seem to be two general points to be made here.

- 1) In order for culture to function as a strategic resource, its symbols must function in a dual way; they must simultaneously be meaningful (or

sensory, to use Turner's term) and instrumental. To thousands of Norwegians – I have no statistics and cannot confidently say millions – the *bunad* symbolizes not only their personal attachment to history, but also a respect for (assumed) ancient craftsmanship. It represents the opposite, one might say, of ahistorical presentism and the standardized goods of the shopping mall. For the Bunad and Folk Costume Council, the *bunad* represents nation-building; to Husfliden and others, it represents a way of making profits that is entirely contingent on the functioning of the meaningful dimension of the symbol.

- 2) For culture to be turned into a form of property, a process of externalization and reification of symbols is necessary. The movement is one from the unmarked to the marked, from the implicit and embodied to the explicit. It is an instance, not of “all that is solid melts into air” but of a contrasting, less familiar observation by Marx, namely that “le mort saisit le vif” (Marx 1968, 11) – the dead and frozen seizes that which is living. This process is likely to be accompanied by struggles for symbolic hegemony. Subsequently, cultural capital is converted and accumulated among users as well as by politicians and/or businessmen. Under certain circumstances, such as a massively neo-liberal economic regime, the inalienable possessions may then be converted to commodities.

The anxieties voiced by the traditionalists are related to all three dimensions: In a thoroughly neo-liberal situation (anyone can wear what she wants; anyone can design and make *bunads* anywhere in the world), nation-building (politics) suffers because regional roots are severed; economic interests suffer because prices go down; and the personal or emotional pole suffers because the garments lose their special quality.

Finally, then: Wherein exactly does this “special quality” consist? What is the nature of the enormous personal resources invested in – clothes? What is invested are (notions of) hundreds of years of accumulated, local skill, to which one is oneself somehow connected as the legitimate wearer of a *bunad*. It is the *hau* of the local. It is the recipe, not the food. What is reaped from this investment is a handsome profit, an enhanced sense of community and visible boundaries with regard to the outside world. Cultural property of this kind is intangible, it is legally oblique, and it is poised to lose out against both the brisk efficiency of contemporary capitalism and against the thinking that emphasizes individualist rights. Marketing and selling *bunads* thus does not blur the distinction between commercialism and tradition; and the continued validity of the distinction becomes evident when the unspoken but essential connection between a cultural practice and a marketing strategy is severed. Put your secret/sacred knowledge on the Web, and the magic spell is immediately broken.

Notes

- * A version of this article exists in *Focaal* 2004 (44), “owning culture,” edited by Deema Kaneff.
- 1 When cultural minority groups appropriate aspects of majority culture, they are said to “lose their own culture,” but when their own cultural production is appropriated by others, it is said that “their culture is stolen from them.” Unless the issues are framed in another way, the result will be that minorities lose out no matter what happens to their culture!
 - 2 Much of the information in this section is taken from websites devoted to *bunads* and folk costumes. <http://www.husfliden.no> has sections in English; <http://www.bunadraadet.no> (The Bunad and Folk Costume Council) does not.
 - 3 The fact that traditionalist folk costumes are worn by Norwegians on festive days says something about the form national identity takes in Norway. Elsewhere in Europe, it is chiefly *minorities* who wear folk costumes. Norwegian identity, as I have argued elsewhere (e.g. Eriksen 1993), can thus be seen as a *minority* identity in spite of national sovereignty.
 - 4 Nina Granlund Sæter, former editor of the specialist magazine *Norsk Husflid*, to *Dagbladet* 16 May 2002.
 - 5 Magny Karlberg to *Dagbladet* 16 May 2002.
 - 6 The parallels between the *bunad* movement and the New Norwegian movement deserve further exploration, but that will have to wait.
 - 7 John Helge Dahl to *Dagbladet*, 16 May 2002
 - 8 Margunn Bjørnholt to *Dagbladet* 16 May 2002

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