

5. Conclusion: An Episodic View of Time

Both the discourse of tradition and the discourse of development are primarily constituted in the political context of interethnic relationships, which in turn determine the connotations evoked by their core concepts. The analysis of the ideological implications of both discourses has exposed the differences in meaning and the contradictions between the connotations and the denotations of the central concepts featuring in either discourse. Thus we are confronted with the paradox of two discourses which presuppose each other yet are contradictory at the same time, at least at the epistemological level of analysis.

In the social practice of Maori tribes, however, the discourse of tradition and the discourse of development happily coexist. Although in individual situations the awareness of inconsistencies is sometimes apparent, contradictions are largely resolved through an episodic conception of time (cf. Gellner 1964: 1).²⁷ In an episodic view of change the progression of time is resisted by means of a collapse of the past, the present, and the future into a state of timelessness. Consequently, the world is perceived as relatively unchanging, and change is defied, either retrospectively or prospectively. In an episodic view of change transformations are interpreted in terms of analogies which are invariably phrased in a timeless mode. Thus they enable the perception of the past as re-lived in the present, while the future is viewed as being pre-lived. Historical events and structures are constantly regenerated to charge and recharge the present with connotative significations which, for political and ideological reasons, are considered important for the direction to be followed in the future, while the aspired state of the future is foreshadowed by the generation of connotative significations which are considered panhistoric extensions of the timeless signs.

Thus, an episodic view of time enables the reconciliation of, on the one hand, signs whose signifiers are lagging behind their practical denotations in the present and, on the other hand, signs whose signifiers are running ahead of contemporary situations. However, one important qualification needs to be made, and that concerns the contextual nature of the episodic view of time. Both the discourse of tradition and the discourse of development are determined in and by interethnic

relationships between Maori and Europeans and the episodic view of time is particularly relevant to the social practice at the interface between these two subcultures of New Zealand society. An analogy can be made with the episodic mytho-praxis in precolonial Maori society, so eloquently analysed by Sahlins (1985: 55–72), who, however, failed to confine the validity of his interpretation to the supernatural context of myths and rites. Thus Sahlins implicitly generalized the episodic mystification characterizing Maori ritual to the more mundane contexts of life, which were and are structured, not in an episodic mode, but on the basis of the cognitive universal of linear time (cf. Bloch 1977). Hence it needs to be emphasized that, beyond the "ritual" interaction between Maori and European in the highly politicized circumstances of contemporary New Zealand, Maori people are extraordinarily competent to view the world from the same perspectives as any other human being, regardless of time and space.

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27 For a creative use of Gellner's ideas in the analysis of non-Western views of history, see Errington 1974 and particularly McDowell 1985.