

Religion at Work in Globalised Traditions

Religion at Work in Globalised Traditions:
Rainmaking, Witchcraft
and Christianity in Tanzania

By

Terje Oestigaard

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P U B L I S H I N G

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Chapter One.....	1
Introduction	
Chapter Two.....	31
Religion, Rain-Making and Rain-Fed Agriculture	
Chapter Three	85
Globalisation, Traditions and Change	
Chapter Four	123
Rainmaking: Returning to Tradition?	
Chapter Five	159
Witchcraft and Witch Killings	
Chapter Six	205
Religions at Work	
About the Author	247
Notes.....	249
Bibliography	279
Index	301

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Terje Oestigaard
Uppsala, January 2014

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Tradition: the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation, or the fact of being passed on in this way ... a long-established custom or belief that has been passed on from one generation to another.
—Oxford Dictionary¹

Since knowledge is held largely in the minds of men, rather than being stored in a book or a computer, the older are inevitably at once the most experienced, and the most privileged communicators, as well as most likely to die, taking their knowledge with them to the world of the ancestors. The dead must therefore know more than the living; the forefathers are also the forebearers, the carriers of 'tradition'. And it is in the cult of the ancestors that the dead reveal some of their superior, more comprehensive, knowledge.
—Jack Goody²

This book aims to discuss why traditions disappear and how society is restructured when old traditions are replaced by other beliefs and knowledge systems. The empirical focus is the Sukuma group along the southern shores of Lake Victoria in Tanzania, but the discussion and conclusions may be relevant to similar processes in other areas, in particular in Africa. A central theme throughout is how religions work in practice as perceived by believers.

For more than a century, the Sukuma have been integrated into the global world, but in varying degrees. Traditionally, the society was culturally and cosmologically structured around the chief and rainmaking. Everything depended on the rain. The chief was responsible for providing the life-giving rains believed to heal the land, a power that afforded him legitimacy as ruler. Both the chieftainship as an institution and rainmaking as a ritual practice have now disappeared, while at the same time Christianity is spreading and both witchcraft and witch killings flourish (with more than 500 alleged witches killed annually in Tanzania, predominantly among the Sukuma). Similarly, the role of the ancestors has diminished and tradition is no longer as important in culture and

cosmology. In a religious context, why is rainmaking not working anymore and why are traditions disappearing? And might the declining role of ancestors enable *both* the spread of Christianity and increase in witchcraft?

Prologue

Why does change happen? Why should it? Perhaps it is much more normal that matters and processes change than that they remain the same. More specifically, why do and believe the same as your grandparents, today in a globalised world? This may seem to be a ludicrous question since the obvious answer is in the negative, but then the pressing question is why? My own grandparents grew up before the Second World War. The world is different now, not only because of the War, the Cold War, the War on Terrorism – or because of peace or pieces of the Berlin Wall. The examples of change are endless, and not without reason: my grandparents were born at the beginning of the 20th century, and society and the world have changed dramatically since then.

I can confidently say that the Second World War was the ultimate tragic event and the most important frame of reference and experience for my grandparents, in fact for the whole of their generation in Europe and beyond. By contrast, the births of their children and grandchildren, including me, and the associated weddings, confirmations and other festivities and so on were at the opposite and positive end of the scale of experience. Apart from my own history and family traditions, this shared European history and the war is part of my own culture and has shaped my worldview, although I did not witness or experience it firsthand. It is also part of Tanzanian history, but in a very different way and is given numerous other meanings and probably lesser importance than in Europe. Tanzania has a colonial history and gained independence in 1961. In Tanzania, the colonial past is probably more important than a war, however devastating, on another continent, even one involving the very nations that colonised Tanzania, Germany and Britain.

Nevertheless, even though the war shaped and redefined history, both from a Western or European perspective and also globally, today it belongs to history, but in a different way from, say, the European Thirty Year War (1618-48). The latter was one of the longest continuous wars in modern history, and also caused millions of deaths, including from disease, but it is a war few apart from those with a more than average interest in history even know about. Older people may refer to the Second World War as the most ground-breaking event in history, but few of that

generation live today. It is absolutely true that if the outcome had been different, the world today would be dramatically different. But that was not to be the historical trajectory and much has happened over the last 70 years. The world has continued to change. This circumstance draws attention to two issues: distance in time and space, since the scale on which we measure the importance of events is intrinsically linked to both.

Time: The war was fundamental and shaped the lives of my grandparents, not to mention the Jews who survived and everybody else since. However, for me, as a member of the second generation, although the war is still important, it belongs to history. It is not my history as experienced personally. It is a tradition, yes, and there are lessons to be learned, but the sad truth is that for the generations following me it is just another war among many others, to be studied if and when somebody wants to read history. Even the Great War has become history, not necessarily forgotten, but marginalised and not given cultural relevance equivalent to today's challenges (the War on Terrorism is today's reference point, or, at least, was a couple of years ago) and no longer viewed as being as important as it used to be in the years and decades after its ending. Its cultural impact and incorporation into the social matrix diminishes and eventually fades into the past. What was once the most important event for better or worse gradually loses significance. Time takes its toll. A mundane example: nothing is more important than the person you marry on the wedding day, but circumstances and perceptions may change, in many cases substantially and dramatically before and during a divorce.

Space: Distance matters, the closer, the more important. This is also closely linked to time. The Germans serve as an example. Today, Germany is the locomotive of the European economy, and may save the Euro and solve the current financial crisis. In a historic perspective, for the person reading this book 100 years hence, this crisis probably won't matter and will long since have been resolved in one way or other. Now, however, it matters, and Germany is at the very centre of these developments. Moreover, other countries in Europe are dependent on Germany through the European Union and physical proximity. Germany has, of course, also had different roles in history. The Holocaust is perhaps the most obvious example of why place matters. Millions of Jews were executed. The physical closeness of the genocide gives this history special importance. It has global significance, but this may nevertheless be different from its significance to, say, the Jews who survived or who lost family members. In Tanzania, German colonisation is remembered for its brutality. Although the Holocaust was on a totally different scale, the

closeness in space affects the ways events (in this case murders and genocide) are incorporated into the social matrix and become essential parts of tradition. In short, traditions are intrinsically woven into lived lives, because they form a frame of reference for own life experiences and for social interaction, ranging from family and local community to the global world. Thus, in Tanzania the memories of German colonisation may be more important than the genocide of the Jews, and vice versa. Place and closeness matter. Rwanda is another example.

Whether one lives or is born in Africa or Europe, much water has flowed under the bridge since my grandparents were young. The world is different. This is somehow obvious and trite, but sometimes it is necessary to stop awhile to examine the seemingly banal and simplistic. Beyond these obvious observations, there are some profound and far-reaching questions. Yes, the world is changing, but why and how? These are among the most fundamental questions of any social analysis throughout time, and consequently I cannot pretend to have definitive answers. I hope, however, to add at least something to the understanding of change by focusing on traditions, more importantly and specifically, globalised traditions. The traditions of our grandparents – wherever they lived – persist in today's global world, but not all of them. Many have disappeared, or are barely remembered, or are largely ignored and marginalised, at best documented in ethnographic books stored somewhere in libraries, which few read and even fewer refer to. Traditions do disappear, quite rapidly and in many cases unnoticed by others, since they have never been documented. Yet, there is also continuity: knowledge is transferred from generation to generation, institutionalised in schools and universities and incorporated into the very foundations and core of the social matrix that is society and culture. Indeed, this knowledge transfer lies at the heart of every person, society, culture, nation, civilisation and religion. Tradition is thus of utmost importance and a fundamental basis for humanity – ranging from what it is to be an individual to what it is to be part of the greatest civilisations or world religions (regardless of how one defines any of these).

In short, being in the world means that the past is part of the present and the only source of knowledge and experience for facing the unknown future. Traditions are dependent upon time depths, and are also some of the structuring mechanisms at work in history. This was emphasised by Braudel, who wrote:

History exists at different levels, I would even go so far as to say three levels but that would be only in a manner of speaking, and simplifying things too much. There are ten, a hundred levels to be examined, ten, a

hundred time spans. On the surface, the history of events works itself out in the short term: it is a sort of microhistory. Halfway down, a history of conjunctures follows a broader, slower rhythm ... And over and above the 'recitatif' of the conjuncture, structural history,³ or the history of the *longue durée*, inquires into whole centuries at a time.

Despite all human creativity and cultural innovation, the present is also to a large extent, and perhaps overwhelmingly, the direct continuation of the past, although in different and modified forms, and experienced in various ways. On one hand, at all times and in all places there have been entrepreneurs and innovators, and some solutions simply are the best or better and continue to work today, for instance Archimedes's water screw. On the other, the accumulated knowledge of hundreds of generations is so vast that it is a challenge for modern cultural creativity to come up with something truly new, in the sense that no-one has previously not thought of it. In practice, there is a strong cultural resistance regarding how change happens, not only because of the number of people in the society involved, but also because of their specific knowledge, which shapes important parts of their identities. Still, cultural creativity, innovation and change are universal and continuous. Sometimes, change occurs rapidly, but social change by incorporating new knowledge into the social matrix of reproduction can also be a very slow and resistant process. The reproduction of knowledge directly focuses attention on tradition.

There are numerous definitions of tradition. At its simplest, tradition has been defined as the way our grandparents did things; the way things used to be in the past; the old ways; or the ways things should be. Traditions are about past life-ways, life-worlds and beings that still linger to today and are somehow believed to represent some undefined or implicit core values of culture and society. Traditions are just that: that which has, or is believed to have, always been, and which should continue for no other reason than that it is tradition and consequently fundamental to our being and identities. Traditions are the deep structures in society guaranteeing stability and permanence; they are the security net of experience and cultural value one does not have to challenge precisely because they have always been, and should be, there. Tradition is the grandparent of culture, undefined but providing security and serving as ultimate reference points of being – a well of stability and continuity in an otherwise changing world. Thus it has always been and will continue to be, although in different ways in changing worlds. Grandparents are not only a metaphor for tradition, they also communicate and transfer traditions. They are, in short, the elders, those with the most life experience and knowledge.

But then the question arises, why does this traditional knowledge matter today? One may even stress the latter point: in a world that has radically changed, of what relevance is knowledge based on experiences up to a century old? The world is different, so why should traditions matter? Logically and, consequently, in practice, the lives of our grandparents are not necessarily the most relevant to our being in and engaging with the world. How could it be otherwise? One would have to step back two generations, and even more if one follows the logic that those grandparents would have followed the traditions of their grandparents and so on successively. Everyone and everything would have been in a state of static continuity from time immemorial and involving unknown and undefined ancestors. Time, people and the world do not work that way.

Using grandparents as a metaphor may nevertheless yield some insights into cultural change and the continuity of tradition. Whether one talks about culture or tradition, one is basically talking about humans, their interactions and knowledge transfers. Tautologically, there is no one older than the elders. At the age of 40, I am in the middle, there are both grandparents and teenagers. But irrespective of age, no person does and believes everything that his or her grandparents did. Even so, all of us continue certain of what our grandparents and their grandparents did. From our early days, we get accustomed to the cycles of tradition, those events and rituals we repeat because they have always been so and should be so. Traditions are some of the most stabilising and structuring practices in our lives, helping us to organise our life-worlds and being in the world. The past matters and it is impossible to live in the world without tradition simply because everybody's lives are the sum of the past and lived experiences. From childhood onward, these streams of influence include parents, grandparents, the extended family and the community to nation states and the whole planet in a globalised world. At all levels, one is influenced by and influences people, but in very different degrees and with very different consequences. But if tradition is so fundamental in our lives, why does it change and even disappear?

This is the main question I attempt to address in this book. I do so by focusing on the disappearance of the tradition of rainmaking in Tanzania (Fig. 1.1). What are the mechanisms and social processes at work when knowledge of a crucial ritual is no longer transferred from one generation to another and continued? Clifford Geertz calls the important aspects of the cultural matrix 'thick description': what matters culturally and constitutes the social web of significance.⁴ But what happens when 'thick descriptions' become 'thin descriptions' by becoming irrelevant and even

being forgotten? As Goody says, ‘what matters culturally is what is transmitted. Silent knowledge is lost knowledge.’⁵ If the cultural core and culture as tradition are not transmitted to the next generation, why and how does this not happen?

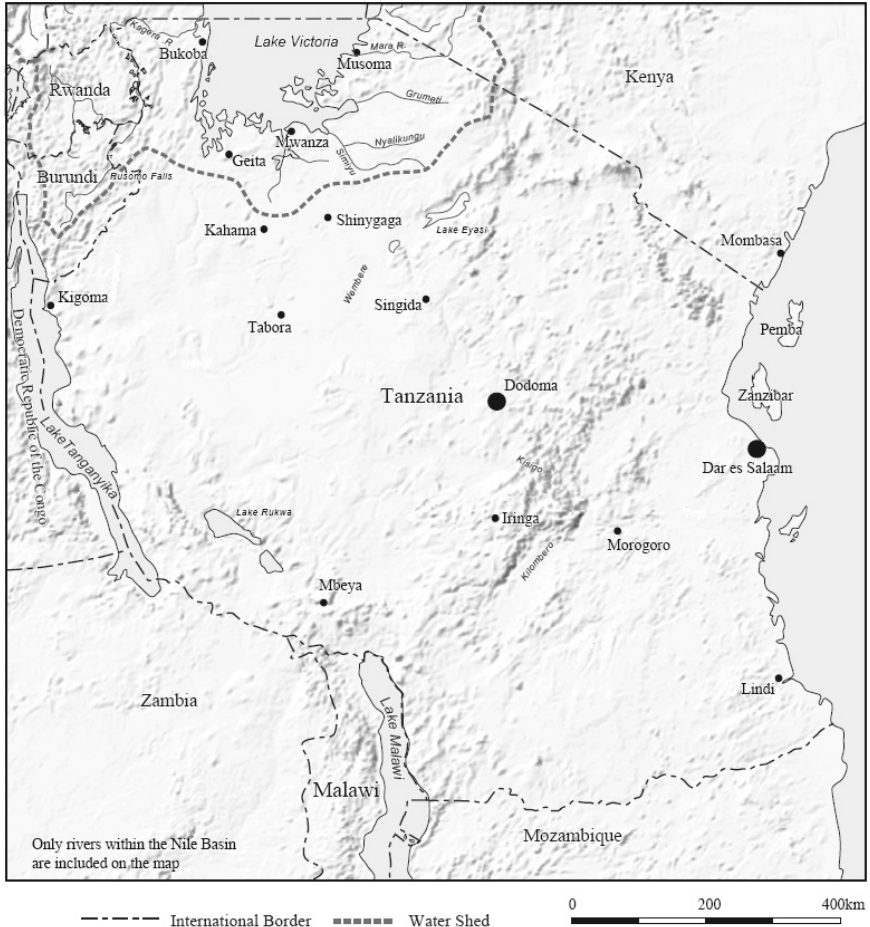


Fig. 1.1. Tanzania. Map: Nile Basin Research Programme. University of Bergen, Norway.

In any social analysis, the question of what constitutes change or continuity is central. However, most social analyses addressing this

subject have largely focused on the new. This is somehow natural, since innovations create new situations and consequently change. However, in this book I attempt to address the other aspect of change, omitted in most other studies, namely *what is lost and why?* In order for new factors to be incorporated into the social matrix and to bring about change, certain elements of the past as tradition have to be discarded or ignored.

Change involves accepting the new at the expense of the old. Therefore, in order for change to happen, what is culturally dismissed as relevant knowledge and why? This will be addressed by studying the disappearance of the beliefs and practices associated with rainmaking. This, in turn, has had far-reaching consequences for other aspects of culture and cosmology. In short, we come to the issue of why and how religions work in a context of globalised traditions.

Approaching the topic

In Tanzania, agriculture employs about 70 per cent of the labour force, it contributes about 45 per cent of GDP and is a major source of livelihood for about 80 per cent of the country's population.

In sub-Saharan Africa, agriculture is, as elsewhere, dependent on the life-giving waters, and in this region more than 95 per cent of farmed land is rainfed. Although the water-world, with its absence and presence of water, is a consequence of hydrological and climatic parameters, in traditional African societies the occurrence of the annual flood or rains has been a fundamental part of culture and religion. It is these life-giving waters that bring the successful harvest, and give life and prosperity to people. Depending on the ecological context, various rituals are conducted with regard to rain, rivers and lakes, according to how these different waters are included in domestic agrarian pursuits. In Tanzania, rainmaking has been an intrinsic part of culture and religion. As a ritual, it is believed to control the life-giving waters at the time of the year when they are most needed for cultivation.

Traditionally, political power did not derive from direct control over economic resources, but rather, indirectly through ritual power: 'Politics was ultimately played out in the sphere of ritual; i.e., in the capacity to provide fertility, peace, and health.'⁶ Thus, one may consider rainmaking as an ecological technique, at least as perceived by the practitioners, who respond to ecological crisis and political situations by performing rainmaking rituals.⁷ In Shambaa in Tanzania, for instance, the concept of 'healing the land' and 'harming the land' linked rain and fertility to stability and political power.⁸ '[Southern] Africans followed implicit and

explicit ecological policies, no less real for their apparent rootedness in “religion”.⁹ This in turn draws attention to how religions work and the fundamental role of rain for rain-fed agriculturalists.

The importance of rain and agriculture has not diminished with globalisation in the modern world. Rather the contrary is true: population increase places more stress on water and land resources. Why then has the most important ritual believed to secure the life-giving waters disappeared?

In order to understand changing agricultural practices and how and why things work (or do not work) in practice, this project started on the assumption that some of the answers could be found in culture, tradition and religion. At the outset, the aim was to study the relationship between traditional rainmaking and agricultural practices in the face of modernity, globalisation and climate change in Tanzania. Initially, I proposed two overall questions. On one hand, how do changes to or resilience in traditional culture and religion with regard to rainmaking affect actual agricultural practices? On the other, how do new agricultural activities and crops, higher stress and pressure on land and water resources, population growth, food shortages, erratic rainfall and climate change influence actual ritual practices and religious beliefs, with cultural consequences for society? These two questions looked good on paper.

In Usagara village, just south of Lake Victoria and close to the town of Mwanza, where I started my fieldwork among the Sukuma, rainmaking rituals had disappeared long ago. The initial questions were wrong, but still somehow relevant I thought, because the village could be an interesting case study of the impact of globalisation processes on indigenous cultural practices, beliefs and rituals, or, in other words, tradition. It took some time before I again realised I had made wrong assumptions: I had created a false dichotomy between tradition and globalisation, between the local and the modern (regardless of what these terms mean, which will be discussed later), and between a vaguely defined Us (meaning Westerners and global, in practice me) and them, the Others (in practice, the local or the poor farmers’ traditions). They were as globalised as I was, but in very different contexts and on very different terms.

Yet, the dichotomy does exist and has relevance, but in other ways. In discussions with elders who still believed in traditional values and religious and ritual practice, they complained that tradition was disappearing. Nobody cared to follow it. The young generation wanted a Western lifestyle and to be modern. Misery and suffering within the community and the failing rain was because of the failure to propitiate the

ancestors and conduct rainmaking rituals. If society were to be healed and the well-being of people recovered, villagers would have to resume traditional beliefs and rituals. However, they added, since most people had converted to new religions, in practice Christianity (with its different denominations), but also partly to Islam, this was highly unlikely. Tradition would be lost forever and misery would continue and increase. And, according to them, since the young generation despised traditional values and wanted to be modern, society would deteriorate with dire consequences, as was already evident in the increase in witchcraft and witch killings. And this was all because tradition was disrespected and lost. The disappearance of tradition has, as Caplan notes, also weakened the social glue: 'young men do not want to spend their income supporting their natal households – they want consumer goods such as radios, watches, bicycles and smart clothes, and to spend their evenings watching videos.'¹⁰ Changes in tradition change the social matrix with, according to the elders, devastating consequences for society and social life.

Since no condition is permanent, the question of what tradition is inevitably arises. Is tradition a static residue of the past or has it always been a continuously renegotiated process of interpretation in the present? In other words, we are back to the classic question in anthropology, that regarding continuity and change. Is it change through continuity or continuity through change? These questions bring other questions in their train. Is change due to local innovation, or external impulse or migration – or a combination of these? In this case, however, it is change in the face of globalisation, which represents something new or at least different. Communities in Tanzania, as elsewhere, have never been isolated islands without communication and interaction with the wider world. Their traditions have always been globalised in some degree, and not solely locally bound in time and space. However, today's processes of global interaction and change occur with greater intensity and with unprecedentedly deep and pervasive consequences for all levels of society. This will be a central theme throughout the book, also illustrating that undertaking fieldwork today challenges any notions of tradition as an unsullied source of authentic knowledge from the past and unrelated to the current global world.

Globalised traditions in practice

It was just a normal day during my second field trip among the Sukuma during the autumn 2011 (Fig. 1.2).¹¹ On the way to Usagara village, my interpreter and I sat in the local minibus, as usual overcrowded and with

music being played too loudly. There had, however, been a small but notable change since my previous visits during the rainy season just half a year ago. The songs were probably much the same (although I had not paid particular attention), but now instead of cassettes or CDs, many minibuses boasted small video-screens playing DVDs of the hottest Tanzanian pop and music bands.

The music and the video performances of the bands, singers and dancers could have been from anywhere: young, shapely women in small bikinis with or without tight jeans dancing on a beach in the sunset with good drinks, and accompanied by hip, cool male youngsters wearing large sunglasses. In other words, modern and Western. Or perhaps not: indigenous, local and global at the same time. Truly Tanzanian and truly modern. In fact, it was as global as any music video from Hollywood or Bollywood or anywhere else. Although the global is often understood as something indefinably 'Western', mainly because globalisation started in the West and has rippled throughout the globe at different scales and intensities, it is perhaps more correct to say that the global is just that – global, something transcending national boundaries. Still, cultural influences flow both ways: African music has spread across the world. This is not a new phenomenon, and I can hear the sounds of Gospel choirs or Bob Marley, among others, somewhere at the back of my mind. And centuries-old traditions and cultural memories of the past live on as important parts of the cultural make-up of 'Westerners' and others. No man or society is an island and local traditions are influenced by, or partly the outcome of, external impulses. In other words, every tradition is in varying measure part of the global world.

When we got to Usagara, my interpreter called a good and cheerful farmer we had met and interviewed several times before. He answered on his mobile phone that he was around, and as agreed the day before, he took us to meet his friend in the sub-village. The latter was my age and was busy cultivating, since the rains had come. He had not much time to talk, but wanted to meet me later and also to gather a group of elders who knew more about the topics I wanted to ask about.

There was a knowledge gap between the elders and the younger men, or at least that was the perception (the difference between 'elders' and 'younger' will be elaborated later). Implicit in this is also a perception that the elders are the true bearers of tradition, a line of reasoning consistent with the definition quoted above. The younger generation does not have the same insight into the rituals and the history, or may not even have the same interest in knowing about this past. For this reason it is common for scholars undertaking ethnographic studies to seek the elders when

inquiring about the traditions – those beliefs, social practices or cosmologies – of a group, a people or a culture.



Fig. 1.2. Map of Usagara in relation to Mwanza.¹²

The loss of tradition and the elders

One characteristic of the Sukuma is that they are said to abide by tradition more than other groups.¹³ The Oxford Dictionary defines tradition as ‘the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation, or the fact of being passed on in this way’ or ‘a long-established custom or belief that has been passed on from one generation to another.’¹⁴ The word originates from the Old French *tradicion* or from Latin *traditio(n)-*, the latter being derived from *tradere*, to ‘deliver, betray’, or from *trans-* ‘across’ and *dare* ‘give’.¹⁵ According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, oral tradition is:

... the first and still most widespread mode of human communication. Far more than ‘just talking,’ oral tradition refers to a dynamic and highly diverse oral-aural medium for evolving, storing, and transmitting knowledge, art, and ideas. It is typically contrasted with literacy, with which it can and does interact in myriad ways, and also with literature, which it dwarfs in size, diversity, and social function.¹⁶

In another context, Barth writes that ‘to understand reproduction and historic change we need to understand the functional system which is undergoing reproduction and change – in this case, is the process one of collective retrieval from socially accessible sources, or one of recreation from elements lodged in one or a few individual minds?’¹⁷ Importantly, ‘whether or not the “knowledge” is held by one or more individuals, what matters more is who reproduces it in the ceremonial situation.’¹⁸ This is notably relevant to rainmaking, to which we will return later.

Thus, tradition concerns knowledge and knowledge transfers within and between generations, from parents to children and from grandparents to grandchildren, thereby unifying time and generations. The traditions are mostly orally transmitted by elders and are somehow seen as more ‘authentic’ than the traditions of the younger people. More precisely, the cultural knowledge of the latter group is by definition not ‘proper tradition’, since they are the receivers of knowledge from their parents and grandparents. The question is, will they transfer it to their children? Moreover, the younger cohort’s knowledge has been influenced by modernity: it has become globalised tradition or at least partly influenced by other impulses. But as will be argued, there is no pure or authentic tradition. The traditions disclosed by elders were also and still are subject to external and internal influences and changes. Today we call it globalisation, but since the late 19th century, Tanzania has experienced Christian missionaries, German and British colonisation, independence, socialist ideology and a liberal market economy. All of these and much more have influenced the traditions that refer to the past and how things used to be. Traditions are always changing. They have always been globalised, but in varying degrees.

Still, it is worth listening carefully to the elders for a number of reasons. The experiences of lived lives cannot be underestimated, and, depending upon social context, they are to differing extents the foundations of society. Although in Western societies elders become increasingly marginalised, it is also true that a 20-year old does not become a bank director, professor, prime minister or president. Age is not the sole criterion, but age combined with experience institutionalised through practice confer legitimacy. This is what Feierman refers to as

‘peasant intellectuals’ in his seminal book of the same title. Intellectuals are defined ‘by their place in the unfolding social process: they engage in socially recognized organizational, directive, educative, or expressive activities ... Intellectuals are not defined by the quality and content of their discourse ... they are defined by their place within the ensemble of social relations.’¹⁹ In African contexts, this must be emphasised. The elders were respected and their advice followed. As a social institution, this was the council of the elders. This institution, however, is now gradually declining. It is losing legitimacy and becoming more and more marginalised within its community, as the elders are elsewhere.

Importantly, however, elders have knowledge of what was significant in the recent past. The key ritual was rainmaking. Among the Sukuma and others in Tanzania, the king or chief was responsible for securing the life-giving rains for his people, and that was the rationale for him being the legitimate ruler. The chieftain had powers to enhance the fertility of fields, secure the health and wealth of humans and well-being of animals, and to control or counter disasters, including epidemics, plagues and attacks by wild beasts. The rainmaker controlled and manipulated nature through rituals such that the forefathers and the ancestors provided the rain through the chieftain or king as a facilitating medium. The chiefs could themselves be rainmakers or include healers with this capacity in their court. Where a chief was unable to procure rain either himself or through his attendants for three years, the result being enduring drought, he would be replaced by another ruler. The rainmaker was thus responsible for the wealth and health of his people by controlling and providing the life-giving waters, in fact, by providing for life in its widest definition. This tradition has now been lost among the Sukuma in Usagara village.

Even though the traditions of which the elders speak have been influenced by a number of global factors over time, they are nonetheless about identity. In Barth’s words, through ritual ‘a situation is created where the vision and commitment of a handful of senior men must be sufficiently strong to make it necessary for them to impose this ephemeral group identity on a vastly larger, ritually passive population which has no experience that calls for its conceptualization.’²⁰ These comments are certainly relevant to rainmaking rituals.

Identity is a fundamental aspect of being human. According to Jenkins, ‘identification can be defined minimally as the ways in which individuals and collectives are distinguished in their social relations [from] other individuals and collectives. Identity is a matter of knowing who’s who (without which we can’t know what’s what).’²¹ It is not only the younger generation that listens to radio, watches TV and is updated about what is

happening in the world. The same is true of the elders, but there are important differences. Younger people may want to become 'modern' and 'Western' and fancy new hip-hop music, Coca-Cola and European-inspired clothes. As a consequence, they generally neglect older rituals and tradition and see rainmaking as archaic, since failing rain is understood as related to climate change and not to the failure to propitiate ancestors. This underscores an important aspect of identity: according to Jenkins again, 'identity can *only* be understood as process, as "being" or "becoming"'. One's identity – one's identities, indeed, for who we are is always singular *and* plural – is never a final or settled matter.²²

Identities are always changing and so are traditions. With regard to the globalisation of tradition, those very factors that some community members would like to embrace as part of *their* identity ('Western lifestyle') are a threat to the identity and lifestyle of others or to the 'original' tradition. The younger generation may want to distance itself from the tradition the elders speak of and identify with, but the elders may see the issue as diametrically different. According to the elders, modern lifestyles, behaviour and values, including neglect of ancestors, destroy tradition and bring misfortune upon society. The elders and some informants complained that, since the young generation will be modern and will have nothing to do with the ancestors, in the future they will be unable to address their forefathers when they face misfortune and evil and will not know what caused the problems. Moreover, they will not be able to benefit from the powers the ancestors also possess to enhance good fortune. Unable to approach the ancestors for solutions and knowledge, they will face more suffering, difficulty and lack of development. In the end, however, it was generally claimed that the tradition of propitiating the ancestors would disappear and be gone forever.

Thus, if tradition is 'the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation,' when the younger generation actively works against the transmission of the knowledge and beliefs of the elders, there will be a loss of tradition. This is how many elders perceive the situation. Theoretically, though, traditions continue although elements may disappear. Traditions are always changing, being reinvented and being moulded into the social matrix of culture. Thus, there is both change and strong elements of continuity. Moreover, it should be noted that complaints about the youth are not new. In classical Greece, for instance, Plato quotes Socrates thus: 'The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They

contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers.’ In this sense, there is nothing new under the sun. Still, the young in time become elders and transfer traditions, and complain about the youth not caring about tradition, and yet they continue and transmit traditions.

Culture and tradition

How is one to approach and define culture? Culture and tradition are often used interchangeably. Tradition, although not consistently used, generally refers to a vaguely defined past, since it entails the transmission of knowledge from generation to generation. However, if particular practices no longer exist, rainmaking in this case, strictly speaking they are no longer part of tradition as defined as transmission from generation to generation. Yet culture and tradition are deeply complex concepts and phenomena. Memories of lost traditions and practices are often among the most powerful structural components in any revival of identity through ethnic, national or religious mobilisation. This is not the case with the Sukuma, and among the elders there is sincere sadness at the loss of tradition. It just disappears. Even so, it is part of culture.

Roy Williams once said that ‘culture’ is one of two or three of the most difficult words to define, because it is a concept fundamental to numerous non-compatible disciplines. Consequently, the concept has a history of diverse and mutually contradictory ideas,²³ and it has numerous definitions.

In 1871, the British anthropologist Edward Tylor defined culture in this way: ‘Culture or Civilization, taken in its widest ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.’²⁴ A century later, the core had not changed much, although the definition had become broader. The 1982 Mexico Declaration defines culture as:

... the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs; that it is culture that gives man the ability to reflect upon himself. It is culture that makes us specifically human, rational beings, endowed with a critical judgment and a sense of moral commitment. It is through culture that we discern values and make choices. It is through culture that man expresses himself, becomes aware of himself, recognizes his incompleteness, questions his

own achievements, seeks untiringly for new meanings and creates works through which he transcends his limitations.²⁵

This is both a good and a bad definition. It is good because it is broad and seeks to include all aspects of humanity and of being a human. Herein, however, lies the problem. The definition captures everything and hence nothing. It is too wide to have any practical utility for social analysis. Moreover, such definitions tend to be ahistorical or phenomenological, presenting a culture as a unit or a whole. Once one starts scratching below the surface, these definitions crumble. Herskovits described the problem as early as 1945:

To think in terms of a single pattern for a single culture is to distort reality ... for no culture is [so] simple [as not] to have various patterns. We may conceive of them as a series of interlocking behavior and thought and value systems, some even in conflict with others. The pattern of fundamental values in a society ... will be effective over the entire group; but there will be subpatterns by which men order their lives differently from women, young and middle-aged folk from elders, members of lower from those of higher socioeconomic status ... But all must be taken into account when an understanding of the mutations of culture in change is the end of the analysis.²⁶

Fredrik Barth elaborated on the problem of cultural diversity in *Balinese Worlds* (1993). Reality is always diverse for a number of reasons. First, there is variation in 'expertise' and positioning in any community, and is there any expertise that can exercise authority for all? Second, there are also differences between men and women, young and old, poor and rich, vulnerable and powerful. Third, there is diversity in traditions. Fourth, local history, contention and context represent varied particularism. Finally, there are always the pragmatics of purpose and interests, and consequently different representations for different tasks. Thus, Barth asks, 'which should the anthropologist privilege? Or do we adhere to a belief that, if only it is thoroughly abstracted, it all coheres in its essence?'²⁷ This is hardly an option, according to Barth. In cultural analyses, 'we are invited to approach our subject with questions of how meaning is constructed and conferred, how the webs are spun, rather than merely what is the shape of the edifice so constructed.'²⁸

I will not make any conclusive statements about Sukuma culture. I don't know that it exists as such. From the above discussion it should be clear this is not a postmodern deconstruction stance, but goes to the core of what culture is. The cultural diversity of the Sukuma was emphasised by a chief I interviewed. As the chairman of the Sukuma chiefs, he was writing

a book about the Sukuma and documenting traditions before they disappear. However, he stressed that it was impossible to make any uniform statements about the Sukuma people, their traditions and lives, for 'there are differences everywhere.'

However, if we accept that cultures in general exist and that the (or *a*) Sukuma culture in particular exists, this is as good as any point of departure for analysing social change. After all, if there is one thing one should have learnt after a couple of decades of postmodern deconstructivist discourses, deconstructing everything to bits is the most deconstructing and intellectually de-stimulating practice possible – easy yes, but does it contribute to much new knowledge? Deconstructing a concept like 'culture' solves nothing.

On the other hand, the object of anthropology is the study of cultural difference and variation. 'Culture' is so intricately woven into all social studies and disciplines that in practice it is futile to dwell too much on the concept as such. And yet there are some general patterns within a 'culture' that are more common to and shared among, say, the Sukuma than the Swedes. Witchcraft is but one example. Widespread among the Sukuma, it is not so in Swedish towns and villages. Culture, however, is not a unit, although nation states may have borders that differentiate cultures and people. Beyond that, where are the boundaries of a culture or society? 'They were different in every different context of action and in every domain of discourse,'²⁹ Feierman argues. 'The wider world is not external to the local community; it is at the heart of the community's internal process of differentiation.'³⁰ The local is global and the global local. It is impossible to demarcate where a culture starts and ends, simply because this is a wrong approach and misunderstands what culture is and how it works.

In his *The Work of Culture* (1990), Gananath Obeyesekere distinguishes between *personal* and *cultural* symbols.³¹ From his psychoanalytical perspective, a symbol has a dual function because it is both personal *and* cultural. A symbol is therefore a basis for self-reflection (the personal dimension), but it also communicates with others (the cultural dimension). Personal symbols are public symbols 'that permit the expression of the unconscious thoughts of the individual; but since they make sense to others, they also permit communications with others in the language of everyday discourse.'³² A personal symbol is a cultural symbol that is related to an individual's motivation and makes sense only in relation to the life history of the person. Still, the individual and all personal symbols are part of the larger institutional context in which they are embedded.³³ Symbols therefore both enable and constrain cultural change. However,

although all forms of subjective imagery and symbols are innovative, not all of them end up as culture. They have to be legitimated by the group in terms of the larger culture.³⁴

Turning from symbols to traditions, the same processes are at work, and indeed to some extent they are common, since symbols are intrinsic to language, practice and ritual. 'The difficult task in actual historical analysis is to create a method and a form of ethnographic description which can capture the cultural categories as both continuous and in transformation,'³⁵ Steven Feierman observes. He continues: 'Each person has a sphere of competent knowledge, but not all knowledge is equal in its weight within society, in its capability to move people towards collective action, or to create authoritative discourse. The study of intellectuals is an attempt to examine the variation in discourse from one social position to another.'³⁶

Traditions exist, but they are not passively inherited from the past. Rather, they are actively created. This may mainly happen in two ways: new inventions acquire legitimacy from tradition if seen as *direct continuity*, or as a *re-creation of a lost tradition*. Traditions are always invented, and a tradition may therefore not bear any direct or visible relationship to the past, although people may believe there is direct continuity.³⁷ There is another way as well. Certain elements in a person's life-world and history are developed and given new meanings in new contexts. The present lives and life experiences become tradition and history. Culture is always in the making, and so also are cosmologies being reincorporated and reconstituted in society. Cosmology 'is not merely about a world out there, isolated from the self. More essentially, it provides a web of concepts, connections and identities whereby one's own attitudes and orientation to the various parts of the world are directed and moulded.'³⁸ When the premises change, new traditions develop based on interpretations of how to solve new problems. The development of witchcraft is just such a case, as will be elaborated below.

Roy Rappaport addresses this using another approach. He asks: 'When does a system stop being what it has been and become something else?' This is difficult to answer unless there is a distinct break in the succession of ecosystems,³⁹ which is hardly the case among the Sukuma in Usagara. They are still dependent on the arrival of the annual rains for their life and well-being. Moreover, there is also always continuity in some elements or fundamental structural aspects, because 'structural transformations in some subsystems [have] made it possible to maintain more basic aspects of the system unchanged.'⁴⁰ Rappaport therefore argues that the crucial question is 'What does this change maintain unchanged?'⁴¹ This is a

dialectic process between individuals and society. 'Long-term continuity and active creation are in fact compatible. Even when forms of discourse are inherited from the past, the peasants must make an active decision to say that they are meaningful at this moment, to select a particular form of discourse as opposed to other possible forms, and to shape the inherited language anew to explain current problems,' Feierman argues.⁴² But then another problem arises.

Individuals and society (culture)

Feierman, in asserting that it is not society creating continuity or discontinuity in cultural practices but individuals living and acting in particular historical contexts, is adopting a position of methodological individualism.⁴³ The alternative position is methodological collectivism.

These are two ideal types of historical explanation. Methodological collectivism is holistic and states that human behaviour can be explained or deduced from macroscopic laws that apply to the whole social system whereby it is possible to describe the positions and functions of individuals within this overall whole. Methodological individualism deduces events and processes from acting individuals and descriptions of their situations.⁴⁴ Simply put, is it individuals who produce society or is society that produces individuals? Methodological collectivists have society as the point of departure from which the individual's behaviour is deduced. Methodological individuals start with acting individuals, from whom they go about deducing society or social units.⁴⁵

This is also a discussion of what matters – mind or materiality. The archaeologist Ian Hodder says that by 'materialist approaches [I mean] those that infer cultural meanings from the relationship between people and their environment. Within such a framework the ideas in people's minds can be predicted from their economy, technology, social and material production.' He continues: 'By idealist I mean any approach which accepts that there is some component of human action which is not predictable from a material base, but which comes from the human mind or from culture in some sense.'⁴⁶ Thus, whereas methodological collectivism is determinism, methodological individualism is reductionism.

Karl Marx is of course lurking in the background here. Materialism defines reality as a form of 'matter'. 'An idealist is one who denies ontological reality to matter; a materialist to mind.'⁴⁷ All materialist Marxists define subjectivity impersonally and freedom as the realisation of objective laws,⁴⁸ and a key controversy has been whether Marxism emancipates or enslaves human behaviour. Materialist Marxism is an

extreme variant of methodological collectivism. On the other hand, extreme methodological individualism is advocated by Jon Elster, who in the book paradoxically entitled *The Cement of Society*, concludes that ‘there are no societies, only individuals who interact with each other.’⁴⁹ However, as Maurice Godelier notes, ‘human beings ... do not just live in society, they *produce society in order to live*.’⁵⁰

The works of the sociologists Pierre Bourdieu⁵¹ and Anthony Giddens⁵² have aimed to overcome the problem of methodological collectivism and individualism and how relations between humans and society operate and interact. Still they have worked within a sociological tradition that, since Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), has argued that in the social and human sciences, social facts can only be explained by other social variables.⁵³ Nature and material aspects are denied relevance. From a rain-fed agricultural perspective, the most important parameters have thus been excluded in these approaches. For farmers, nature matters, and most importantly of all, water matters. Without rain, there is no farming, no harvest, and there is the worst possible consequence of all, starvation and even death. The presence or absence of life-giving rain is ultimately a matter of life and death.

Rain-fed agriculture in the global world

The Sukuma are the largest ethnic group in Tanzania, and are estimated to number more than 5 million people. The origins of the Sukuma as an ethnic group are shrouded in history. According to Speke, who came to this area in 1858, ‘Sukuma’ means ‘north’. ‘Nyamwezi’, by contrast, perhaps means ‘of the moon.’ It was the colonial administration that listed and identified Sukuma and Nyamwezi as two distinct ethnic groups, although culturally they may have been one group. On the other hand, there might not have been tribal unity in precolonial times.⁵⁴ The Sukuma were traditionally agro-pastoralists and cattle were their main possession and form of storable wealth for procuring all of life’s necessities. Although cattle still have importance in Sukuma society and cosmology, the role of farming has increased at the expense of cattle.⁵⁵

Mwanza is the second largest city in Tanzania. By focusing on the Mwanza region along the shores of Lake Victoria, this book will address the relationship between traditional rainmaking, witchcraft and Christianity. The fieldwork was mainly conducted among the Sukuma people of Usagara village outside Mwanza town, but also in other villages, thus enabling a broader and more comparative approach and context.

According to the 2012 National Population and Housing Census, the population of Mwanza region was 2,772,509.⁵⁶ Usagara ward is part of Misungwi district, which has 20 wards and 78 villages. In Mwanza region, smallholder agriculture employs about 85 per cent of the population, and in Misungwi district, 12.7 per cent of the land is under irrigation.⁵⁷ Usagara village is located about 25 kilometres south of Mwanza, a 35 minute drive by public transport. The village straddles the Sirari-Mbeya road (B6) from Mwanza to Dar-es-Salaam (Fig. 1.3.). Thus, the village is truly semi-rural and semi-urban, with heavy traffic passing and trucks sometimes stopping to offload goods before continuing on their journey. The closeness to Mwanza and the transport facilities make for easy access to markets for the farmers.



Fig. 1.3. Usagara village located in a semi-urban setting.

Usagara ward comprises four villages, Usagara, Nyanghomango, Bujinga and Fela, and in Usagara village there are nine sub-villages: Usagara A and B, Isesabudaga, Sanjo, Kagera, Isela, Nyalwigo, Idetemya and Misungwi. Fieldwork was mainly conducted in Isela and Sanjo, but other places were also visited. The population of the ward in 2010 was 8,839, distributed among age groups as set out in Table 1.1.⁵⁸