

Jean-François Bayart,

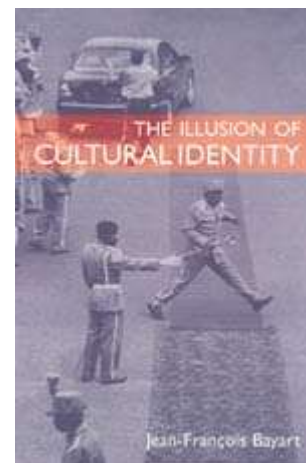
The Illusion of Cultural Identity

Translated by Steven Rendall, Janet Roitman, Cynthia Schoch, and Jonathan Derrick.

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Reviewed by Dr. George F. Simons at diversophy.com

Identity and identity formation are topics addressed in psychology and intercultural work largely from a personal perspective. Less frequently are they carefully researched for their social and political dynamics and ramifications. Interculturalists who have looked into the social dimensions and effects of identity are probably more familiar with the work of Amin Maalouf in *Les Identités Meurtrières* than this slightly earlier work of Jean-François Bayart. Though the French edition of this book (*L'illusion identitaire*) has been around since 1996, I was unaware of the English edition released some nine years later, until it was gifted to me recently by a colleague in Morocco. Hence my feeling that it is important to (re)call it to the attention of my colleagues in the intercultural field albeit belatedly.



Before launching in it is important for the reader to know that Bayart is a heavyweight political scientist with a monumental grasp of African and Middle Eastern affairs, to say nothing of how these are entwined in the historical and political ambience in which we are currently swimming. He is an active player in political discourse in France and beyond, places where being labeled an “intellectual” commands respect rather than dismissal and disdain. While the book is a pleasure to read, it is not an easy read, particularly because of the intense detail and copious examples that it provides page after page, both enlightening us and summoning us to scramble for more context in which to understand them.

One of William Faulkner's most quoted lines runs, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." (*Requiem for a Nun*). We may ask, however, “Why?” What keeps the past alive? I suspect most of us interculturalists would respond by saying “tradition,” the handing down or handing over of our group’s formulae for surviving and succeeding in the environment in which or for which we are constituted or have constituted ourselves as a group. Particularly in the West, we are inclined to temper the discourse of culture by looking to how individual experiences and choices determine one's identity and variety within the culture. And, we may belong to many different groups and walk daily in different identities which we may recognize either as multiple, or as hybrid if our personal history has placed us in a variety of cultures during our upbringing and subsequent careers.

Bayart’s perspectives come as a wake-up call or, at least, as a reminder to the constructed nature of culture and tradition. Here again many of us are inclined to nod in agreement that, yes, culture is socially constructed, but without taking a very close look at by whom, why, and how what we have been calling cultures are actually brought into existence, managed, and transformed. We have been trained to have a knee-jerk condemnatory rejection of stereotypes about people

different from ourselves. However, Bayart illustrates how the very act of cultural differentiation tills the ground for identities to be planted and sprout in service to nationalistic and other forms of ideology. The practice of differentiation subsequently bears fruit in the need to reconcile differences through Procrustean forms of homogenization both willful and willy-nilly. Elaboration of differences is inclined to produce efforts to reduce them or purge them. This is beginning to give us the gnawing suspicion that we are perhaps more collaborators than prophets, more colonialists than liberators, when it comes to how we understand and how we plant the seeds of awareness in others in the way we do our intercultural work.

This form of husbandry is called *culturalism*, using the illusion of the existence of things called cultures to cement a sense of identity. Bayart is careful to point out that *globalization*, despite its recently acquired buzzword status, is not a new phenomenon. What we tend to call “tradition” is a modern invention and has little to do with our actual background and histories, except as these may provide raw materials for creating a story to be propagated and believed, for the shaping of a national identity, for example. This is best summed up in words cited from R.A. Peterson: “... The collective memory is systematically unfaithful to the past in order to satisfy the needs of the present.” In other words, we attempt to address the present by reconstructing the past as if it always existed in the way we now adopt it.

In the light of this dynamic, Bayart would eliminate the use of the word “culture,” as it commonly misleads us down the path of believing in a fixed set of values and in identifying an unequivocal discourse for groups of people we are attempting to describe, which in fact never existed as such. Thus the search for authenticity and identity, popular as it is, might be viewed as panning for fool’s gold— authenticity and identity have no existence in themselves or in us, but exist only by virtue of the acts of identification that we ourselves produce. Our connection with “our own kind” is based less on actual affinity than it is a chosen result of our relationships, more a reflex against the outsider than a verifiable connection among the members of our group. Nor does likeness, even within our group, mean liking. It may mean quite the opposite, as when we identify others with what we reject about ourselves.

If we abandon the commonly accepted concepts and descriptions of cultures and come to understand the dynamic how these are created in culturalism, we are brought face-to-face with the raw creative power of the imagination, the divinity-like capacity through which the genesis of a reality depends on the articulation, the speaking of and repetition of what is imagined. The religious allusion is intentional. We don't discover truth; we speak truths into being. What is outside of us may indeed not change, but we are forever dancing worlds into and out of existence by the tales we spin about it to create a shared narrative, both deliberately and as a result of our being immersed in each other's streams of discourse. Affectation of religious discourse for political ends is not limited to colonializing missionaries. It is alive and well today, and is far from limited to the divine mission of George W. Bush and the pietistic niceties required for one to be elected in the US political context. Bayart gives ample examples, not only of how this occurs in other parts of the world, but how in fact it shifts from place to place, time to time, and in the diverse personalities who seek to define and manage their constituencies.

Setting what we call “culture” and “cultures” aside, Bayart focuses his analysis using the term for an element adopted from Gilles Deleuze, the *imaginaire*, best described as a complex social construction launching a particular reality or set of realities in motion and sustaining them. This leads to the situation where, as Deleuze himself puts it, “The *imaginaire* is not the unreal, but the inability to distinguish the real from the unreal.” It does not serve as a replacement for the word culture, but is in fact, historically speaking, nebulous and transitory, filled with ambivalence and often containing internal contradictions, yet giving rise to a sense of totality and wholeness to a society.

While many of the author’s allusions, particularly African ones, may seem cryptic to the nonprofessional reader, the section on the materialization of the political *imaginaire* proffers fascinating reading. Most intercultural studies and practices we are familiar with focus on values, dimensions, and behaviors, all quite abstract until we actually encounter them as we mix with, converse with, or try to do business with other people. This section however deals with the concretization of these values in such things as hairstyles, food, and clothing. Here the author draws both on history, colonial practice, and the current use of these everyday functions for the creation of social and class identities, as well as to forward political agendas. Materiality and how we “do business” with it cannot be conceived as separate from the *imaginaire*.

Again, this is not a recent matter of hippy hairdo’s, Coca-Cola diplomacy, McDonaldisation, and covering one’s backside in Levi’s jeans. Rather we are looking at how political discourse has been carried on over the ages via artifacts, continuing into the present day. This reinforces Bayart’s thesis about how we create the *imaginaires* that we tend to understand and pass off as culture, but which in fact represent expressions of political, religious and social agendas. Though often debated, they pass quickly into the taken-for-granted reality of our consciousness and yet confront us with their narrative day after day. Certain artifacts, such as the veil worn by many Muslim women become a bone of contention both within the politics of Islamic groups and countries as well as in their negotiation of identity in places where they constitute a minority of the population.

In his conclusion the author discusses what he calls the “paradoxical invention of modernity.” The ambivalence of the *imaginaire*, as we have already described it, allows for the cohesion of society contrary to the way that the strict essentialist construction of “culture” is likely to lead to its disintegration. The modern *polis*, far from being a triumph of secularity requires these *imaginaires*, that contain the ritual, celebration, and sacred utterances upon which its cohesion and survival depend.

“Culturalist discourse, and, unfortunately, increasingly culturalist diplomacy as well, imprison concrete historical societies in a substantialist definition of their identity by denying them the right to borrow, to be derivative, that is, to change, possibly by a paradoxical invention of modernity.” We need to realize that social, political and even material elements that we intend to gift others with will be accepted, used, or even rejected, on their terms not ours. We are challenged to move from “there is nothing new under the sun,” to, “There is nothing that is not

new under the sun," given that it is constantly being regenerated. This means a mental shift from concepts created to capture the essence of a particular human phenomenon, to careful participative observation of what is happening in the here and now as it constructs our world. While I have been often struck by the ubiquity of sports terminology in business and social life in the USA, I was right well overwhelmed by Bayart's analysis of football's ritual role in how relationships are negotiated both by actors in the same society as well as between societies worldwide.

The book's intent is in fact summed up this assertion found in its closing paragraph: "Today nothing threatens the 'stability of the social order' more than the illusion of cultural identity." It lays before us the challenge of disentangling ourselves and our work from a futile search for secure individual and collective identities in order to discover riches that we may all enjoy.