

# Breaking with tradition: The 'personal touch' is key to cultural preservation

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"Memetics," or the study of memes, is a very popular discipline among cultural researchers now, particularly as it concerns new media like viral videos. But no one seems to know what a meme really is.

Originally coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, the "meme" transfers cultural information much the way that genes inherit biological properties. Pharrell Williams' feel-good hit "Happy" (2013), one of the top-selling singles of all time, is a recent example of a wildly popular meme. Originally tucked away in the soundtrack of the film *Despicable Me 2*, the song spread across the viral Net through thousands of similarly-formatted cover videos, ultimately enjoying global sales of

over ten million copies - a true display of memetic cultural transference.

However, unlike genes, well-defined biological entities with clear structural units, memes have long been slapped with the vague label "cultural replicators." Now a Tel Aviv University study scheduled for publication in the journal *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* provides insight into the building blocks of cultural replication and the different ways they're used to preserve traditional rituals and practices.

## **Adding the personal touch to tradition**

According to the research by Prof. David Eilam of the Department of Zoology at TAU's Faculty of Life Sciences, together with Dr. Michal Fux, Dr. Joel Mort, and Dr. Tom Lawson of Queens University Belfast, idiosyncratic acts, once considered merely incidental to the memes—the common actions that form the basis of traditions—are actually essential for their survival in a culture. Conducted alongside a few fixed memes, individualized gestures ensured the very survival of a ritual or practice by providing simplicity, flexibility, and creative license.

For the purpose of the study, Prof. Eilam and his team observed and analyzed a wedding dance called the "Umsindo," performed by the Zulu tribe in South Africa. In this dance, only one act—the high kick, the standard meme of the dance—was performed by all 19 participants. But all the dancers engaged in additional idiosyncratic movements resembling free-style dance before and after executing the high kick. The researchers found these idiosyncratic movements to be indispensable to the easy transference and preservation of this long-practiced cultural ritual.

## **Keeping it simple**

"There are a limited number of common acts that lead to the continuation of any given tradition," said Prof. Eilam. "On the one hand this is surprising, but on the other it makes sense. You can't teach or transfer very complex things. In the Umsindo dance, there is just one common gesture. The rest you are free to improvise."

The same process characterized the application of phylacteries (a head and arm garment replete with leather bands and a small box) performed by observant Jewish men at the Tel Aviv University synagogue, the researchers observed. In the application ritual, only 11 out of 67 acts were recognized as common to all the gestures of the application and could be regarded as the "memes" by virtue of their commonality and high frequency of performance. Again, the vast majority of the gestures during the ritual were found to be idiosyncratic, providing flexibility and creative license during a rigorous religious ritual that has been practiced throughout centuries.

"The common acts of the memes are always accompanied by idiosyncratic acts that establish identity and preserve behavioral flexibility," said Prof. Eilam. "In other words, idiosyncratic acts, or 'behavioral variability,' appear to be an essential component that participates in the evolution of behavioral patterns, similar to genetic variability in biology."

Prof. Eilam is continuing his research on memes, exploring how these fixed actions emerge and why they are specifically selected in the evolution of cultural and other behavioral practices.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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