Rethinking the Idea of Tradition

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Abstract

The way tradition is viewed in modern times, courtesy of the Enlightenment and social sciences that have continued the Enlightenment project, is that it is a dead weight that hinders change, modernity and progress. The reason is that tradition is treated as cultural product that is monolith and impervious to change. It is therefore thought that tradition should be jettisoned in the process of development. The purpose of this paper is to show that this conception of tradition is inadequate and to propose the need to see tradition in a new light. The paper's proposal is that tradition should be treated as process and that the role of human agency should be recognised in the process. The methodology adopted for this paper is conceptual analysis. The paper shows that a proper analysis and clarification of the concept of tradition would show that it is a concept that accommodated change.

Keywords: Tradition, social change, human agency, traditionalism,

1. Introduction

Tradition has had a hard time ever since the seventeenth century, especially in the hand of the Enlightenment thinkers. Neither the philosophes nor Descartes, for instance, had much patience with the knowledge which is acquired through tradition (nor what may be called inherited knowledge). The conviction that progress was a moral and intellectual imperative made what was received from the past a burden – a dead weight that should be discarded as soon as possible. During the Enlightenment period, empiricism and rationalism united in

trying to force tradition out of the way because it was thought to be a hindrance to innovation and creativity. Data that are received from direct observation of present event and rational analysis of these observations were strictly emphasised as the only rational means of knowing. This meant that nothing was to be taken for granted except the primacy of direct observation and rational analysis. Reflecting on the influence of the above thinking about the idea of tradition, Shils rehearses the bad treatment tradition receives in the academics especially in the social sciences(Shils, 1995-1996).

What the negative treatment of tradition in the academics reveals is the underlying refusal to acknowledge its existence, value and dynamics. Part of the refusal to acknowledge the value of tradition is the "rationalistic" contention that there are no traditions *per se* but invented traditions. That is to say it is believed that traditions are orchestrated for certain ideological purposes. The notion of an invented tradition, while not totally misplaced, is, as Shils rightly argues "part of the fashionable derogation, which attempts to discredit cultural and intellectual achievements of long standing high merit" (Shils, 1995-1996:11). The notion of invented tradition tends to treat tradition as mere contrivance with the intention of domination and suppression. This account of tradition is grossly inadequate.

While one acknowledges the significance of the Enlightenment critique of tradition and the notion of an invented tradition, one cannot but argue that the entire critique is based on an inadequate conception of tradition. By seeing tradition as backward-looking, stagnant, inhibitive of freedom and by setting it in opposition to reason, the Enlightenment discourse failed to capture the true essence of tradition. This paper aims at rescuing tradition by subjecting it to critical analysis so that we can show its true nature and dynamics. To my mind, it is the improper characterisation of the concept of tradition that has contributed to its vagueness and its treatment as a residual category in the study of social change.

2. Tradition: Process or Product?

Derived from the Latin verb *tradere*, meaning "to hand over" or deliver, tradition originally referred to the handling down of knowledge or the passing on of a doctrine. But because only some things are worth being passed down over time, tradition soon came to be associated with issues of authority, right, duty and respect. Its meaning thus slipped from an original emphasis on *process* to a more static focus on what is being transmitted. From this stems the reading of tradition as culture or social practices that persist over time. The Enlightenment is still to be blamed for this because the historical origin of this reading can be traced to its struggle for emancipation of knowledge from the constraints of religious dogma and authority. It is believed that while tradition ensures continuity of culture over time, it obscures the access of the power of objective reason and prevents growth and development.

More often, those who regard tradition as backward-looking, not reason-constitutive and antithetical to progress focus more on seeing it as what is handed down, that is, as *product*. And this "product" is treated in essentialist terms as objects that maintain their identities and are passed on from one generation to another. This accounts for the distinction which is made between genuine and invented tradition implying, as Hobsbawn does, that invented traditions are not real traditions (1983). But the question Hobsbawn would have to answer in this regard is this: Is lack of change and innovation a criterion of genuineness and

authenticity. To my mind, the re-adaptation and re-invention of inherited knowledge and social inheritance does not make them inauthentic or spurious.

To focus on tradition as *product* rather than as *process* gives only a partial view of tradition and what is constitutive of it (Oladipo, 2002:12). Treating tradition as product would lead to the implausible conclusion that tradition would be entirely dormant and passive. There is no doubt about the fact that tradition is an embodiment of those enduring and influential elements which give a people a sense of identity and community. None the less, as Oladipo rightly argues, tradition is more than a source of reference for socio-cultural and intellectual validation (2002: 12). The treatment of tradition as a residual category, and as something which is not actively engaged is traceable to seeing it as product rather than as process.

In the handling down of certain rules, behavioural codes, practices and other cultural values, a process is involved. To downplay this process is to read too little into tradition and thereby confuse the proper understanding of the concept. It is the proper understanding of the processes involved in enacting, transmitting, receiving and making use of tradition that explains its dynamism. Traditions are not static or monolithic. They are human constructions which can be transformed through human agency. This is the point Oladipo clearly articulates when he contends that:

> The truth, however, is that, tradition is also dynamic, it responds to changes in human experience through questioning or evaluation of some of its assumptions, particularly when they are rendered suspect by new realities. Indeed, it can safely be asserted that the survival or competitiveness of a society is largely a function of the extent to which its cultural foundations are opened to such evaluations. So, although tradition plays regulatory conservative roles in social development, it can also provide inspiration or stimulate reaction. (Oladipo, 2002:12).

3. Anthropology and Tradition

As hinted earlier, anthropology contributes to the static conception of tradition, and hence its misunderstanding. Anthropology began by being defined as the study of primitive societies. This definition reveals the Enlightenment origin of the discipline. The original background to the subject matter of anthropology was the metaphor of a one-way evolutionary ladder which all societies could be placed, the industrial Western cultures being obviously set at the top while non-Western and colonial people are placed at or near the bottom. The latter were believed to still exist at the early stage from which the developed and non-traditional had started but had now left.

The conception of the non-Western cultures being more traditional in the sense of having remained at a more primitive and less advanced stage is also linked with the influential social theories developed in the nineteenth century as one way of making sense of what was perceived as the vast development initiated by the Industrial Revolution (Finnegan, 1991:107). These theories took many forms, but common to them was the distinction commonly drawn between "us" (the non-Western) and "them" (the industrialised West). It is the former that constituted the subject matter of anthropology. The influence of such classical

social scientists such as Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and FredinandTonnies also led to the cementing a binary opposition between these types of societies.

This formed the background to the initial development of anthropology as a discipline closely associated with traditional culture and all characteristics that were supposed to go along with that abstraction, namely, its being irrational, non-progressive, closeness to nature and the like. We call it an abstraction because it is not something based on experience. That is why Brodnicka suggests that "it is important to differentiate the ideology of tradition and modernity from tradition or modernity as they are experienced"(2003). It is true that within the social science this binary view of human culture is under challenge, but the conception still hold sway especially when one understands the task of anthropology, namely, "to document the traditional forms, so that even when changes were taking place, anthropologists – it was assumed – used to look for the 'original' and authentically 'traditional' kinship practices, 'traditional' religion, the 'traditional' political system and so on" (Finnegan, 1991: 108). The conception of tradition underlying anthropological research therefore is that it is a static, unchanging and un-dynamic phenomenon. Worse still is that for many years, as Finnegan rightly argues, the subject of anthropology and the context in which it operated highlighted the concept of tradition and traditional as central to the phenomenon it studies, that is, non-western cultures (Finnegan, 1991). This has become an ideology that is central to the treatment of non-Western peoples and cultures by the West. There is need for a deconstruction of this kind of thinking.

The study of societies reveals that there are practices, know-hows, technologies and beliefs that have been used over often considerable time-span. Included in this category are customs and linguistic patterns that have been perpetuated and maintained. All these can be put together and labelled cultural continuities. These cultural continuities are what we may also term traditions. This is what forms the point of departure for our conception of tradition. Traditions are first and foremost cultural materials. This is not to say that we accept Shils' conception of tradition as

> …that which is handed down-includes material objects, beliefs about all sorts of things, images of persons and events, practices and institutions. It includes buildings, monuments, landscapes, sculptures, paintings, books, tools, machines. It includes all that a society of a given time possesses and which already existed when its present possessors came upon it and which-is not solely the product of physical processes in the external world or exclusively the result of ecological and physiological necessity (1981: 12).

The problem with this definition is its vacuity. It would seem to make everything into tradition. What constitute traditions are not things but processes. As far back as 1899, Edwin Hartland writes about what could be properly constitutive of tradition. According to him,

> It is now well established that the most civilized races have all fought their way slowly upwards from a condition of savagery. Now, savages can neither read nor write; yet they managed to collect and store up a considerable amount of knowledge of a certain kind, and to hand on from one generation to another a definite social organization and

> certain invariable rules thus gathered and preserved in the memory,
> and communicated by word of mouth and by actions of various kinds.
> To this mode of preservation and communication, as well as to the
> things thus preserved and communicated, the name tradition is given
> (Cited in Bronner, 2000: 91).

The knowledge and forms of social organisation rules referred to by Hartland, in addition to certain beliefs, constitute social structures in which the individuals found themselves in the society. This view of tradition assures it of its future. So long as people need rules and categories by which to live, and they cannot on the spur of the moment develop them for themselves in a manner acceptable to their fellows, they will make use of traditions, and past ways of doing and thinking about things, which they have inherited as useful, tried responses to the vagaries of their existence. Most importantly, identifying the general context for the functioning and survival of tradition, we might recognise with Edward Shils that:

> A society is a 'trans-temporal' phenomenon. It is not constituted by its
> existence at a single moment in time. It exists only through time. It is
> temporally constituted. It has a temporal integration as well as spatial
> integration. To be cut off from the past of one's society is as
> disordering to the individual and to the society as being cut off in the
> present (1981: 327).

A proper conception of tradition would show that it is a constitutive element of human cultural life. It rests on two basic principles: (1) human mortality and historicity, (2) the need to build on the experiences, knowledge and skills developed by others. The first principle recognises that a culture does not end with the death of a generation but that each generation transmits to the next what it holds to be precious and utilitarian. The second principle is a corollary of the first in that it provides the bond between successive generations when values, norms, symbols, attitudes and behaviours are shared throughout history. It is evident therefore that tradition is a principle of continuity, identity and unity in any culture. However, it is not simply a seamless diachronic process, for such a process would negate human freedom. It is simultaneously a synchronic process where both the transmitter and the receiver bring "tradition into relation with their particular situations and experiences and must also interpret for each other their remembered and current experiences, if living recollection is not to transform itself into dead traditionalism" (Pottmeyer, 1994: 1120).

To my mind, an adequate conception of tradition would be that which sees it as conscious and critical confrontation with the cultural continuities which constitute social structure into which individuals are born and which acts as the backdrop of their beliefs and actions. This social structure is constituted by beliefs, rules and knowledge. Tradition, in this sense, constitutes the web of beliefs and knowledge that people necessarily inherit and which influence the way they understand the world and act in it. What this implies is that tradition becomes an inescapable starting point for every individual. The idea of the "modern man", in the sense of a person who is free from the past, assumes the possibility of possessing pure experiences. This assumption has no rational foundation. The impossibility of such pure experiences becomes obvious when one realises that the so-called "modern man" must also arrive at his beliefs and action by way of the traditions found in his community. This is not to

say that as a rational agent, he is absolutely bound by the tradition into which he is initiated. But he must first understand and rationalise it. He could afterward critique it and modify it as he confronts new situations in his daily experience. This conception is significant in the sense that it embraces all traditions whether it is religious scientific or socio-political. It also demonstrates the inescapability of tradition. In this sense, we say that the conception is ontological. This is because it shows how tradition is constitutive of our being. We do not thereby imply that we could not be human without tradition, but as social animals, human beings cannot do without certain structures found within the society. This conception of tradition also shows that tradition embodies both process and content. As we have shown, there is a process involved in the transmission of tradition, but as well as there is something that is being transmitted.

4. Tradition and Change

The focus on tradition as product has led to the thinking that tradition can only be defined as *traditio*, that is, that which is handed down, or passed down or something given for keep. In accordance with this, tradition is defined as "a set of practices and beliefs that persist over several generations" (Fleishacker, 1994:71). In this sense, tradition is essentialised and ascribed a kind of existence independent of the beliefs and actions of specific individuals. This kind of thinking places tradition in oppositional relationship with change and innovation. For instance, Frohnen argues implausibly that:

> Traditions are concrete realities, not collection of ideas more or less coherently put together. They are enduring modes of conduct based in habitual relation among people and between practitioners and their objects. Because they are constituted largely by habits, traditions are not easily manipulated or changed, particularly by individuals (Frohnen, 2001: 112).

Thus, for him, traditions are self-contained systems that do not depend directly on the actions and beliefs of individuals.

To my mind, tradition does not form a simple contrast with change. Consequently, there is no opposition between tradition and modernity. It is the advocates of change, modernity and progress who have set tradition as a straw-man and claim, in their pursuit of novelty, that they can free themselves and their contemporaries from the so-called "dead weight" of tradition. As Kristeller (1983:12)rightly remarks, a completely stable and rigid tradition that never admits of change is humanly impossible and has never existed. The correctness of this remark is evident when examined in the light of the so-called traditional or primitive societies that are said to be most traditional. They are stable only in a relative sense and subject to more or less subtle change. To see tradition as antagonistic to change, modernity and progress is to present an inadequate account of the relationship between tradition and social change. Tradition can only be seen as the opposite of only one kind of change, namely, that in which the disruption of the status quo is so complete that the new cannot be read as an innovative adaptation of the old, or what we may call revolutionary change. A change is revolutionary when it involves a great, often violent, departure from the status quo.

When we turn to empirical evidence, we often see that traditions evolve and change. Frohnen even admits this when he remarks that:

> Traditions undergo modifications in the course of events – in facing changed circumstances – or, when constitutive groups over time come to accept that aspect of their tradition conflict with other, higher order tradition (2001:113).

The truth is that traditions are historically engendered and nothing historically engendered ever remains static, fixed or maintains intact everything that constitutes its identity through time. Even when one considers the process of the handling down of traditions, change is involved. Gross explains this when he remarks that:

> The totality of relations that encompasses a receiving generation is never exactly the same totality that was taken for granted by the transmitting one. As social and cultural changes occur, so do ways of confronting and organizing experience. And as experiences change, so do modes of perception, including perceptions of what a tradition is and means (1992:13-14).

When social needs and perceptions change, no matter how minute, the inherited traditions cannot help but be apprehended and assimilated differently. So, no tradition is taken over and used precisely at it was given, or passed to future generation precisely as it was received. Rather, it is always adapted to a situation. For instance, if a given historical situation includes elements not previously encountered historically, a tradition need not really be embraced as it is, but instead it is selectively adapted and thereby modified and altered.

The cultural materials that evolve into traditions are, at the time of their enactment, grounded in some historical circumstances, certain conceptions of human society and social relations, certain metaphysical ideas, beliefs or presumptions. These conceptions, however, may be found by subsequent generations to be superstitious or rationally unfounded. This may provoke them to search for a rational foundation which may lead to the modification of the received social inheritance. Historically, there is always some amount of non-congruence between one generation's definition of reality and another. The greater the changes that occur in the way the world is organised and interpreted, the greater the degree of non-congruence that will be between the generations, and the more necessarily it will need to adjust or attain a tradition to the new circumstances.

5. Tradition, Change and Human Agency

What is implied in the above section is that traditions are not as static as it is presupposed: traditions do change. For Munoz, there is no problem with this kind of conclusion; but he argues that the premise should not be based on conscious human action. It does not require rigorous reflection to disagree with this. He writes:

> Traditions indeed do change. They adapt themselves to different circumstances as well as to the unique characteristics of each individual personality but are not the result of a conscious action. Traditions do

develop but their modification is not a conscious or voluntary action (Munoz, 1995:26).

Munoz presupposes two lines of thought with this assertion which require to be deconstructed. Firstly, he presupposes that tradition has a dynamics of its own that is different from what human beings do and therefore grants tradition a transcendent quality. This, for me, leads to the hypostatisation of tradition, a view which is difficult to sustain in view of the fact that traditions are created by people and not vice versa. The second presupposition, to my mind, is that while human beings may be involved in the modification of tradition, it is not a product of deliberate and conscious human effort. By implication, human beings are helpless in the hand of tradition and thus inextricably influenced by it. Both presuppositions are partial in view of the nature of tradition.

Let us examine the first point, that is, that tradition has a dynamics of its own. A critical look at tradition would show that tradition does not possess an inherent power of its own. The faulty belief that it does is based on wrong analogy. In an attempt to explain the dynamics of tradition, some have used the organic metaphor by drawing an analogy between tradition and organisms. This analogy between tradition and organisms is responsible for the erroneous thinking that tradition has a dynamics of its own. For instance, Callahan compares traditions to living organisms. According to him, "Traditions are like living organisms, in that both ought to and usually do grow and adapt in response to their external circumstances and internal tensions, or failing to do so, soon cease to exist" (Callahan, 2009: 27). This analogy is weak because while a living organism possess an internal dynamics that respond to external circumstance, traditions do not. Traditions, like culture, are, as Glassie argues, created by human beings as they go through life (1995:398). In the process of cultural development, traditions which form the background to future development are always embedded in actions and practices. They do not exist as abstract entities apart from their instantiation in people's lives and activities. Thus, tradition is usually taken forward; it does not take people forward. If there is a static tradition, it is because for certain reasons people keep it as it is, and in so far as it changes, it is because people change it.

Further clarification is needed on this point. To say that tradition has no power of its own to adapt and change in the process of enactment, transmission, reception and use is not only to reduce tradition to an inert phenomenon, but also to imply that it lacks power to exist and hence persist of itself without the instrumentality of human actors. The notion being developed here is that tradition is constituted in use and lacking in inherent power. Barnes remarks that this line of reasoning is recognised in sociology but used only in particular contexts (1995:117). In theoretical discourses, this line of reasoning seems forgotten. The reason for saying this is that when speaking of the familiar received component of social life – ideas, laws, norms, knowledge and especially religious doctrines – the tendency is to empower them (as weights) and regard them as a source of constraints.

Now let us examine the second point. To argue that traditions change but not as a result of voluntary or conscious action on the part of individuals operating within that tradition is to subscribe to a form of determinism and to give primacy to structure over human agency. To argue as Munoz does is to take a structuralist position, that is, to argue that social institutions and structures shape human behaviour and that people are shaped by their history

and by power structures and social forces that they cannot control. On the contrary, it is more plausible in this regard to see tradition as the continuing accomplishment of human beings. It lacks any power of its own. It exists and persists only through the continuous exercise of the power of human beings themselves. In other words, "tradition is founded upon personal choice" (McDonald, 1995: 58). Tradition is propelled by the conscious decision of certain individuals to engage in a certain sort of historical relationship involving a network of people and a shared value, knowledge, worldview and so on. This is what the notion of agency suggests; that individuals possess internal powers and capacities, which through exercise, make them active entities, constantly intervening in the course of event around them rather than being tossed around by those events in an unconscious and unthinking manner. The implication of this is that tradition is not, as some supposed, an unconscious process of carrying out or perpetuating certain cultural values but a critical confrontation with these cultural values. This confrontation is a conscious process.

There is the need to examine how the influence of tradition gives room for human agency. Bevir provides an analysis of this. At the core of the analysis lies a particular conception of the relationship between content and conduct or between tradition and agency. His concept of tradition captures an ontological fact which implies that humans necessarily have their beings in a social context already constituted before them which inevitably influences them. He therefore would like us to see tradition as a set of understandings or beliefs someone acquires or inherits during the process of socialisation (Bevir, 2000: 36, Bevir and Rhodes, 2003: 43). Tradition, in this sense, evokes a social structure in which individuals are born and which then acts as the backdrop of their (individuals) beliefs and actions. For Bevir,

> To recognize the inevitable influence of tradition on individuals is not to deny human agency. Although individual must begin their journey against the background of tradition, they later can modify that tradition: although they are inescapably influenced by it, they are not determined by it (2000: 35).

Thus, tradition can be seen as a social inheritance in the form of knowledge, web of beliefs and practices which constitute the background to our being in the world and which form the basis of future explorations and development. There is no doubt about the fact that this social inheritance can influence us. They influence our beliefs, our habits and our actions. However, as Bevir rightly contends, the influence of tradition is not antithetical to human agency. The reason is that though tradition influences human beings, it does not determine, restrict or place limits upon the beliefs and actions in which human agents subsequently engage. As rational agents, human beings possess the powers of reasoning which are deployed in response to issues or dilemmas. Traditions or webs of beliefs may be modified by actors as a consequence of the circumstances they confront. Therefore, the past influences the present but does not determine it; agents can resist or reformulate the ideas and cultural values they inherit.

What we are saying is that the inevitability of tradition only refers to its influence as a starting point, not as a final destination. We should be wary of representing tradition as an inevitable presence within all that the individual ever does. The fact that an individual starts

out from a tradition does not mean that he cannot extend or modify it. If indeed traditions are changed and they cannot change themselves, then we cannot avoid the acceptance of the role of the individual in the process of change in any tradition. Meanwhile, though we need man to explain the changes that take place in tradition, we should not see this as an *a priori* assumption. It is a necessary and a sufficient condition to bring change to any tradition whatever. In fact, we must recognise the fact that the ability to develop traditions that were bequeathed to us and which we have acquired is an essential part of our being in the world. We are always confronting novel circumstances that require us to apply traditions anew, and traditions themselves cannot fix absolutely the nature of their application. When we confront a new situation, we have to extent or modify our inheritance to encompass it, and as we do so we thereby develop this inheritance. Whatever is seen in our contemporary world whether in art, science or politics is as a result of this kind of development. Because no two situations are exactly ever the same when we look at time and contents, every time we attempt to apply a tradition, we have to reflect on the tradition; we have to try to understand it afresh in the light of the relevant circumstances, and by reflecting upon it, we necessarily open it up to possible innovation.

We must therefore agree that human beings can and do exercise their agency in remodifying their social inheritance. However, we must recognise that Bevir's analysis looks too simplistic, that is, it not only over-emphasises but also oversimplifies the ease with which individuals can modify their inherited contexts. This is not to say that tradition itself has a way of resisting change, the problem lies in the fact that people may be too habituated in their inherited contexts that they do not see the need to subject it to reflective and critical questioning. In other words, the reflection that is suggested above in the event of a novel situation in which a tradition needs to be applied is not an attitude people constantly engage in even though they still retain their agency and are capable of doing so. In Frohnen's view, traditions do not have the malleability Bevir predicates of them but rather are "concrete, social entities…constituted primarily by habits…that go qualitatively beyond the status of any background understanding (Frohnen, 2001:109). The usual tendency to empower tradition is what manifests in Frohnen's criticism. As we noted the problem is not with tradition but with the individuals.

6. Attitudes and Tradition

The relationship between tradition and change is a variable which is dependent on the attitudes of the people to which a tradition is bequeathed. Popper contends that there are only two main attitudes possible towards a tradition. These attitudes we may also call mental outlooks which may be either uncritical or critical (Popper, 1991:122). These attitudes are adopted as a result of pressures from a changing socio-cultural reality. Each of them, however, determines how an existing tradition would come to be assimilated and carried forward.

To adopt an uncritical attitude towards a tradition is to accept it the way it is or approve it without analysing or questioning it or discriminating between the good and bad aspects of it. This appears to be what happened during the long stretches of pre-history, as well as in stable peasant communities with historical time, when there were very few changes

in the basic forms of social life over centuries. Popper argues that people often put up this attitude without being aware of it and that in many cases; we cannot escape this kind of attitude (1991: 122). The reason, for him, is that often times, we do not realise that we are faced with a tradition. And if we do not know that we are acting under the influence of a tradition, we cannot help accepting the tradition uncritically.

While the argument of Popper is good, we must grant that its explanatory usefulness may be limited. We need to realise that an uncritical attitude toward a particular tradition, for instance, does not result from only ignorance. Sometimes, it may be deliberate, and when this happens, tradition inevitably leads to and becomes traditionalism. Under the pressure of changes in socio-cultural reality, people may decide to hold on uncritically to the status quo and refuse to allow the tradition to change.

Gross explains the uncritical mental outlook in another way. He thinks that our mental outlooks towards traditions depend largely on the degree of changes that happen in the social cultural environment of any people. For him, people hold uncritically to their social inheritance when the changes in the socio-cultural environment are only slightly or not significantly different from one generation to another (Gross, 1992:14). This point is also limited in explanatory capacity. It does not explain, for instance, why significant changes sometimes do not make some people change their traditions. I think the point raised by Gyekye is more germane in this respect. In explaining the reason why certain traditions persist from generation to generation despite their shortcomings, Gyekye writes:

> It may be that the reason for the persistence of certain features of a received tradition that are considered inelegant is that most people, either out of irrational difference to pristine values and patterns – out of a desire not to rock the traditional cultural boat that has kept afloat by time – or out of an intellectual or moral inertia that prevents their conceiving other ways of doing things, would rather conveniently settle in the inherited cultural milieu and be moulded by it than to mould it (1997: 223).

To my mind the above passage sums up the reason for the uncritical attitude, namely, irrational deference to pristine value and patterns, cultural revivalism and intellectual inertia. These are likely to prevent a critical attitude toward tradition and hence prevent alternative conceptions that may lead to the modification and adjustment in the appropriation of tradition.

The second reaction is the critical attitude or mental outlook. This attitude may result either in the acceptance or rejection of a tradition. It may also result in a compromise, that is, in reworking or re-modifying the received tradition in order to make it more relevant to the prevailing socio-cultural environment. According to Popper, this attitude requires that we know the tradition and understand it in order to be able to subject it to critical analysis (1991: 122). In other words, we have to have the tradition clearly before us, and we have to understand, in a general way, what may be the function and significance of the tradition. In addition, I believe we need to maintain some distance from the tradition. If we are too absorbed in or too culturally habituated with the tradition, such a critical standpoint may be difficult to take. While Popper believes that we cannot free ourselves entirely from the bonds of tradition, he however, thinks that we can free ourselves from the taboos of a tradition

(1991:122). What he means is that we can free ourselves from setting up a tradition as something sacred and thus empowering it. This can be done not only by rejecting the tradition but also by critically accepting it. In order to free ourselves, we have to adopt the methodology of thinking about the tradition and asking relevant questions.

7. Tradition and Traditionalism

Shils discredits how rationalism denied tradition any relevance while depositing the source of valid knowledge and experience in the powers of individual spirit. He also subjects to criticism rationalistic liberalism which ascribed validity to what the individual had decided in the light of his or her own perceptions and reason. Rationalistic liberalism, according to Shils, misrepresents tradition as "the mindless repetition of inherited lines of thought and conduct into which individuality did not enter" (1958:153). It holds that tradition imposes barrier on man's conduct and restraints on his thought and sentiment. Tradition, in this view, prevents an individual from seeing with his or her own eyes and from feeling and valuing according to his or her own creative powers (Ibid) and so the expansion of individual freedom has come to be regarded as incompatible with the maintenance of tradition. In other words, from the rationalist and liberal's perspectives, there is an inherent antinomy and mutual exclusiveness between tradition and liberty, and between tradition and creativity or innovation. This attitude to tradition, for me, as for Shils, seems to rest on the conflation of tradition and traditionalism.

As we have argued in this essay, the reception of tradition is not a passive thing. It seems to us that there is an active, ongoing, positive tendency in the reception of tradition. As Shils argues, tradition is not the dead hand of the past but rather the hand of the gardener, which nourishes and elicits tendencies of judgment of which would otherwise not be strong to emerge on their own (1958: 156). In this respect, tradition is an encouragement to incipient individuality rather than its enemy. Shils observes that "most human beings are not creative enough to give birth to a wholly original experience of the sacred, to create their own individual image of justice and truth" (1958: 155). The value of tradition, therefore, lies in that what has been on ground could act a motivator, something to start with and which can further transform. It is not necessary that what is called tradition here should be thought to have been observed from time immemorial. To appropriate the past, it is not necessary that it should be seen as an indefinitely backward reaching span of time. All that is essential is that it should be involved with the past and not just as an historical fact.

Tradition, yet, has inhibitive or illiberal potentiality. This is accentuated when the attachment to tradition becomes traditionalism (Shils, 1958: 160). Thus, Shils argues that tradition and traditionalism are not the same and have varying effects on the human community. JaroslarPelikan, the Yale historian of Christianity, in an interview in 1989, describes tradition as the living faith of the dead and traditionalism as the dead faith of the living (Cited in Legenhausen, 2002: 1). This gives a positive view of tradition and a negative view of traditionalism as the former shows element of dynamism which is absent in the latter. For, Pelikan tradition lives in conversation with the past, while remembering where we are and that it is we who have to decide. Traditionalism, on the other hand, supposes that nothing

can be done the first time, so all that is needed to solve any problem is to arrive at the supposedly unanimous testimony of this homogenised tradition.

Shils defines traditionalism as "the self-conscious, deliberate affirmation of traditional norms, in full awareness of their traditional nature and alleging that their merit derives from that traditional transmission from a sacred origin" (1958: 160). This definition shows that traditionalism is an uncritical, revivalist attitude, which is always dogmatic, doctrinaire and which insists on uniformity and conformity. Traditionalism urges a thoroughgoing adherence and does not discriminate between the workable and the unworkable aspects of a tradition. It regards all its elements as equally essential. As a revivalist attitude, traditionalism is backward-looking. It always calls for a return to certain pristine traditions. The intention is usually to emphasise the cultural products of the past as constituting the cultural context within which an individual member of the society must function.

Traditionalism is almost always ideological and extremist. As an ideology, it opposes the present in its entirety and looks to the past for an alternate way of being (Gross, 1992: 78). It operates on the assumption that the traditions of the past offer better guidelines for life than what the present represents. It therefore sentimentalises and romanticises the old traditions and longs to return to them. This backward stance however is not wistful or escapist, but militant and activist. The reason is that traditionalism's primary goal, as Gross rightly remarks, is "to bring about a coercive restoration of the way things were" (Gross, 1992: 78).In a sense, traditionalism is, therefore, fundamentalist. In its purest form it attempts to set the clock of history back in order to make the past come alive again in the present. Gross writes that:

> Traditionalism's underlying assumption is that the world governed by tradition was simpler, better, and morally healthier than the world we have now. This being so, tradition should not just be fondly recalled but radically repeated. Yet for tradition to become operative, modernity would have to be eradicated so that normativity of past traditions can be restored (Gross, 1992: 78).

What is deducible from the above relates to the relationship between traditionalism and modernity. For me, while it is inappropriate to set tradition in polar opposition to modernity, traditionalism is a polar opposite and an arch-enemy of modernity. Traditionalism usually crops us in situations where a modern, technical-industrial culture has been superimposed on an older, traditional one. In the nineteenth and twentieth century's, traditionalist movements most often emerged in colonial settings as a response to Western imperialism. While it is the case that traditionalism provides at least an answer to the problem of cultural hegemony of some cultures and cultural dislocation within an imperialist setting, this answer is unacceptable because what is demanded by traditionalists is not just a restoration of the spirit of the past, but a dogmatic restoration of the very letter of tradition as well.

The extremist dimension of traditionalism relates to what looks like an uncompromising rigidity that is built into it. It seems to passionately insist on the full adherence to tradition with a form and elaboration unknown in the ordinary observance of

tradition. Exceptions, qualifications, deviations are regarded as wickedness, and only the pristine tradition in all its fullness is regarded as an adequate guide to conduct.

If anything is harmful to liberty, innovation, progress, individual proactivity and development, it is not tradition but traditionalism. This is what the Enlightenment thinkers fail to realise. It is not tradition but rather traditionalism that renders rigid the social structures which it regulates. Those who, in the light of traditionalism, regard themselves as qualified bearers and guardians of certain traditions cannot stand rival claimants and they cannot stand deviations in conduct from those stipulated by the traditional values. It therefore excessively repress independent and critical attitude towards authority. Whether it takes the form of national patriotism, or ethnic solidarity, traditionalism is like political and religious enthusiasm.

Tradition and traditionalism should be clearly distinguished in an attempt to evolve a theory of tradition that is useful in the development process. This is because they are not only different but, as Shils argues, traditionalism is radically hostile to tradition. Traditionalism views tradition as possessing inherent authority, and consequently traditionalists usually employ it to legitimise existing authority structures. If traditionalism is the only account of the nature of tradition then the classical antithesis between tradition and freedom would be correct. However, it is clear that traditionalism is not only an inadequate account of tradition; it is not the only elaboration of the concept.

A critical examination of the normal condition of substantive traditional life is much more flexible than traditionalism implies. In most communities, whether intellectual or social, deviations from tradition are many and they sometimes go unnoticed. The reason is that traditional prescriptions of conduct are sometimes vague and a certain range of variation is allowed in many spheres. Corroborating the above line of reasoning, Shils remarks that "In daily life, the tradition is not so rigid that it does not permit adaptations to individual idiosyncrasy and external pressure" (1958: 161). In other words, the pattern of normal of tradition is loose. This is because gradual modification in actions are possible without arousing hostility from others or guilt within the actors. Traditions, as opposed to traditionalism, permits diverse interpretations which, though might be criticized as incorrect, retain sufficient legitimacy to render them tolerable. It is within this framework of such a shared tradition, with its capacity for multiple interpretations and diverse emphases that the culture of freedom and innovation can arise and flourish. Individual variation and group diversity are both fruits of normal tradition.

One thing that is troubling about traditionalism is the fact that despite all its professed interest in the past, it is fundamentally a-historical. It assumes that earlier traditions can simply be reinstated in the present, without taking into consideration intervening developments which effectively renders that option not only implausible but impossible. The truth is that tradition cannot be re-established by authorisation. It can only regenerate when the entire network of relations and situations that brought about the tradition and sustained it is recreated intact. But such temporal historical reconstruction is a fact beyond conception. Even the greatest historian will understand this point. There cannot be a temporal recreation of an historical event. The past indeed is not capturable and the underlying conditions that once nourished an old form of life are unrecoverable. They have been superseded by new

cultural conditions whose very nature prevents any compulsory restoration of the old life and traditions.

8. Conclusion

The point of this essay is to clarify the idea of tradition so as to see it in a new light. When view not with the lens of the enlightenment thinkers, it would be seen that to operate within a tradition does not stifle change or innovation. The true dynamics of tradition can only be fully appreciated when one sees it as a process rather than a product. When there is emphasis on the process, there would be no need to refer to some cultures or societies as traditional, and meaning that they will remain traditional and not susceptible to change. Let us consider, African cultures. The introduction of colonialism, Christianity and Islam into African cultural growth has produced a lot of changes. Ideas about politics religion and development have been shaped and reshaped. The reason is that, even in the face of tradition, people have the capacity to rethink their situation in the face of new realities. The truth is that there is no tradition that is not adaptable in the face of new realities and contacts with other cultures. If African traditions and culture were impervious to change, there is no way it would have accommodated western influence. In fact it is correct to say that the success of the European conquest of Africa resulted from the fact that African cultures were not recalcitrant to change. The implication of this is that the clinical separation that is envisaged by modernisation theorists does not have historical evidence (Norbu, 1996). This clinical separation may be highly desirable in some quarters but it is practically impossible for the reason that development does not occur in a vacuum. It takes place within the society; and this makes the interaction between tradition and modernity inevitable. Contrary to the supposed conflict and the relation of replacement that is said to hold between tradition and modernity, modernity as a social reality is not antithetical to tradition; modernity in actual fact can be conceived as tradition in critical evolution. In other words, modernity is tradition responding or adjusting to the challenges of new realities. An analysis that yields this perspective regarding the two concepts would enable us to see tradition not as an inhibiting force in the social changes occurring in any society. Tradition needs not be abandoned for modernity in development. This is because one is not a threat to the other. Modernity, for instance, could enrich particular traditions if it is not imposed but consciously adapted. The tradition could also be reinterpreted in the face of new contexts and realities. Development normally induces a continuous interaction between a people's socio-cultural heritage and alien cultures which creates tension. It is within the limit of this tension that development compels tradition to reformulate its ideas and to redefine its function in the light of modernity.

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