

Tradition

Tradition: Long- standing beliefs or practices handed down from generation to generation, and a group's or society's continuation of these beliefs or practices.

Modernity: The present culture of openness towards change and novelty in beliefs and practices.

There exist traditional sports (sumo wrestling, sepak takraw), languages (ethnic tongues, dialects), arts (Chinese opera, Indian classical dance), medicine (Traditional Chinese Medicine), religious practices (Kesh in Sikhism, Lent in Christianity), political institutions (monarchy), social customs (etiquette, filial piety) and values (closeness to family, solidarity with community, respect for authority, religiosity).

Characteristics of tradition	Characteristics of modernity
Continuity	Change
Preservation	Destruction + Creation
Guided by time- tested practices	Guided by creativity + rational goals
Deferring to history	Embracing freedom to create one's own future

Perspective A: Why embrace tradition?

1. A1. Order, cohesion

Certain traditional beliefs and attitudes have been central to maintaining social order and cohesion between different individuals in a society.

- Traditional etiquette promotes civility between individuals.
- Traditional social bonding activities promote social solidarity and affinity for one's culture.
- Traditional respect for established authorities sustains obedience towards rules.
- Traditional belief in an afterlife of punishment and reward instills moral discipline.

When such traditions are rejected, society risks moral relativism: instead of members adhering to a common socio-moral order we have all inherited, each individual adheres only to moral standards she has created or chosen for herself.

Individuals' beliefs and standards may then lack concern for the collective interest, or move in conflicting directions, resulting in social fragmentation. Sticking to our shared traditions avoids fragmentation, and preserves unity.

Perspective B: Why be wary of tradition?

B1. Unjust order, herd behaviour

Tradition may be used as an excuse to maintain an social order that is unfair towards a particular group.

- Gender roles: Women's roles have traditionally been confined to the domestic sphere, in contrast to men's more expansive roles in public life and work. After women's movements fought for women's emancipation from this restrictive tradition in the 19th and 20th centuries, women finally gained greater choice over their roles in society and the family, and greater public recognition.

The supposed "collective interest" may disproportionately serve the interests of one group in society at the expense of another group. Established authorities sometimes come from a privileged group (men, some religious leaders, upper classes) who demand respect for traditional order as a way of maintaining their privileged status.

Excessive social cohesion may also lead to herd behaviour, whereby individuals forgo their ability to think for themselves and mechanically follow whatever their community does, no matter how misguided.

Over-attachment to tradition may lead a community to ostracise independent-minded iconoclasts, instead of appreciating such individuals' valuable potential in pointing out the community's blindspots.

Perspective A: Why embrace tradition?

A2. Stability, familiarity

Tradition gives us roles and paths that are already established for us. These stable roles from the past serve as signposts guiding our life, so we are not burdened by too much decision-making and uncertainty. This may seem restrictive from our modern perspective, but from a traditional perspective, it may be liberating: it can liberate a person from the burden of too many choices and decisions; your path has already been laid down by history for you, and you just need to follow it. Tradition can thereby provide clarity to one's identity and place in the world, so life becomes less confusing.

- Traditional religion: When a person follows the traditional religious beliefs of their community, they have a well-established, ready-made set of beliefs to guide them and need not go through the confusing process of navigating and choosing between different religious and ethical worldviews as an individual.

Humans crave familiarity. The stability of tradition satisfies a person's desire for a familiar environment by preserving the culture she grew up in, preventing her from becoming disoriented and alienated by excessive cultural change and disruption.

- British monarchy: The majority of British people want the traditional institution of the monarchy to continue, despite the

Perspective B: Why be wary of tradition?

B2. Stagnation, closed-mindedness

Over-attachment to the safe and comforting familiarity of traditions can stifle creative risk-taking and weaken one's ability to adapt to changing conditions. A community that clings to tradition may stagnate: its culture may continue on, but it may fail to overcome shortcomings and progress to what it is capable of achieving.

Although traditions may have served people well in the past, today's world contains new ethical perspectives, new contexts and new alternatives; traditions should at least be reassessed, taking into consideration these new developments. To ignore such developments just because they are unfamiliar, and insist on maintaining a practice just because it is traditional, is to be closed-minded and wilfully ignorant.

- Korean hierarchical deference: Korea's traditional culture of deference towards a superior contributed to the Korean Air crash of 1997, when the first officer did not explicitly alert the captain to the latter's mistakes out of deference to his superiority. Subsequently the airline hired a US executive who replaced the traditional cockpit culture with a more openly communicative one, resulting in the airline's progress to a very reliable safety record.

idea of a hereditary head of state being old-fashioned. Amidst the coming and going of governing parties and prime ministers, the stable status of the monarch as their head of state provides citizens with the comforting sense of a familiar political order. This may also be why many other Western countries – including Australia, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands – have also retained their kings and queens as figureheads, despite identifying as democracies.

- Traditional health remedies: Many traditional Chinese health remedies use parts of endangered exotic animals. For instance, traditional Chinese ‘cooling water’ is made using parts of the Saiga antelope, which is critically endangered. Today, we have more modern ethical perspectives (animal welfare movements, conservation movements), new contexts (species’ endangered status) and new alternatives (modern medical and scientific perspectives). Older generations may not have known such perspectives and alternatives, but today we do, and we ought to re-evaluate traditional remedies in light of all that we know today.

Perspective A: Why embrace tradition?

A3. Historical belonging

A person often feels a need to be part of something greater than herself, not just in society but also in history. Tradition fills this need by giving her a sense of identification with her forebears.

By continuing a tradition, a person affirms herself as a link in an unbroken chain of generations stretching back into the past and continuing on into the future. She identifies as part of a community existing long before she existed. And by handing down the tradition to future generations, she contributes to the community's continuity beyond her lifetime.

Thus, her significance is not limited to her lifetime. She becomes part of something more historically significant than herself, part of something greater that transcends the boundaries of her lifetime.

- The Sabbath: Religious Jews carrying out weekly Sabbath rituals are partaking in sacred traditions practiced by their ancestors for thousands of years; such rituals have helped their people's sense of cultural and religious identity to endure despite dislocation and persecution, and by continuing these rituals Jews today share in that historical significance.
- The Hajj: Muslims carrying out the traditional pilgrimage to Mecca are retracing a pilgrimage taken by Muhammed in the seventh century and believe the

Perspective B: Why be wary of tradition?

B3. Blindness towards past faults

A person's identification with her forebears may lead her to view criticisms of them as if they were criticisms of herself.

To deflect and deny such criticisms, she may cultivate a blindness towards her forebears' faults, and whitewash and over-romanticise the past.

Such a bias towards the past prevents people from objectively understanding and learning from past mistakes.

- Honouring the Confederacy: In the American Civil War, southern states fought for the right to break away to maintain slavery. Some southerners uphold the tradition of holding regular memorials to honour Confederate soldiers who died in the war. The memorials give them a sense of connection to their ancestors who died during the war. Some defend these ancestors by falsely claiming that the southern states did not fight to maintain slavery, and were simply fighting to maintain their independence from the northern states. The tradition of honouring the Confederates seems to have made some southerners identify so strongly with their forebears that they have become blind to these forebears' racist goals. It has also been a southern tradition to display the Confederate flag, the flag of the most powerful Confederate army in the Civil War. For some southerners, this symbolises not a pro-slavery cause, but the South's broader cultural

ritual stretches back thousands of years to Abraham, thus giving them a sense of connection to their prophets in the distant past.

identity and independent spirit. However, such traditions offend others, as the flag was used by an army fighting for slave-owning states, as well as by racist segregationists in the mid-twentieth century. Southerners, in their desire to identify with their region's heritage, seem to selectively overlook negative elements of history associated with the flag and their Confederate ancestors.

- Female genital cutting: The partial or total removal of female external genitalia is an entrenched cultural practice in some communities, especially in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. It can cause severe pain, infection and childbirth problems, and the UN World Health Organisation claims that it "violates a person's right to health, security and physical integrity". It may be hard for traditionalists in those communities to believe that their cultural and religious ancestors caused such harm to girls, and easier to just assume that such respected forebears must have had some wise reason for such a practice.

Perspective A: Why embrace tradition?

A4. Cultural richness, inspiration

Tradition preserves a culture's skills and knowledge, which may be unique and valuable to the world. The preservation of various culture's traditions maintains the rich diversity of cultural heritage in the world, and provides resistance to cultural homogenisation that comes with the spread of Western culture.

- **Music:** The diversity of musical traditions around the world serves as an inexhaustible source of inspiration for artists and musicians. Traditional African music, with its expressiveness and sophisticated rhythms, influenced modern Jazz musicians.
Eg: Classical Indian music styles and traditional Indian instruments were incorporated by the influential rock & roll band The Beatles into some of their music. The arts would be less interesting without such inspiration by artistic traditions.
- **Environmental knowledge:** Indigenous peoples' survival in forests or deserts for thousands of years testifies to their sophisticated knowledge of their natural environments and resourceful use of the environment for medicine and sustenance. With their traditional ways of life giving way to modernity, such precious knowledge and survival skills may be lost. Indigenous Australians have a traditional practice of 'cultural burning' in the bushland environment: using small, carefully controlled burning to strategically remove particular trees

Perspective B: Why be wary of promoting tradition too much?

B4. Commodification

Promotion of traditional culture can result in these cultures being "appreciated" in ways that distort the perception of them

- **Commodifying tradition:** The popular appreciation of Indigenous Australian art has contributed to its over-commercialisation and commodification: tourist shops now profit from fake "traditional indigenous art" made cheaply in Indonesia rather than by Indigenous Australians themselves, to whom the benefits do not flow.

Perspective C: Look for nuanced, moderate positions to balance both Perspective A and B.

C1. Appreciate tradition, but with an openness to gradual change.

When traditions change, this may mean not that the tradition is dying, but rather that the tradition is adapting to a changing world, evolving to maintain its relevance and acceptability.

What count as 'marriage' and 'traditional marriage' have evolved over time. In some time periods and communities, 'traditional marriage' meant polygamous marriages. In other times and communities, 'traditional marriage' meant monogamous marriages that were arranged by the couple's families and not the couple themselves, and marriage based on improving a family's status and wealth, not marriage based on love. In more modern times, it means love-based marriage based on individual compatibility and romantic feelings, but restricted to heterosexual couples. In the 21st Century, more and more countries are allowing same-sex couples to legally marry. From a conservative perspective, such changes could be seen as the institution of marriage losing its traditional essence. But from another perspective, this could be seen as the institution of marriage evolving to maintain or increase its relevance to changing society.

It makes sense to embrace slow, steady evolution, but not radical, disruptive revolution. This ensures there is progress over time, but incrementally, piece by piece, at a gentle pace that doesn't change everything at once. This gives traditionalists time to slowly adapt, so they feel less alienated by the changes.

Pope Francis is the first pope to endorse same-sex unions. This is a relatively small change; he has not endorsed same-sex marriage. But even this incremental change has led to criticisms from conservative Catholic archbishops; changing at a faster pace would surely alienate traditionalists even more and risk an even larger backlash.

That said, we should also bear in mind that sometimes a tradition's harm may sometimes be so severe that people may understandably feel an urgent need to change things quickly and drastically.

C2. Preserve tradition, as long as its harmful aspects are changed.

Realise that a traditional culture may involve a mix of beneficial and harmful aspects. Take care not to throw the baby out with the bathwater – i.e. do not eliminate an entire culture with good aspects just because of it contains some harmful aspects. But also do not use the good aspects as excuses to maintain the harmful aspects. Instead of eliminating an entire culture, reform it.

- Preserve the essence of traditional religious practices and beliefs, since they provide precious values, community and identity for religious followers. But ban or discourage particular religious practices that involve oppression

and harm towards women.

- Preserve traditional Chinese medical practices, especially those with proven medical efficacy. But ban or discourage those that involve the trade of endangered animal parts.

C3. Modernise society, but preserve spaces for particular groups to maintain their traditions, while facilitating integration and exchange.

Modernity can and often does co-exist alongside tradition. Instead of choosing either one or the other, we should establish institutions and laws to facilitate peaceful co-existence, integration and exchanges between the two.

- Build a modern, secular society and state. But within this society, protect the right of religious communities to practice their respective religious traditions, in so far as they respect secular society's laws, norms and stability.
- Teach all citizens a common language (a lingua franca) in school, but also enable linguistic communities to preserve their respective languages and dialects, as long as their members know society's common language as well.
- Be open to the intermingling of different beliefs and practices, so that traditionalists and modernists can mutually inform and learn from one another.

Here is a reflective exercise for you to attempt on your own or with your peers, following the lecture, that may help you reflect on the topic of tradition in a more personal way:

1. List down traditional practices and beliefs in your society that you feel should be abolished today. What traditions that you would not want to pass down to future generations?
2. List down traditional practices and beliefs in your society that you feel should be continued. What traditions would you be happy to pass down to future generations?
3. Explain what makes the first list of traditions less desirable than the second list of traditions. Both your lists contain traditions; why is it that some traditions are undesirable, and other traditions are more desirable?
4. I imagine it is 20 years in the future, you are in your late 30s, and speaking with the generations younger than Gen Z.
Would you want these younger generations after you to continue the beliefs and practices that you are familiar with? Why or why not?
Would you want these younger generations to develop their own culture and their own beliefs, different from your own? Why or why not?

A- Level essay questions for which ideas about tradition could perhaps be used:

The arts & architecture

'Only modern architecture and modern art have a place in today's world.' How true is this of your society? (2011)

Assess the view that traditional buildings have no future in your society. (2016)

Examine the role of music in establishing a national identity in your society. (2017)

Do handicrafts still have value when machine-produced goods are so readily available? (2018)

'We shape our buildings, but then our buildings shape us.' To what extent is this true of your society? (2020)

Language

'The world would be a better place if everyone spoke the same language.' Discuss. (2006)

Is there any value in preserving minority languages in the world? (2012)

'The quality of written language is being destroyed by social media.' What is your view? (2017)

Religion

Discuss the importance of religion in society today. (2004)

'The more science advances, the more religion will decline.' To what extent do you agree? (2008)

'Human actions should be based on scientific fact, not religious faith.' How far do you agree with this statement? (2015)

'Religion is an important part of the lives of young people today.' Consider whether this is true in your society. (2019)

Family

Is the idea of having one partner for life still a realistic one? (2001)

'Traditional marriage is an outdated concept.' To what extent is this true of your society? (2014)

'Parents have no right to impose their own values and beliefs on their children.' Discuss. (2015)

Age

Is it true that the old must now learn from the young? (2000)

Education

'Conformity should be the main aim of all schools.' How far is this true? (2002)

History

Is the preoccupation with the past merely an escape from the present? (2000)

Tradition

How far do we agree that, in spite of all the changes in society, traditional values always remain the best? (1998)

How important is it for people in your society to retain a sense of tradition? (2010)

Culture

Assess the importance of food within Singaporean culture. (2019)

To what extent are festivals and national holidays effective in promoting unity in your society? (2023)

Life values

Do you think that life today offers us too many choices? (2001)

'Taking risks is an essential part of life and should be encouraged.' Discuss. (2011)

Thank you for listening to the lecture.