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Tradens, Traditum, Recipiens.
Introductory Remarks on the Semiotics, Pragmatics and Politics of Tradition

The theme of 'tradition' in the South Asian context, with the variety of its expressions, is the subject of this collection of essays. It is a fundamental topic on which many have reflected and much has been written. However, because of its very centrality, I believe that it can never receive enough attention. In fact, the function performed by the device of 'tradition' has been and is still indispensable for the great majority of the South Asian forms and systems of knowledge and meaning, since it is their main foundation of guarantee and validation. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the details and the dynamics of this function in order to effectively grasp the logic of those forms and systems of knowledge.

These are, in short, the principal motives that have led me to return once again to the theme of 'tradition'.

Now, in order to counterbalance the terseness of the above statements, it would be appropriate to explain the intentions, goals and reasons that have guided the construction of this volume on 'tradition'. However, a mere list of programmatic declarations would not do justice to the complexity of the theme and to the wide range of contexts that have been examined and discussed; it would actually generate various kinds of misunderstandings.

This does not mean that the organisation and arrangement of the following collection of essays did not follow any 'guideline' —namely, a precise programmatic intent. Quite the contrary. Yet I believe that, instead of making a mere list of such guidelines, in these introductory remarks I should dwell upon other aspects, which I consider methodologically more relevant to the study of tradition.

This attempt to reconsider a complex concept such as 'tradition' —with its many variants— it is therefore prompted not so much by a precise project of definition, as by the desire to radically rethink

the method and the interpretative criteria we adopt today to imagine and represent the functions of 'tradition'.

We should consider, to start with, to what extent *our* questions on 'tradition' are compelling and appropriate. Such questions, although despotic, are necessary.[1] They operate like semiotic grids for the understanding and reduction of complex historical phenomena. Therefore, if we try to reflect upon our method, we should once again ask ourselves questions such as 'What is a tradition?', 'What are its boundaries?', 'How can it be defined?', 'How does it define itself?', 'How does it tell the story of its origins?', 'How does it justify and legitimate its existence?', 'What needs are met by its coming into existence?', 'What are the dynamics of its reproduction?', 'How and why does it come to an end?', 'What are the means by which it maintains its distinctiveness and vitality over the course of time?'.

Moving on to a different level of analysis, we may then ask ourselves to what extent such questions are relevant to the field of South Asian cultural context. By doing this, though, we run the risk of finding ourselves in a double bind. On the one hand, if we start thinking about the logic underlying such questions, we will realise that we are unable to discuss their relevance in an abstract way (in fact, these are all questions that need to be addressed through the scrutiny of specific data and materials in order to be adequately explored). On the other hand, we will find out that these questions deal with problematics that have been identified after the generalisation and universalisation of particular data. In other words, these are questions of a 'universal' nature but originated from the analysis of specific material conditions. Before they assumed the general abstract form that allows us to address them again to a particular circumstance, such questions were context-related.

Thus, to avoid the temptation to resort to naïve 'essentialism',[2] acute hermeneutic awareness is strongly needed. It is not so easy, in fact, to see how such way of reasoning can lead to a vicious circle that could have a paralysing effect on research. And in order to overcome this cognitive impasse, it is not enough to investigate to what extent certain questions can be effectively related to the statutes, processes and dynamics of an 'alien' tradition. We should rather ask ourselves how plausible they are in regard to our traditions as well as those of others.

Instead of focusing only on their trans-cultural adequacy, we should also explore their intra-cultural validity. This implies that we deal with broad methodological issues, concerning both the epistemology and sociology of a tradition's legitimation processes and of the dynamics of cultural transmission.

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[1] None can avoid here to still ponder Gadamer's reflections on the role of questioning (*Frage*) linked to historical understanding. See Gadamer 1986: 368-384.

[2] An epistemic fallacy not so infrequent in contemporary human sciences. See Fuchs 2001.

It is true that in the past some have voiced extreme views in the attempt to free themselves from this impasse. Thus, it has sometimes been claimed that the notion of 'tradition' is absolutely alien to the classical South Asian civilisation or, on the contrary, that the interpretative model of 'tradition' is the only possible way to explain certain South Asian cultural processes.

While these formulations are objectively untenable, they can still serve us as the extremes within which we can carry out new investigations. Of course, this does not mean choosing the far too obvious solution of the 'middle way'. Instead, we should start from the awareness that *all* our questions concerning what 'tradition' in South Asia is about, are guided by some kind of interest and, therefore, through them we *always* build for ourselves preconceived models of understanding. After all, while being aware that it is impossible to set aside completely one's preconceptions, we should nonetheless remember that every cognitive act always implies some kind of investigative strategy.

A renewed interpretative effort to undestand the function of 'tradition' could start from the willingness to include the analysis of those elements that earlier strategies had underestimated or discarded.[3] Otherwise, it could recourse to a polythetic interpretative model which would allow us to confront the data obtained from different fields and cultural contexts through a flexible system of trans-codification. In both cases the results achieved could lead to significant changes in the evaluation of the data itself as well as in the setup of the investigation.

The interpretation of the discursive strategies through which a tradition justifies itself is a good opportunity to test this logic.

It is well known that the representatives of a given tradition try to justify and legitimate their convictions —which are always exposed to judgment and criticism— through the reflexive strategy of the 'discourse on tradition', with its array of principles and related notions. As is widely attested, this practice is usual in the classical traditions of the Mediterranean area. Now, it is reasonable to think that the analytical model through which the developments of this 'discourse' are interpreted and classified, takes possession of aspects of the tradition under scrutiny, from its terminology to its idioms. However, an interpretative method which is, if not 'universal', at least widely applicable, cannot be elaborated on the basis of the suggestions originating from a single cultural milieu.

It is quite evident here that when a model, or method, is modelled solely on the data drawn from a specific context, it has a dangerous tendency to force other ways of thinking reflexively on one's own tradition into that same mould —even though those ways developed

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[3] Such was the initial approach of the historiographic project carried out by the collective of 'Subaltern Studies' at Delhi University, as can be seen from the first volumes they published. See, *exempli gratia*, Guha 1982; 1983; 1984.

independently. And yet, the limitations of such a process are only revealed when one examines the forms that the practice of reflexive discourse on tradition has taken elsewhere.

In the classical South Asian intellectual world,[4] for instance, this practice was not only well-established, but its peculiarities were such that they could be used to extend our way of understanding and representing the trajectories that the 'discourse on tradition' can take. This is precisely the reason why the materials and the reflections produced by the South Asian representatives of this 'discourse' must necessarily become an integral part of the dialectical processes that shape and organise the ways in which the notion of 'tradition' is conceived today.

Therefore, in accordance with this spirit of reconsideration of the method, the criteria and the categories pertaining to the phenomenon of 'tradition', I believe that it is necessary to establish a preliminary framework within which contextualise and problematise the variegated picture offered by the essays collected in this volume.

It is a good custom to start from the fundamentals —namely, the analysis of the meanings of words and of their semiotic, pragmatic and political implications— and then to use these outcomes in order to face the range of questions and issues that arise when examining the notion of 'tradition'.

1. De traditione. *The semiotics, pragmatics and politics of a notion*

Let me start from the etymology and semantics of the noun 'tradition',[5] which derives from the Latin action noun *traditio-ōnis*, which in its turn means either 'consignment' or 'transmission' or 'passage' or 'surrender'.

The lemma *traditio-ōnis* is connected with the verb *tradere*, composed of *trans* ('across', 'beyond') and *dare* ('to give'), of which the present tense is *trado* and the past participle *traditus*. This last term designates something that has been materially 'handed down'. Hence the Italian term 'tràdito', mainly denoting what is preserved and handed down by a succession of manuscripts. This is because the verb *tradere* primarily designates the physical act of 'consigning', 'entrusting', 'transmitting', 'transferring', 'handing down', and 'narrating'. The use of *traditio* in the terminology of classical Roman law is further evidence of the concreteness of *tradere*: in fact, it denotes a gesture that is meant

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[4] The centuries-old debate on the 'valid means of knowledge' (*pramāṇavāda*) is precisely the symptom of a conflict both on the possibility of legitimate knowledge and on the exclusive control over the criteria that give power to the means of legitimation of knowledge. See the end of § 3 of my paper in this volume.

[5] Regarding the following definitions and technical usage of the terms here mentioned, I have consulted different reference works, such as the *Dictionnaire étimologique de la langue latine* (Ernout, Meillet 1985), the *Lexicon latinitatis Medii Aevi* (Blaise 1975), the *Lexicon totius latinitatis* (Forcellini 1940), the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* (1900-2001).

to ensure the correct and legitimate reception of a possession by an heir.[6] Bequeathing property to one's children is the clearest example of the physical nature of *tradere*, as is attested in the Roman institution of *traditio ficta*, namely the act of the legal consignment of a possession —subdivided into *traditio brevi manu* and *traditio longa manu*. The practical implications of this notion are also shown by some of its figurative usages, as is the case of *tradere* in the sense of 'betray'. This usage was influenced by the pejorative meaning of the notion *tradere* already present in the Latin text of the Bible,[7] and then further reinforced by the association with the ruse by means of which Judas physically 'handed over' —by cheating and, therefore, 'betraying'— Christ to the hostile alien authorities.

In one and the same word, 'tradition', thus co-exists the meaning of the factuality, concreteness and objectivity of giving and the transitive and dynamic sense of transferring. This is further corroborated by the fact that the kinetic meaning of the verb *tradere* is complemented by the conservative and static meaning expressed by the Latin word *traditio* (corresponding to the Greek παράδοσις), which implies the concreteness of 'giving' (*datio*) and 'delivering' (*trado* [*trans-do*]).

However, the meaning of *traditio* that prevailed is that of a particular form of uninterrupted *datio*, namely the continuous transmission of an original *datio*, considered so unique and important to be perpetually re-enacted. Such an act of *tradere*, regarded as a pragmatic action of giving —without a pause, or a break— from hand to hand, follows a kind of positive compulsion to repeat. Therefore, it has been seen as the ultimate guarantee of integrity since it ensures, to those who rely upon such a *vehiculum*, the immediate contact with the *originalis* —being a foundational instruction or an initial event.

Thus, the word *tradere* covered many semiotic contexts. Yet, since it has vital importance, the act of *tradere* demands a more in-depth investigation into its different social and political implications. This is inevitable insofar as any instance of *tradere* always involves two social agents as well as an object or a content. In fact, any act of transmission requires the presence of somebody who hands over (a *tradens*, literally 'someone who gives a certain thing [*res*]'), of the given object or content (*traditum*) and of a recipient (*recipiens*).

This division of the act of *tradere* into its three elementary components provides a preliminary attempt to reveal the factors and interests that constitute, inform and influence a 'tradition' —namely, a

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[6] In Roman law, 'consignment' (*traditio*) was acknowledged as the easiest way of transferring the ownership or possession (*possessio*) of an asset because it consisted precisely in the act of its material consignment. See Schiavone 2003: 307-308; Adriani 1956. Furthermore, Schiavone 2005: 5-38.

[7] In the Bible, the act of 'handing over' is sometimes associated with leaving someone in difficult conditions or in the hands of hostile people. See, *exempli gratia*, *Deuteronomy*, 23.16; 1 *Samuel*, 23.11-20; 30.15; *Job*, 16.11-12; *Psalms*, 30[31].9; 62[63].10-11; 77[78].48, 50, 61-62; 117[118].18; *Isaiah*, 19.4; 51.23; *Jeremiah*, 18.21; *Ezekiel*, 35.5; 39.23; *Amos*, 1.6; 1.9; 6.8.

specific act of transmission. This is precisely the reason why, even though the object of *tradere* (*traditum*) may well be an independent entity —a material thing, a verbal statement or a doctrine, that has significance in itself—, it is always necessary to situate it within its systemic context in order to fully understand its meaning. Consequently, the *traditum* has to be examined simultaneously from the semiotic, pragmatic, mediological and political standpoint.[8]

Seen from this perspective, any act of *tradere* is a crucial gesture closely connected to the social —and, hence, political— sphere, from which it cannot actually be separated.

2. *From the concrete practice of giving to the abstract institution of* datio *and the manner of giving again*

In addition to the systemic and relational dimension of *tradere*, one must take into account also other aims of this gesture, which concern the act of *tradere* itself as well as its socio-political consequences.

While there are always objective reasons for choosing to *tradere* a particular object or content to others, there are also concrete benefits connected to such practice. These concern both the individual who performs the act and the one who is affected by it. Apart from the immediate interest they may have in handing over (*tradere*) a particular object or content (*traditum*), these two may wish to present themselves, on the one hand, as the sole authors of the gesture itself and, on the other hand, as the only depositaries of the particular object or content that has been handed over. In this way they both try to assert their own exclusive claim on a part of the process of *tradere*. They know that, once the value and goodness of the *datio originalis* have been ascertained, the crucial thing is to make use of it, preserve it and give it again ideally intact.

This is the concrete task of future transmitters (*tradentes*), who therefore become the more or less conscious actors of a reiterative institution specialising in the transmission of the given object.

While this is surely valid for the transmission of material things, it acquires levels of complexity when it comes to the transmission of statements or doctrines, since in this context the symbolic dimension is more relevant and therefore those who are engaged in the act of transmitting can change their social status —from mere agents into professionals of *tradere*. Corporate and professional interests —both concrete and symbolic— prompt these transmitters, or mediators, to operate in such a way that their particular way of transmitting and giving again a certain object rapidly imposes itself as the *only* correct way of *tradere*. It is with this aim in mind that they come to establish their own particular way of consigning the *traditum*. Therefore, the empha-

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[8] See, for some illustrations of related analysis and theoretical apparatus, Assmann 1999; Debray 1997: 15-70; Boyer 1990.

sis placed on the correlation and mutual dependence between the original *datio* —that must be 'given again'— and the necessary practices for its acceptance, preservation and restitution become an integral part of their policy. The first gesture would be nothing, they say, without the last and vice versa, to the extent that the *medium* becomes the content and the aim, in a logic according to which practice and content are somehow interchangeable.

It is precisely such dynamics that originated the process of transition from the empirical and practical power of a concrete 'act of transmission' —a power derived from the sum of the intrinsic and concrete value of what is transmitted and the established symbolic status of the transmitter— to the abstract normative dimension of the modes of *tradere*, in which the emphasis is placed on the forms of the action rather than on its contents. This causes a crucial change of status, a sort of semantic inversion comparable to the shift from the concrete use of an object to the abstract representation of the notion of property. Here a simple individual gesture of transmission happens to be qualified beyond its merely objective value. Then, from the initial need to provide a stable foundation for one's own conduct arose a number of devices, by means of which a certain group of *tradentes* tried to move certain events or doctrines from the status of a particular *factum* to that of a universal *principium* or *decretum* (corresponding to the Greek δόγμα).

This is especially true in the cultural and religious spheres, unlike the legal domain, which focuses on the transmission of clearly defined material goods. In these contexts, the belief according to which a good teaching, if badly transmitted, may be corrupted soon became widespread. This is a common-sense principle, but it gains full force particularly in connection with some kind of strife, for it makes it possible to discredit a teaching simply by questioning the quality of its transmission or the authority of the transmitter —by claiming, for instance, that he was not acknowledged by the community of the *tradentes* as a qualified transmitter.[9]

In religious domains, when a deity gives an object or a teaching to some chosen individual, this act has various consequences: not only is the goodness of what is transmitted guaranteed and its survival assured, but it also makes the recipient an elected and privileged individual, drawing special attention to what he has been given. Remembering and narrating the act of the original *datio* then becomes the means to increase the value assigned to the transmitted object or content. This is certainly true in many religious contexts,

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[9] It is particularly appropriate here to recall the customs of the Vedic poets, according to which a bard was considered able to genuinely grasp and express meanings an 'correlations' (*bandhu*) both on the basis of his compositional skills and of the consensus given to him by his colleagues (*sákhyā*), without which he would lose the right path (*nahí pravéda sukṛtásya pánthām* [10.71.6]) and succumb to words that are sterile, literally 'fruitless and flowerless' (*vácam śuśruvám̐ aphalám apuṣpám* [10.71.5]). See *Ṛgveda*, 10.71.1-11.

that are full of narrations in which teachings, truths and visions are handed down, or accessed, and that soon rise to the exceptional status of symbolic *depositum* or *testamentum*. They become special cases of divine transmissions, which need to be preserved and 'committed to memory' because of their unique value.[10]

In this way one goes from the concrete practice of giving to the symbolic institutionalisation of both the given and the givers.

Moreover, now the act and the forms of giving are a 'unique *locus* of truth' since they are decisive in ascertaining the possibility of preserving or corrupting the *traditum*. As far as religious truths are concerned, every *traditum*—precisely because of its additional value— is claimed to be in need of 'institutional guarantees' that preserve it from the various forms of corruption, deriving both from its use and its misuse. Therefore, it becomes necessary to have recourse to that system of tutelage known as 'tradition'. Once established, this is thought to ensure the correct preservation, use and retransmission of the original *datio*.[11]

If what I have said so far makes sense, it will be useful not only to consider the representations that traditions —as well as those who study them— have produced, but also to pay critical attention to the interests and the positions of the individuals operating within the traditions themselves. Indeed, as they are "interested producers of symbolic systems",[12] they deserve the utmost attention. It is their strategic actions that build up the legitimacy of the institution of tradition. A strategy that leads towards a 'policy of perception' which deals with practical and cognitive aspect. Through this policy they aim, first and foremost, at fixing the image of the unity and continuity of their activity[13] and, subsequently, at establishing the devices by means of which this image is committed to memory and reproduced.

Then, the various processes of selection of what is to be remembered and what is to be forgotten take place via the impersonal activity of the established institution of tradition.[14]

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[10] This is especially true in the South Asian classical context, where the precepts of extraordinary people (ancestors, seers, wise men, etc.) are received as special items and are constantly referred to. That which they hand down for posterity to remember is significantly designated with the word *smṛti*, 'that which is remembered or memorised'. Not that everything remembered obtains the prestigious status of *smṛti*, but anything transmitted from Vedic sources can become an object of memory. See, for few examples of traditional approaches to the defintion of *smṛti*, Śabara, *Śābarabhāṣya*, vol. 2, pp. 72-74 (in *Mīmāṃsā-darśanam*, ed. by K.V. Abhyankar, Anandashrama Press, Pune 1970-1976); Kumārila, *Tantravārttika*, vol. 2, pp. 94; 104 (in *Mīmāṃsādarśanam, idem*); Jayantabhaṭṭa, *Nyāyamañjarī*, vol. 1, pp. 372-373 (ed. by K.S. Varadacharya, Oriental Research Institute, Mysore 1969).

[11] No tradition, therefore, can renounce the synthesis of praxis and theory, that is, to the development of specific practices of symbolic *incrementum*, through which the mere gesture of consignment is equal to a noteworthy practice, which also renders its executors noteworthy. Because of this, the executors (now true *tradentes*) develop an interest in preserving and guarding that very act of consignment.

[12] Bourdieu 1991: 4-5 (footnote 9).

[13] See Bourdieu 1991: 5; 29.

[14] See Assmann 1997: 5-58; Douglas 1990: 109-125.

3. Which notion of 'tradition' for the intellectual history of South Asia?

After suggesting this tripartite model of conceptualising the notion of tradition, I will now consider to what extent it can be adapted to the South Asian data.

Since early times, the empirical experience of the appropriation of a new word —either as a lexeme or a sememe— through an act of transmission is reported in positive terms in the cultural history of South Asia. Handing down a lemma is discussed here as an example of the practice of 'transmission' (*āmnāya*) of something that was not possessed or known before. It is an unquestionable practical experience that is significantly referred to in the *incipit* of the ancient Sanskrit treatise on etymology attributed to Yāska.[15] Talking of the lexical heritage that has been 'transmitted' (*āmnāta*), Yāska emphasises both the factuality and the guarantees offered by this institution that has made it possible to acquire formerly unknown lemmas and meanings. His discourse is structured around the same elements of the triad described above: *tradens*, *traditum* and *recipiens*.

From this very example, the notion of 'tradition' to be used for the South Asian context would appear to be easily conceivable and very close to that described in the preceding paragraph. But, although the subject of 'tradition' has been much discussed in Indological studies —variously interpreted and dealt with from different angles—, new researches and changes in the cultural attitudes over the last decades demand us to discuss it again.[16]

While revisiting 'old' interpretative criteria —such as the opposition between 'great' and 'little' tradition—,[17] various studies have chosen to talk about the 'happening' of a tradition,[18] the 'negation' of tradition on the part of some Orientalists,[19] the need to critically understand the historiographic role to be assigned to traditions,[20] the forms of entropy that can affect a tradition,[21] the theme of the 'modernity' of tradition.[22]

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[15] See Yāska, *Nirukta*, 1.1 (*samāmnāyaḥ samāmnātaḥ | sa vyākhyātavyaḥ | tam imaṃ samāmnāyaṃ nighaṇṭava ity ācakṣate | nighaṇṭavaḥ kasmāt | nigamā ime bhavanti | chandobhyaḥ samāhṛtya samāhṛtya samāmnātāḥ | te nigantava eva santo nigamanān nighaṇṭva ucyanta ity aupamanyavaḥ |*).

[16] As a matter of fact, the studies on tradition in South Asia have recently increased, and not just in number. See the detailed re-articulations of the notion of tradition presented in Kaviraj 2005: 124; 125; 126-127; 128-129; 130. Furthermore, Manring 2005; Saberwal, Varma 2005. Indeed, over the last decade the subject of 'tradition' has been widely reconsidered by various specialists. See, *exempli gratia*, Brockington, Schreiner 1999; Gopal, Champakalakshmi 1997; Champion 1996; Mohanty 1992; Halbfass 1991; Moore 1979.

[17] See Agehananda Bharati 1978; Singer 1972; Singer 1959.

[18] See D'Sa 1994.

[19] See Sugirtharajah 2003: 75-76.

[20] See Ludden 2002: 5-9.

[21] See Inden 1986.

[22] See Rudolph, Rudolph 1967: 269-293.

In spite of these propositions, some of the methodological implications of the recourse to the notion of tradition are still to be clarified. In other words, the gap between the universal category of 'tradition'[23] and the particular aspects it embraces in South Asian contexts may still turn out to be too broad and problematic. Therefore, it is necessary to think again about the theoretical guidelines and the conceptual framework, so to allow scholars to carry out a renewed analysis of the data obtained from the South Asian world.

In taking the first steps towards this renewal, it might be worth concentrating our efforts, initially, on the understanding of the ways in which the institute of tradition was conceived and described in South Asian sources, retracing its history from the semiotic, pragmatic and political point of view.[24]

This will certainly not be sufficient to clarify all the numerous epistemic, social and symbolic implications of such terms as *paraṃparā* ('succession', 'sequence', 'tradition'), *saṃpradāya* ('sect', 'religious institution', 'denomination'), *āmnāya* ('transmission', 'teaching'), *vaṃśa* ('lineage'), *aitihya* ('historical tradition') and *āgama* ('testimony', 'tradition'). In fact, all these are words by means of which certain social agents defined and characterised their own tradition, often with a remarkably thorough self-reflective attitude. However, it is important to comprehend to what extent these words are not simply nouns, but rather semantic indicators that have been used over many centuries as legitimating metaphors, apt to point out the objective location —and, consequently, the actual criteria of its accessibility— of a much more abstract and intangible *depositum fidei.*

I will now examine some of these lexical referents, considering them in the eyes of the tripartite interpretative model presented *supra* (see § 1, 2).

4. *Starting from words: a few etymological and mediological remarks on* paraṃparā *and* saṃpradāya

Let's consider two terms that are crucial for our reflection on the notion of tradition. These terms are *paraṃparā* and *saṃpradāya*, both of them widely used in South Asia to denote the functions that are usually assigned to 'tradition'.

An intitial survey of the available lexicographic tools shows that the feminime noun *paraṃparā* (derived from *para-m-para*, with a reiteration of the stem *para*,[25] literally both 'distant', 'remote', 'previous', 'ancient', 'subsequent', and 'different', 'other', 'opposed', 'foreign',

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[23] In the beginning of this introduction I have discussed to what extent its universality can be said to be partial and particular.

[24] In this regard, Sheldon Pollock's essay published in this volume is an outstanding example of this kind of approach. Furthermore, Pollock 2005.

[25] Consider, on the other hand, the word *pārá-*, already attested in the *Ṛgveda*, which denotes the act of 'bringing across, from one side to another'. See Turner 1966: 457.

'adverse') means 'one next to the other', 'one after the other', 'one another' or, much more abstractly, 'that which connects disjointed parts'. The term *paraṃparā* then denotes an 'uninterrupted line', a 'continuous series' or a 'regular succession', and is variously combined with different past participles —among others, *paraṃparāprāpta*— meaning 'handed down through successive transmissions'. Other derivations of the same stem are used, for instance, to designate the way to obtain 'a life without interruptions (or perpetual)' (*tathā paraṃparam āyuḥ samaśnute*),[26] or to denote opposite extremes and convey the sense of distance, as in the section on the names of rivers in an ancient lexicon.[27] Relevant is also the adjectival usage of *paraṃparā*, referred to what is seen as 'traditional' or 'hereditary' —namely, something from the past, also used as a synonym of *kulakramāgata* ('obtained through the transmission of the family lineage'). Thus, semantically equivalent to the word *paraspara* —meaning 'reciprocal', 'mutual', and itself derived through the reduplication of *para*— the word *paraṃparā* denotes the dynamical and composite nature of the act of giving and transmitting.

The general idea of a 'system of transmission' expressed by the word *paraṃparā* is then qualified by specific additional meanings, as in the case of the compound *guruśiṣyaparaṃparā*, that is, the 'transmission [of knowledge] from teacher to disciple'.

Furthermore, the noun *paraṃparā* is also used as an indicator of an established version of 'giving', displacing the semantic load from the practical act of transmitting to the symbolic institute of transmission.

Such meanings are already attested in the classical lexicons.[28] The word *paraṃparā* is in fact recorded in the *Nāmaliṅgānuśāsana* of Amarasiṃha (c. 5th century CE —also known as *Amarakośa*—), in the section that deals with terms concerning Brahmanic novitiate, forms of asceticism and sacrifice as well as of knowledge and teaching. Here *paraṃparā* is said to denote a 'kind of traditional instruction'.[29] The word is also found in another section of the same work dealing with the vocabulary of various ritual and sacrificial practices.[30] However,

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[26] *Śatapatabrāhmaṇa*, 4.2.4.7.

[27] See Yāska, *Nirukta*, 2.24 (*pārāvataghnīṃ pārāvāraghātinīm | pāraṃ paraṃ bhavati | avāramavaram |*).

[28] For further in-depth considerations on the classical uses of the word *paraṃparā* it is worth to consult the *Nāmaliṅgānuśāsana* of Amarasiṃha with its commentaries and glosses (as the ancient '*Kośa*' of Jātarūpa, the *Ṭīkāsarvasva* of Vandyaghaṭīya Sarvānanda, up to the *Amaraviveka* of Maheśvara), as well as its supplements (as the *Trikāṇḍaśeṣa*, the *Hārāvalī*, the *Dvirūpakośa* compiled by Puruṣottamadeva) and other classical lexicons (such as the *Abhidhānacintāmaṇi*, *Abhidhānacintāmaṇipariśiṣṭa*, *Liṅgānuśāsanakośa* of Hemacandra [edited by Paṇḍit Durgāprasād, Kāśīnath Pāṇḍurang Parab, Paṇḍit Śivadatta and published in the 1889 within the 'Collection of ancient lexicon' —*Abhidhānasaṃgraha*— by the Nirṇayasāgara Press of Bombay]).

[29] See *Nāmaliṅgānuśāsana*, 2.6.835 (*pāramparyopadeśe syād aitihyam itihāvyayam*).

[30] See *Nāmaliṅgānuśāsana*, 2.6.862 (*paraṃparākaṃ śamanaṃ prokṣaṇaṃ ca vadhārthakam*).

the presence of the kinetic sense of the word is not lost, as is shown by a further section of Amarasiṃha's treatise in which *paraṃparā* is mentioned among different synonyms for 'indirect' means of conveyance (such as palanquin bearers, dray horses, etc.).[31]

Although the meaning referring to the symbolic value of an 'established institute' of transmission has prevailed, there are persistent instances in the ancient sources of the use of the word *paraṃparā* in its pragmatic and dynamic sense, in which its kinetic aspects are emphasised. Consider, for example, the practical and social implications of such compounds as *vaṃśaparaṃparā* and *kulaparaṃparā*, in which *vaṃśa* and *kula* stress the value of a transmission that takes place through the guaranteed medium of familiar or dynastic affiliations; or *śrotaparaṃparā* and *karṇaparaṃparā*, in which *śrota* and *karṇa* designate the sense of hearing and its organ, the ear, respectively, through which the transmission occurs. Even more suggestive are the compounds *sopānaparaṃparā* and *sopānakaparaṃparā*, where —in Sanskrit as well as in Pāli— *sopāna* means 'step', 'staircase', 'ladder' or 'flight of stairs'. The same pragmatical sense is also conveyed by related compounds, such as *sopānapātha, sopānapaddhati, sopānapanti* and *sopānamārga* —all of them of great interest because of the images they conjure up.

The will to symbolically institute and the concrete fluidity of movement are, therefore, the two main features expressed by the word *paraṃparā* as used in classical Brahmanic literature.[32]

It should be noted that the word *paraṃparā* is especially widespread in the ancient Pāli Buddhist literature. Here one finds the first attestations of both a specialised use of this word (exentsively used until the much more recent 'historiographic' Buddhist work *Sāsanavaṃsa* —in which compounds such as *theraparaṃparā, ācariyaparaṃparā, bhikkhuparaṃparā, sissaparaṃparā* and *ganthakāraparaṃparā* occur in the context of the distinction between lineages and forms of transmission of the teachings—) and of its being utilized to express the general sense of sequentiality and continuity (as in the term *paraṃparābhojana*, designating a monk's meal that follows a pre-established order or sequence).

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[31] See *Nāmaliṅgānuśāsana*, 2.7.1049 (*paramparāvāhanaṃ yat tad vainātakam astriyām*).

[32] The term *paraṃparā* frequently occurs in Brahmanic sources —less so, however, before the compilation of the *Mahābhārata*. See, *exempli gratia, Vasiṣṭhadharmasūtra*, 6.43 (*pāramparyagato yeṣāṃ vedaḥ saparibāṃhaṇaḥ*); *Mānavadharmaśāstra*, 2.18 (*tasmin deśe ya ācāraḥ pāramparyakramāgataḥ*); *Kātyāyanadharmaśāstra*, 164 (*yāvan yasmin samācāraḥ pāramparyakramāgataḥ*); 891 (*yaṃ paramparayā maulāḥ sāmantāḥ svāminaṃ viduḥ*); *Arthaśāstra*, 1.12.13 (*paramparā*); 1.12.23 (*paramparā*); 1.15.16 (*paramparā*); 2.34.11 (*paramparā*); 8.2.26 (*pāramparyakrameṇa uktam*); 14.1.32 (*matsyaparaṃparā*); *Mahābhārata*, 3.195.34 (*paramparā*); 6.26.2 (*paramparāprāptam*); 6.115.27 (*pāramparyeṇa*); 11.23.21 (*pāramparyeṇa*); 12.101.26 (*pāramparyāgate*); 12.164.12 (*pāramparyaṃ*); 12.326.113 (*pāramparyāgataṃ*); 12.336.2 (*pāramparyāgatā*); 13.73.13 (*pāramparyāgataṃ*); *Rāmāyaṇa*, 4.55.5 (*paramparā*); 5.14.30 (*paramparā*); Bhartṛhari, *Vākyapadīya*, 1.159 (*anekatīrthabhedāyās trayyā cācaḥ paraṃ param |*); Īśvarakṛṣṇa, *Sāṃkhyakārikā*, 71.

Moreover, in these texts it is also possible to come across the apologetic and self-reflective recourse to the device of *paraṃparā*.[33] Considering that the word already occurs in the earliest parts of the Pāli canon,[34] the contexts in which it is used are far from being homogeneous. Nonetheless, it seems that from the beginning the word *paraṃparā* is used to denote the specificity and the advantages of having recourse to the device of the transmission through a teaching lineage, as it appears from some occurrences in the *Vinayapiṭaka*.[35]

Of utmost interest is the co-existence —in formulaic phrases— of the two words *paramparā* and *sampadāya* in Pāli texts.[36] A distinction is also made among different forms and dimensions of the *paramparā*, for instance, between 'elementary' (*dhātuparamparā*) and 'large' (*mahāparamparā*) *paramparā*.[37] Furthermore, various types and means of transmission are explicitly distinguished, as is exemplified, for instance, in the *Divyāvadāna*.[38]

Thus, the device of *paraṃparā* is here widely acknowledged and

[33] A powerful apologetic *dispositif* adopted up until modern narrations of the origins of Buddhist tradition. See *Sāsanavaṃsadīpa*, 1063-1074; 1532-1542; 1635-1659 (these relevant sections are significantly entitled *mahāmahindattherādyācariyaparamparādi kathā dīpo, ācariya paramparādi kathā dīpo* and *ācariya paramparā kathā dīpo* respectively). Further, Law 1986.

[34] See, *exempli gratia*, *Majjhimanikāya*, 2, in PTS [Pāli Texts Society] p. 520 (*paramparāya*); 3, in PTS p. 74 (*upeti gabbhañca parañca lokaṃ saṃsāramāpajja paramparāya*); 3, in PTS p. 78; 3, in PTS p. 169 (*paramparāya*); 3, in PTS p. 170; 3, in PTS p. 200; *Aṅguttaranikāya*, 3, in PTS p. 189 (*paramparāya*); 4, in PTS p. 191 (*paramparāya*); 4, in PTS p. 191 ([…] *mā anussavena mā paramparāya, mā itikirāya* […]); *Cullavagga*, 5.6, in PTS p. 22 (*āvāsa*['home', 'place of residence']*paramparā*); 5.37, in PTS p. 110 (*veḷu*['bamboo']*-paramparā*); 6.4, in PTS p. 25 (*āvāsaparamparā*).

[35] See, *exempli gratia*, *Parivārapāḷi*, in PTS, pp. 3; 6; 18; 39; 49; 54; 56; 81-82; 88; 128; 130 (*ācariyaparamparā*); 139 (*ācariyaparamparā*); 144; *Pacittiya*, 6.4.3, in PTS pp. 75-78 (section entitled *paramparahojana sikkhāpadaṃ*).

[36] See, *exempli gratia*, *Majjhimanikāya*, 2, in PTS p. 520 (*so anussavena itihitiha paramparāya piṭakasampadāya dhammaṃ deseti* | […] *so anussavena itihitiha paramparāya piṭakasampadāya dhammaṃ deseti*); 3, in PTS p. 169 (*atha kho kāpaṭiko māṇavo bhagavantaṃ etad avoca: 'yam idaṃ bho gotama, brāhmaṇānaṃ porāṇānaṃ mantapadaṃ itihitiha paramparāya piṭakasampadāya, tattha ca brāhmaṇā ekaṃsena niṭṭhaṃ gacchanti'. 'idam eva saccaṃ moghamañña'nti, idha bhavaṃ gotamo kimāhā'ti*); *Aṅguttaranikāya*, 3, in PTS p. 189 ([…] *mā paramparāya, mā itikirāya, mā piṭakasampadānena* […]); 4, in PTS p. 191 ([…] *mā anussavena, mā paramparāya, mā itikirāya, mā piṭakasampadānena* […]); *Suttantapiṭaka*, 1, in PTS p. 360 (*sakkhidhamma'nti na itihitihaṃ na itikirāya na paramparāya na piṭakasampadāya*); 1, in PTS p. 400 (*sakkhidhamma'nti na itihītihaṃ na itikirāya na paramparāya na piṭakasampadāya*); 1, in PTS p. 482 (*na itihītihaṃ na itikirāya na paramparāya na piṭakasampadāya*).

[37] See, *exempli gratia*, *Mahāvaṃsa*, 3.40; 35.40 (*yugaparamparā tesaṃ purato pāvisī puraṃ*); 74.245; 91.82 (*katolikaparamparā* [note that the term *katolika* is only found in the *Mahāvaṃsa*, where it occurs 16 times, also in connection with the word *āgama*]); *Dhātuvaṃsa*, 3 (an entire *pariceddha* entitled *dhātuparamparā kathā*).

[38] See *Divyāvadāna*, 190.11 (*te śravaṇaparamparayā cānveṣamāṇās tasya gṛhapateḥ sakāśamupasaṃkrāntāḥ* |); 289.16 (*eṣa ca vṛttāntas tena brāhmaṇena karṇaparamparayā śrutaḥ* |); 478.10 (*evaṃ karṇaparamparayā sa śabdastayor duṣṭāmātyayoḥ karṇaṃ gataḥ* |); 499.11 (*bāṣpasaliladhārāparamparodbhavoparudhyamānakaṇṭhī anilabalākulita galitasajala-jaladapaṭalā valīmalinakeśapāśā satvaratvaram abhigamya maitrakanyakasya bodhisattvasya pādayoḥ pariṣvajyaivam āha —mā māṃ putraka parityajaya yāsīti* |).

invoked for its legitimising force.[39] This is particularly relevant for early Buddhist sources, which —being strongly dependent on the prototypical and charismatic figure of the Buddha— have a much more compelling need than Brahmanic sources to create a system of validation of their status. As a consequence, Buddhist texts sometimes present a self-reflective 'discourse' that is not found, instead, in the surviving earlier Brahmanic literature.

The other key-word is *saṃpradāya*. According to a *sūtra* of Pāṇini's grammar (*Aṣṭādhyāyī*, 3.1.141), this is derived from the root *dā-*, belonging to the third *gaṇa* (present tense, *dadāti*) and meaning 'to give', through the affixation of the agentive suffix *ṇa* (=*a*) preceded by the increment *yuk* (=*y*).[40] From this etymological explanation, then, *saṃpradāya* denotes 'that which transmits' rather than 'that which is transmitted'. The emphasis is placed on the symbolic value of the institute established by the 'act of *tradere*' rather than on the contents of such acts.

Significantly, the term *dāya*, which is the basic semantic component of *saṃpradāya*, is first attested in contexts that deal with the transferring or partitioning of goods and, especially, of legacies.[41] This sense of material transference, intrinsic in the word *saṃpradāya*, will be maintained, even though it has been accompanied by figurative and symbolic meanings since its earliest attestations.[42] However, the concreteness of this 'institute of transmission' (*saṃpradāya*) is already emphasised in some ancient sources.

An interesting case is Yāska's mention of the fact that the oral transmission of the hymns (*mantra*) and, later on, of their editing and collection into 'distinct treatises' (*bilmagrahaṇāya imaḥ granthaḥ*), served the purpose of countering the inevitable gradual disappearance of individuals —among the new generations of *brāhmaṇas*— who were capable of having a 'direct intuition of the norm'

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[39] In fact in these sources it is also associated with men of power. See, *exempli gratia*, *Sīhaḷavatthū*, 27.35 (*vacanaparamparāya asokarāja sutvā*).

[40] I wish to thank Vincenzo Vergiani for his help with these points of grammar.

[41] See, *exempli gratia*, *Taittirīyasaṃhitā*, 3.1.9.4-5. In the later juridical literature, the topic of inheritance, with the related guarantees, is extensively dealt with. In the *Mānavadharmaśāstra*, in particular, the presentation of the criteria for the 'division of the inheritance' (*vibhāga, dāyabhāga*) represents one of the eighteen 'grounds for litigation' (*vyavahārapāda*). See *Mānavadharmaśāstra*, 9.103-220. Other sections of the same work dealing with inheritance are *Mānavadharmaśāstra*, 1.115; 8.7; 8.27; 9.47; 9.77-79; 10.115; 11.185. The question of how to properly transmit the inheritance has been largely debated within the Sanskrit juridical tradition until the XII century CE. See, about one of the last innovative treatise on this matter, Rocher 2002.

[42] See, *exempli gratia*, *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, 1.5.2.7 (*sa yadāśrāvayati | yajñam evaitad anumantrayata ā naḥ śṛṇūpa na āvartasvety atha yatpratyāśrāvayati yajña evaitad upāvartate 'stu tatheti tenopāvṛttena retasā bhūtenartvijaḥ sampradāyaṃ caranti yajamānena paro 'kṣaṃ yathā pūrṇapātreṇa sampradāyaṃ careyur eva manenartvijaḥ sampradāyaṃ caranti tad vācaivaitat sampradāyaṃ caranti vāgghi yajño vāgu hi retas tad etenaivaitat sampradāyaṃ caranti*). The same, with small variations, is in the Kāṇva recension. See *Kāṇvaśatapathabrāhmaṇa*, 2.4.4.3.

(*sākṣātkṛtadharman*).[43] Evidently, these individuals were perceived as lacking the qualities of the ancient 'seers' (*ṛṣi*).

However, throughout the various contexts in which it is used, the primary connotation of the word *saṃpradāya* is that of the 'repeated performance' of an act of giving and taking.

The later *Nāmaliṅgānuśāsana* of Amarasiṃha lists *saṃpradāya* among other action nouns designating a received doctrine or teaching.[44] And indeed, among the numerous later definitions of *saṃpradāya*, there is one given by Uddyotakara, according to whom 'tradition' is the handing down of knowledge from 'teacher' (*upadhyāya*) to 'pupil' (*śiṣya*).[45]

With regard to the tripartite interpretative model presented in preceding pages, it is necessary to draw attention to the connections between some aspects of the above semiotics and etymological derivation of the word *saṃpradāya* and other related terms.

Note, for example, the verb *saṃpradā-* (present tense *saṃpradāti*, past participle *saṃpradatta*), the basic meaning of which is 'to offer completely', 'to give up', but also 'to transmit', 'to impart' and 'to teach'. From *saṃpradā-* the noun *saṃpradāna* derives, which means either 'gift', 'present', or 'transmission', 'teaching'. In both cases the full sense of 'giving' (as a *datio*) is dominant. This suggests a dynamic that is really very close to what I said above about the triad *tradens*, *traditum* and *recipiens*. In fact, in the grammatical literature —and especially in the short, but extremely interesting, *saṃpradānādhikāra* (*Vākyapadīya*, 3.7.129-135) of Bhartṛhari— the various complex implications of the use of the dative case are explained through a reflection on the role played by the recipient, namely, the *kāraka* called *saṃpradāna*. Here the recipient is the final consignee and, indeed, the real motive for an action addressed to him, which he has to consent to if the action is to be properly performed and acquire its full significance. Thus, the focus is on the individual (*saṃpradāna*) to whom something is entirely and effectively given.[46]

The concreteness that is a connotation of the word *saṃpradāna* is further shown by those ritual activities —known as 'transmission'

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[43] See Yāska, *Nirukta*, 1.20 (*sākṣātkṛtadharmāṇa ṛṣayo babhūvuḥ | te 'varebhyo 'sākṣātkṛtadharmabhya upadeśena mantrān saṃprāduḥ | upadeśāya glāyanto 'vare bilmagrahaṇāya imaṃ granthaṃ samāmnāsiṣuḥ | vedaṃ ca vedāṅgāni ca | bilmaṃ bhilmaṃ bhāsanam iti cā |*). Furthermore, Wezler 2001.

[44] See *Nāmaliṅgānuśāsana*, 3.2.241-242 (*vardhanaṃ chedane 'tha dve ānandanasabhājane | āpracchannamathāmnāyaḥ saṃpradāyaḥ kṣaye kṣiyā ||*).

[45] See Uddyotakara, *Nyāyavārttika ad Nyāyasūtra*, 1.1.1 (*saṃpradāyo nāma śiṣyopadhyāyasaṃbandhasyāvicchedena śāstraprāptiḥ*).

[46] According to the grammatical commentators, these are the implications to be drawn from Pāṇini's *sūtra* (*Aṣṭādhyāyī*, 1.4.32 [*kármaṇā yám abhipraíti sá saṃpradánam*]), for which the technical name *saṃpradāna* designates the beneficiary or recipient that the agent intends to reach through his action (of giving).

(*sampradāna*) or even 'acquisition' (*sampratti*)—[47] by means of which a dying father hands over his doctrinal, ethic, symbolic and practical legacy to his son. All these rituals indicate the need to ensure both an ideal and concrete continuation of the preservation of a given order.

In short, insofar as they serve as guarantees, all these systems of transmission must be able to dynamically preserve what they were once given. A dual concern which requires a dual effort.

From what can be seen through the semantic history of the word *sampradāya*, in fact, only what the tradition (*sampradāya*) actually hands down is to be understood as the true *testamentum* and should be preferred to any supposed original meaning. This seems to be the sense of Jaimini's words,[48] which also recurs in the remarks of some later commentators while they strive to clarify the sense of some central notions —such as that of the permanence or eternity (*nityatva*) of the Veda.[49] According to Uddyotakara, this 'eternity' should even be taken in a figurative sense, namely as an emphatic reference to the length and certitude of the uninterrupted process of concrete transmission.[50]

Besides its employment in the ancient Buddhist literature,[51] the term *sampradāya* circulated widely in Brahmanic circles, as it became the most common word designating a specific religious tradition or denomination.[52]

What I have presented here, in regards of the terms *parampara* and *sampradāya,* should be considered on the one hand as the proof of an explicit awareness of the value and importance of the institute of tradition; on the other, as complementing the remarks made above on

[47] In the late Vedic period, the ceremony of *sampradāna* was a form of justification and symbolic procedure that had the purpose of confirming the heir's right to receive what the institute of transmission destined to him. See, for some of the earliest descriptions of this practice, *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*, 1.5.17-20; *Kauṣītakopaniṣad*, 2.15. Furthermore, Olivelle 1993: 123-126.

[48] See Jaimini, *Mīmāṃsāsūtra*, 1.2.8 (*tulyaṃ ca sāmpradāyikam*).

[49] See Vātsyāyana, *Nyāyabhāṣya ad Nyāyasūtra*, 2.1.68.

[50] See Uddyotakara, *Nyāyavārttika ad Nyāyasūtra*, 2.1.68.

[51] See, for some examples of the use of the Pāli *sampadāya*, *Majjhimanikāya*, 1.3.9 (*mahāsaropamasutta*, 6), in PTS p. 192 (*so tāya sīlayampadāya attamano hoti paripuṇṇasaṅkappo | so tāya sīlasampadāya attānukkaṃseti paraṃ vambheti […] aham asmi sīlavā kalyāṇadhammo, ime panaññe bhikkhū dussīlā pāpadhammāti | so tāya sīlasampadāya majjati pamajjati pamādaṃ āpajjati | pamatto samāno dukkhaṃ viharati|*); 2, in PTS p. 520 (*so anussavena itihitiha paramparāya piṭakasampadāya dhammaṃ deseti | […] so anussavena iti-hitiha paramparāya piṭakasampadāya dhammaṃ deseti*); 3, in PTS p. 169 (*atha kho kāpaṭiko māṇavo bhagavantaṃ etad avoca: 'yam idaṃ bho gotama, brāhmaṇānaṃ porāṇānaṃ mantapa-daṃ itihitiha paramparāya piṭakasampadāya, tattha ca brāhmaṇā ekaṃsena niṭṭhaṃ gacchan-ti'. 'idam eva saccaṃ moghamañña'nti, idha bhavaṃ gotamo kimāhā'ti*).

[52] As for what I said above on *paramparā*, the word *sampradāya* is often used by Brahmanic sources, although it is not so frequent as in and after the *Mahābhārata*. See, *exempli gratia*, *Mahābhārata*, 1.82.4 (*sampradāya*); 2.5.5 (*sampradāya*); 3.13.18 (*sampradāya*); 5.27.27 (*sampradāya*); 10.11.10 (*sampradāya*); 13.70.50 (*sampradāya*); *Rāmāyaṇa*, 2.29.18 (*sampradāya*).

the possibility for an agent (*tradens*) to obtain a certain status —precisely, that of a recognised *tradens*— on the basis of the symbolic significance given to a practical act —the agent's handing over of a *traditum*— that would normally be forgotten right away.

This is to show that my initial interpretative proposal is substantiated by a variety of descriptive reports preserved in classical South Asian sources.

In summary, the principle according to which a practical act accompanied by a semiotic intention will lead to a semantic increment —that, in its turn, will have practical repercussions— seems to be at work also for the South Asian context.

5. *The dual role of tradition and the need for novelty*

From what has been said so far it appears obvious that a given tradition cannot remain still when faced with historical changes and the corrosive effects of time —as actually stated in the *Bhagavadgītā*.[53] In fact, this is the true reason why its process of continuation cannot be limited to mere static repetition, on pain of death.

Hence every tradition has devised complex intellectual practices and strategies, thanks to which, while the elements of the originally established *corpus* are innovated and changed —though seeking not to formally alter the fundamental unitary picture— an attempt is made to preserve the image of integrity and unalterability.[54]

In such contexts, 'new' necessarily means unreliable while —since Vedic times—[55] 'ancient' is presented as an undisputable sign of trustworthiness. Within the South Asian intellectual history, in fact, there are many examples of authors who, by addressing a change under the guise of 'novelty', sought to preserve a particular conception of the world,[56] in a way that is not so different from what characterised the

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[53] See *Bhāgavadgītā*, 4.7-8 (*yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir bhavati bhārata | abhyutthānam adharmasya tadātmānaṃ sṛjāmy aham || paritrāṇāya sādhūnāṃ vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām | dharmasaṃsthāpanārthāya saṃbhavāmi yuge yuge ||*).

[54] In this regard, the picture presented in *Bhāgavadgītā*, 4.2 is emblematic (*evaṃ paramparāprāptam imaṃ rājarṣayo viduḥ | sa kāleneha mahatā yogo naṣṭaḥ parantapa ||*).

[55] In those times, giving the shape of 'archaic' and 'ancient' was indeed a commonly applied strategy, as persuasively stated by Witzel: "In all these cases one can notice that one means to bring about continuity in spite of the great changes carried out under the Kurus, was the artificial archaization of certain parts of the new Śrauta ritual, the use of artificial, archaic forms in the poetic and learned language of the poets, priests and 'theologians' of the Mantra and YV Saṃhitā periods, and of text formation and their collection. The new ritual and its language appeared to be more elaborate and impressive but at the same time, had to give the appearance of having come down from a hallowed past". Witzel 1995: 15.

[56] Most pertinent here is the case of *kalivarjya*, as it is dealt with in Sanskrit juridical texts. See, *exempli gratia*, *Bṛhaspatidharmaśāstra*, 1.23.4 (*ātatāyidvijāgyānām dharmayuddhena hiṃsanam | imān dharmān kaliyuge varjyān āhur manīṣiṇaḥ ||*). An extended discussion on the notion of *kalivarjya* can be read in Kane 1993: 926-968. Furthermore, Lingat 1999: 189-195; Kane 1997; Sannino Pellegrini 1997; Dumont 1991: 339; Smith 1987: 38-42; Heesterman 1984: 151-152; Doniger 1980: 37-43; Bhattacharya 1943.

recourse to the theme of the 'classical' in the Mediterranean area (through which, instead of slavishly repeating the past, often new visions of the past —and therefore of the present and the future— were promoted).[57]

Far from a descriptive distinction, the opposition between 'new' and 'old' is a judgemental dicotomy. In other words, whilst praising its coherence with the past, the tradition is thus obliged to make known also the twists it has introduced.

Such is the quandary that can be found in classical South Asian sources. Each time they explain their origins, the way in which they say they were consigned to the world and the reasons why they are now well known, they display the inevitable need to highlight the specificity of their contribution.

But this is the dilemma of every historically positioned traditional context: being unable to renounce the merit it would gain by publicising its particular contribution (shaped through the effort of keeping alive the tradition it has received, both by preserving and protecting or by innovating and renewing it), it must explicitly state the importance of its own action.

The result is that the element of 'novelty' is stigmatised in 'orthodox' texts like the *Mānavadharmaśāstra*, which raises a severely admonishing finger against what is labeled as new and recent.[58] However, 'novelty' cannot be avoided for two reasons: on the one hand, by not updating itself, a tradition risks to lose its persuasive force, on the other, those who, while working within a tradition, do not sufficiently emphasise the specificity of its role, risk to diminish its importance.

The theme of novelty and originality becomes an essential part of traditional discourse, though the fact remains that novelty was never to be presented as an *ex novo* given, but if anything as a renewal, restoration, reformulation of the original.[59]

Considering the above, it is not advantageous to keep thinking of tradition as if it were a question of

> […] a *corpus* of norms fixed once and for all in time. Not only does it experience initial and sometimes disastrous controversies as far as the unity of the community of believers is concerned, but it constantly

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[57] On this interesting topic, see Settis 2004; Gadamer 1986: 290-295.

[58] See *Mānavadharmaśāstra*, 12.95-96: "95. The scriptures that are outside the Veda, as well as every kind of fallacious doctrine —all these bear no fruit after death, for tradition takes them to be founded on Darkness. 96. All those different from the Veda that spring up and then flounder —they are false and bear no fruit, because they belong to recent times [*tānyarvākkālikatayā*]". This is a principle of caution typical of every tradition, which is not very different in its condemnation of what is 'new', from what is to be found, for example, in one of Paul's epistles (whose attribution is still debated). See 1*Timothy*, 6.20 (*O Timothee, depositum custodi, devitans profanas vocum novitates, et oppositiones falsi nominis scientiae, quam quidam promittentes, circa fidem exciderunt*).

[59] See Kaviraj 2005: 129-131.

undergoes a process of revision, and sometimes substantial creative adaptations and changes. Tradition is, from this standpoint, a social construct; a collective undertaking that has a beginning and in many respects is never finished.[60]

This becomes obvious by looking at the semiotic and political history of certain idiomatic expressions —where by 'semiotic' I mean the history of 'shared meaning' and by 'political' the history of the 'shared legitimacy' of precisely those meanings. If read critically, these histories show how often there is no true *novelty* in the *new*, except for the fact of the *novelty* of the *new* reading of the *old* —which is the element that constitutes the true innovation.

Seen from this angle, the traditional approach is a 'new way of reading and rephrasing the old' that, while it exercises its interpretative practices (which become the ingredients of an actual 'culture') is also concerned with defining, organising and guaranteeing the legitimacy of its ways of looking at the past and making use of it. It is a dual crucial strategy that has to be understood simultaneously, because —as Sheldon Pollock recently stated— "[c]onceptually, it is obviously as important to understand what enables a tradition to radically transform itself as it is to understand what enables a tradition to secure continuity […]".[61]

There are many examples of such strategy, starting from the *sūktas* of the *Ṛgveda* —from which one gathers the need to justify the production of new compositions—,[62] passing through the innovation introduced by certain early grammarians and philosophers of the language,[63] from that produced by the authors of *mīmāṃsā*[64] and of *kāvya*,[65] up until the most recent cases of novelty drawn from the production of the schools of the 'new (*navya*) logic (*nyāya*)',[66] of the 'new grammar' (*navyavyākāraṇa*),[67] and of the new medicine.[68]

These are all evident instances of renewal in certain 'traditional' intellectual fields, which, under the pressure of changing surroundings, had to devise new arguments and new narrative strategies. A fact already noted by Pandurang Vaman Kane:

[…] social ideas and practices undergo substantial changes even in the most static societies. Many of the practices, that had the authority of the

[60] Pace 1996: 9-10 (my translation).
[61] Pollock 2005: 7.
[62] See *exempli gratia*, Elizarenkova 1995: 23-25; Fortson 1998; Galewicz 2000; Galewicz 1995.
[63] See, *exempli gratia*, Bronkhorst 2005; Houben 2002.
[64] See, *exempli gratia*, McCrea 2002.
[65] See, *exempli gratia*, Bronner 2004: 54-75; Bronner 2002; Ingalls 1976; Ingalls 1965.
[66] See, *exempli gratia*, Ganeri 2005: 44-47; 51-52; Preisendanz 2005: 66-72; 76-86; Kaviraj 2005: 131.
[67] See, *exempli gratia*, Pollock 2001: 12.
[68] See, *exempli gratia*, Wujastyk 2005.

Veda (which was supposed to be self-existent and eternal) and of such ancient smrtis as those of Āp., Manu and Yāj., had either come to be given up or had become obnoxious to popular sentiment. This fiction of great men meeting together and laying down conventions for the Kali age was the method that was hit upon to admit changes in religious practices and ideas of morality. The Kalivarjya texts are also a complete answer to those who hold fast to the notion that dharma (particularly *ācāradharma*) is immutable and unchangeable (*aparivartanīya*).[69]

Every historical season (*yuga*), therefore, must have its *dharma*,[70] because previous *dharma*s are not pertinent anymore.[71]

Similar considerations regarding the role of newness in South Asian traditions have recently led to interesting interpretations of these dynamics and to the distinction of "three kinds of newness".[72] It is now clear that in this context the relationship with one's own tradition as a reference is always complex, and within this the contents it has handed down may be unquestioningly accepted and simply repeated, or restored, questioned, modified and even denied or abandoned. Essentially, if it is true that we can think of a tradition "[…] as the way society formulates and deals with the basic problems of human existence", then it follows that

> […] since the fundamental problem of life and death is truly insoluble, it has to be attacked, formulated, and dealt with each time anew under a different aspect. Tradition therefore is and has to be bound up with the ever-shifting present. Hence the irritating flexibility and fluidity of tradition.[73]

So, every tradition, by definition, is an established space where constant negotiation takes place and in which avant-gardes and rearguards do battle for the last word. A fight that informs the very processes of transmission and that is carried out both at individual and collective level. This implies that *tradens*, *traditum* and *recipiens* are all parts and protagonists of the same agonistic dimension.

6. *Novelty, negotiation and the politics of transmission*

It is well known that the relationship between tradition and reason —and hence between memory and innovation— implies a complex

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[69] Kane 1993: 967.

[70] In this regard, the idea of a 'specific *dharma* for any specific time' (*yugadharma*) is an extraordinary *dispositif*, largely used by 'orthodox' author. A useful collection of sources on *yugadharma* is presented in Keshnakar 2000: 779-964.

[71] It is important to read such formula from the sociological and political point of view. For example, the idea that a period of social and political crisis had produced the Brahmanic rhetoric of the 'dark age' (*kaliyuga*) is particularly relevant here. See Sharma 2002. Furthermore, on the notion of *kaliyuga*, Lingat 1999: 189-195; Olivelle 1993: 234-237; Stietencron 1986; Upadhyay 1979: 25; 28-31; 115-116.

[72] Kaviraj 2005: 124.

[73] Heesterman 1985: 10.

combination of continuity and innovation. Because of such complexity, the dialectical negotiation that constitutes any act of transmission has been the object of long-standing scholarly attention.[74] But, since the transmission process that stands at the core of every tradition is dialectically structured —both around the act of preservation and renewal—, we need to add some considerations of a purely socio-political nature to what scholars like Gadamer said about the interdependence of tradition and reason.[75]

In actual fact, seen from a mediological perspective, the efficacy of a certain act of cultural production and transmission is always closely linked to its capacity to generate socio-political distinction and differentiation. As Régis Debray underlines:

> Voilà qui suffit à faire peu ou prou de toute entreprise de transmission une opération polémique, requérant une compétence stratégique (à s'allier, filtrer, exclure, hiérarchiser, coopter, démarquer, etc.), et qui peut s'appréhender comme une lutte pour la *survie* au sein d'un système de forces rivales tendant soit à s'éliminer entre elles par disqualification soit à s'annexer l'une l'autre par phagocytose. […] La transmission appartient à la sphère *politique*, comme toutes les fonctions servant à transmuer un tas indifférencié en un tout organisé. Elle immunise un organisme collectif contre le désordre et l'agression.[76]

In fact, the aim of the conceptual effort made by the representatives of a tradition is to succeed in transferring, without any break, pronouncements and practical convictions from one point to another of the history of a particular community. Precisely for this reason a tradition

> […] cannot be only flexible and situational, for its essential mission is still to deal in a structured way with the insoluble life-death problem in

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[74] Hans-Georg Gadamer's pages on the 'rehabilitation of authority and tradition' (*Die Rehabilitierung von Autorität un Tradition*) are still the best available for challenging reading. See Gadamer 1986: 281-295. In this pages Gadamer presents a particular *modus* of the coexistence of reason (*Vernunft*) and tradition (*Tradition*), a *modus* which deserve serious consideration: "Truly, tradition is always a moment of freedom and of history itself. Even the most authentic and solid of traditions does not develop naturally by virtue of the strong persistence of what happened once, but it needs to be accepted, adopted and cultivated. It is essentially conservation [*Bewahrung*], that same conservation that is at work alongside and within every historical change. But conservation is an act of reason, certainly an act characterized by the fact that it is not conspicuous". Gadamer 1986: 286 (my translation). Thus Gadamer help us to understand in which sense the institute of tradition is an essential *dispositif* in order to take advantage of previously acquired knowledge and experiences —although it still remains necessary to evaluate the socio-political *modus operandi* of such processes of accumulation and transmission. Gadamer's understanding has been scrutinized considering the South Asian context and materials. See Halbfass 1990: 164-170.

[75] Because of the limited attention paid to the role played by the political sphere, it is not possible to embrace Gadamer's hermeneutic perspective in its entirety. If anything, it is necessary to make some critical corrections to it, like those Jünger Habermas has pointed out. See Habermas 1979.

[76] Debray 1997: 21.

all its situational manifestations. It must, therefore, also offer a plan or order independent of and above the actual situation. It is this transcendent order that provides man with the fixed orientation for legitimizing his actions in the middle of the situational flux. In other words, tradition has to be both immanent in the actual situation so as to keep up with shifting reality and transcendent so as to fulfil its orientating and legitimizing function. Thus, we can understand the paradoxical but traditionally common idea that transcendent law is all the time there, suspended as it were in the midair, and that it can be 'found' by agonistic procedures, verbal or otherwise.[77]

Due to such pervasive agonism, every tradition contains a whole series of simultaneous cultural processes, which demand that the highest intellectual resources are constantly tapped in order to create a synthesis between the attempt to preserve power, the constant effort to gain legitimation from history, the awareness of the constant need to adapt to reality, the task involving the complex operation of transmitting those contents understood as being 'right' (in fact, every tradition represents itself as 'orthodox' and draws one of the most important justifying factors from this self-representation) and the defence of its own truths from the ever-present threat of otherness.

This allows one to draw a more articulated picture of the notion of 'tradition', and to place it within a diversified and dynamic social history of intellectual practice.

7. Rethinking our understanding of the intellectual history of South Asia from our usage of the notion of 'tradition'

If, as I hope has happened at the end of this *excursus,* thinking of tradition —and of its representations— along semiotic, political and mediological lines can become a valuable opportunity to reconsider our interpretation of many South Asian sources and materials, likewise this is also a significant opportunity to reflect critically about the Indological tradition and on the use Indologists have made of the notion of 'tradition'. This dual interpretative register is an element of reflection that cannot be avoided, although this has to be understood keeping in mind that "[t]o adopt the viewpoint of reflexivity is not to renounce objectivity, but to question the privilege of the knowing subject".[78]

In this regard, Jan Heesterman's appropriate words of warning, although written more than twenty years ago, are definitely still valid:

[…] the lingering notion of India's persistent traditionality owes much to the observer's feeling of having lost his own traditional moorings, which makes him cast around for the certainty of tradition.

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[77] Heesterman 1985: 11.
[78] Bourdieu 1996: 207.

India thus becomes a screen on which to project our nostalgia for a world we have lost, even when we know that the good old times were not all that good.[79]

A very similar problem was raised by Romila Thapar, according to whom

[t]raditions which we today believe have long pedigrees may on an historical analysis be found to be an invention of yesterday. In other words, what we regard as tradition may well turn out to be our contemporary requirements fashioned by the way we wish to interpret the past. Interpretation of the past have also come to be treated as knowledge and are handed down as tradition.[80]

It is certainly not superfluous here to insist that the use of an instrumental notion of 'tradition' has doubtless contributed to the production of static, artificial and reified images of South Asian intellectual life. Instead of conceiving the mutual relationship between tradition and novelty —but also between continuity and rupture, repetition and innovation, memory and reason— as an inherent and constitutive feature of the very *modus operandi* of every tradition, these reified images have proposed such a relationship, at best, as an accessory or sporadic element. On the contrary, it is an integral part of that fundamental dynamic —often forgotten in traditionalist discourse for obvious reasons of legitimation— to which a tradition can never renounce, unless it wishes to decree its own demise.

In reproducing such stereotyped version of the institute of tradition, academics and traditionalists shared much responsibility. In this respect, the cautionary advice of scholars like Jan Heesterman and Romila Thapar did not serve the purpose. Although they have invited us to recognise the vices, bondages and fetters that could unite representatives of a certain tradition and its external interpreters, still we failed to take full advantage of such recommendations.

Along this line, I think Romila Thapar's considerations on the ways of representing and conceiving this bondage are so relevant that they deserve to be quoted again in their entirety:

The continuity of culture is generally related to traditions which, in turn, are made up of cultural forms. Tradition is defined as the handing down of knowledge or the passing on of a doctrine or a technique. Cultural history implies looking analytically both at what goes into the making of a tradition as well as that which is interpreted by historians as tradition. We often assume that a form is handed down in an unchanging fashion and that what comes to us is its pristine form. However, the sheer act of handing on a tradition introduces change, and not every tradition is meticulously bounded by mnemonic or other

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[79] Heesterman 1985: 1.
[80] Thapar 1994: 8.

devices to prevent interpolations or change. A tradition, therefore, has to be seen in its various faces. Even the concept *paramparā*, which at one level appears to be frozen knowledge, reveals on investigation variations and changes.[81]

Therefore, as I said in the beginning, the attempt to rethink the status of tradition in South Asia cannot exclude the broader task of requalifying the categories used, nor it can overlook the self-reflexive effort that concerns any scholar who wishes to combine the *ars historica* with the *ars hermeneutica.*

[81] Thapar 1994: 8.

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