

A Response to Helen Lauer's Critique of the Tradition Versus Modernity Dichotomy

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ABSTRACT The need to shed modernity of its Euro-centric overtone owing to its link with modern science, for which the tradition versus modernity dichotomy has come under suspicion and is misunderstood mostly by African cultural revivalists, has become imperative. Does the contrast implied by the dichotomy turn primarily on the modern scientific content of a culture or on the extent of reflective critical attitude towards cultural elements? Against the backdrop of Helen Lauer's view that the dichotomy is false, the essay seeks to rehabilitate it as an intellectual framework for appraising African socio-cultural lag, and for pursuing the needed development in Africa. To this end, the essay proposes alternative definitions of tradition, modernity, and modernization in terms of attitudinal orientation towards cultural elements instead of modern science and 'scientization' in the Western tradition. The method adopted is one of critical analysis.

INTRODUCTION

This essay is challenged by the assumption that not a few scholars of African philosophy and cultural studies, on reading Helen Lauer's (2003) recent monograph, entitled *Tradition Versus Modernity Reappraising a False Dichotomy*, could resolve to shun the use of the dichotomy between tradition and modernity to pursue the realization of the progressive ideological purpose for which it is deployed in contemporary African socio-cultural discourse. Also, if the dichotomy is false, as Lauer claims, some major literary works in Africa philosophy, including those of Kwasi Wiredu (1980), Olusegun Oladipo (1996, 1998) and Kwame Gyekye (1997), would have to be jettisoned or at best re-written even though there is just now no ready alternative theoretical framework for pursuing the modernization agenda in Africa. In that monograph, if we understand it aright, Lauer argues that the dichotomy is false because 'tradition' and 'modernity', viewed respectively as the *absence* and *possession* of modern science, are relative terms which are not applicable to any culture wherever and tend to polarize African culture against the so called developed cultures of Europe and North America. She, therefore, deprives the African philosopher and social reformer the needed intellectual framework for discussing and pursuing the transformation of African socio-cultural conditions.

The purpose of this essay is to rehabilitate the relevance of the tradition versus modernity

dichotomy by sorting out the elemental ingredients of modernity from its modern scientific content for which modernity and modernization have become suspect by those scholars who advocate cultural revival in Africa today. In particular, it is argued that the unfortunate and undesirable connotations of the dichotomy aside, science-constitutive modernity, that is, modernity as the result of what professional scientists do in the natural and applied sciences, or a system of the ideas, principles and ideals which underpin western life and thought, is itself a tradition. For, however scientifically dosed and contented a culture might be, its elements do not form a permanent matrix which is forever immune from revision, or else they cannot pass beyond traditions. Hence, modernity, rather than turn primarily on the modern scientific content of a culture, is the interrogation of one's culture which ought to provoke the development and application of relevant methodic procedures for investigating and validating a people's cultural beliefs and practices. Tradition, on the other hand, is the predominance in a cultural group of intellectual complacency, security and acquiescence in past achievements and old habits (Gyekye 1997). Consequently, to modernize a culture in which tradition is dominant is, among other things, to seek to exorcize the lethargic attitude of the mind towards the cultural elements of the group. In Africa this would involve, to use Gyekye's (1997) words, a 'mental revolution, involving radical changes in the mental habits of (the) people.'

LAUER'S CRITIQUE OF THE TRADITION VERSUS MODERNITY DICHOTOMY

In her monograph, Lauer argues generally that the contrast between tradition and modernity does not reflect the actual conditions in Africa; that it involves a dualistic reasoning which is suggestive of the contract between 'backward' and 'advanced' and owes its origin to early imperialist and anthropological branding of African peoples and cultures; and that it endorses a one-sided rationality which undermines African socio-cultural realities in favour of those of the West. For example, she (Lauer 2003) says,

The falsity of this dichotomy emerges when tradition and modernity are used in tandem to evoke a fixed contrast between two metaphysical, ontological or epistemic poles where none exists

Or, as she (Lauer 2003) further puts it,

...even though the 'tradition vs. modernity' opposition fails to accurately depict in any depth virtually any current post-colonial situation, its occurrence is still a routine feature of officially accredited descriptions of contemporary African cultural phenomena. This persistence is insidious because it litters the jargon of international discourse with a catchphrase that connotes unfortunate contrasts between 'backward' and 'advanced' people,...it certainly helps to sustain the economic divide between 'First' and 'Third' worlds.

Specifically, Lauer (2003) argues (i) that the contrastive uses of the dichotomy involve the tacit acceptance, contrary to world historical antecedents, that scientific culture is the creation solely by the Western societies and is their prepossession. This, she (Lauer 2003) says, is the consequence of an 'outmoded ideological agenda which arbitrarily dislocates, disassociates, and disowns from Africans those traditions labelled 'modern' which historically, are part and parcel of the human cultural legacy developed worldwide'; (ii) that the dichotomy is a result of an exclusionary propaganda which arrogates supremacy to scientific knowledge and urges total compliance to scientific claims and methods of truth validation, and as such 'delegitimise[s] all rival systems of positing conjectures and warranting beliefs'; (iii) that the dichotomy habours the false impression that it is only tradition which has the feature of autho-

ritarianism, ignoring the fact that scientific inventions and products have their peculiar authoritarian control and manipulation of social life and thought through the ubiquitous mass media; and finally,(iv) that the dichotomy carries with it the mistaken assumption that indeed Western and African cultures, along with their respective systems of rationality, are incommensurable and mutually exclusive forms of life. But, she says, worldviews are not static nor are they isolated monads. Rather, she argues, beliefs share a kind of 'interdependent coherence' and are always subject to modification by the experience of new things from within a cultural worldview and interaction with other worldviews. This, she notes, is facilitated by the fact that people are generally familiar with more than one language.

She (Lauer 2003), therefore, concludes that the tradition vs. modernity dichotomy does not express a contrast 'between two types of character, worldview, culture or knowledge tradition, but rather [only sometimes] between the observed empirical facts we face everyday, vs. the normative ideals we hold as laudable goals to pursue' She (Lauer 2003) recommends that in eschewing the dichotomy African philosophers and social reformers should see, and seek to resolve African problems simply as 'human' and 'real-life' problems and so give up 'habits of thoughts encased in *modern* categories that suppress ingenuity'.

LAUER'S POSITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS

Lauer surely makes very important and valid points. She clearly unmasks some undesirable and denigrating connotations which some uses of the said dichotomy elicit. For sure, such connotations are inexhaustible. For example, apart from 'backward' the characterization of African cultures as 'traditional' suggests cultures that are superstitious or unscientific, degenerative, primitive, pre-logical or irrational, authoritative, closed, ugly, rural, agrarian, impervious to change and innovation, and lacking in methodic procedures and technological know-how. Correspondingly, on the other hand, modernity is suggested as the prepossession of 'modern' (18th century to date) Europe and North America, and to imply that the cultures of those regions are entirely scientific, progressive, civilized, logical or rational, democratic, respon-

sive to change and innovation, and possess the monopoly of methodic procedures and high technological capability (Gyekye 1996). Given that most of these suggestions are false, Lauer has rightly challenged the apparently fixed and polar contrast which is often taken for granted in the uses of tradition and modernity to characterize two mutually exclusive cultures.

But, as she (Lauer 2003) further argues, tradition is a common feature of culture. For example, she says that superstition and authoritarianism are features of people who live 'provincial lives in ultra-conservative, rule-bound, insulated community (from fishing villages in the Scottish Isle of Skye to hamlets boarding Bolga-Tanga in Northeastern Ghana) everywhere in the world'; just as they characterize low and middle income people who live solitary and isolated lives in 'late capitalist metropolises, like London and Los Angeles.' To the extent that her work helps to identify some of the unfortunate misunderstandings of the tradition versus modernity dichotomy it represents a thorough exercise in what Wiredu (1995) calls 'conceptual decolonization in African Philosophy, 'that is, the activity -of avoiding or reversing through a critical conceptual self-awareness, the unexamined assimilation in out thought...of the conceptual framework embedded in the foreign philosophical traditions that have had an impact on African life and thought'

SOME PROBLEMS IN LAUER'S VIEWS

First, it needs to be acknowledged that most words in natural languages generally have their peculiar connotations other than their direct significations. This is the case even with 'dog' and 'cat' which could be used metaphorically to suggest respectively that one is sexually promiscuous, and double-faced or unreliable. Gottlob Frege's (1972) famous distinction between sense (connotation) and reference (nominatum) of proper names or definite expressions is instructive here. According to him, although two or more expressions may refer to the same object, for example, 'Morning Star' and 'Evening Star' to the planet Venus, they have their own peculiar modes - connotative senses - of referring to one and the same object (Frege 1972). This simply means that most words have more than one meaning. As such, they are generally not jettisoned or considered to be 'false' that is, signifi-

cantly meaningless. Hence, contrary to Lauer's view, that the tradition versus modernity dichotomy is suggestive of unpleasant and denigrating connotations is not a sufficient reason to reject it as false.

Besides, 'tradition' is not such an unpleasant and detestable word as Lauer portrays it. Instead, it is mostly considered to be a meritorious word which is perceived to be more accommodative of enviable moral values such as promotes humane ways of life and individual liberty than science. For example, Bertrand Russell (1927) extols the virtues of tradition when he wrote:

There appeared no hope that the traditional merits of non-industrial civilizations could survive; the problem was to combine industrialism with a humane way of life, more especially with art and with individual liberit³

Also, John Dewey's (1957) characterization of the pre-Socratic culture of the sophists, in ancient Greece, points to the merits of tradition over science. That culture, he says, was marked off by 'traditional', 'imaginative' and 'emotionalized' beliefs, imbued with 'the advantages of social esteem and authority, and intimate contact with what give life its deeper lying values'. The beliefs, he further remarks, were 'rooted in social habits and loyalties... surcharged with moral aims for which men lived and the moral values by which they lived' (Dewey 1957). In contrast to tradition is what Dewey calls the 'prosaic matter of fact knowledge which was favoured by science' (Dewey 1957).. But science, he notes, is limited in scope because it has to do only with specific, verified and technical knowledge which along with its canons, method and criteria, was what Socrates sought to reconcile with tradition (Dewey 1957). Russell (1927) and Dewey (1957) thus assign laudable values to tradition over science, and *ipso facto* admit of the possibility of characterizing a culture as traditional or scientific, contrary to Lauer's view that tradition and science-constitutive modernity are not applicable to two forms of culture character and method of validating knowledge claims. As we shall argue, tradition versus modernity dichotomy is significantly meaningful, not because of the relative scientific contents of the cultures labeled 'tradition' and 'modern' but because of the extent to which conscious reflective attitude towards socio-cultural beliefs and practices have permeated one or the other culture.

Perhaps, more important to note in Lauer's critique of the tradition versus modernity dichotomy is the fact that her work presupposes some misleading conceptions of the contrasted terms. Although she does not provide us with explicit definitions of the terms it is obvious that she takes modernity to be entirely constitutive of modern science which derives from the West, along with its products and methods of knowledge validation; and tradition to mean the absence of that science. This assumption underlines her argument that Western science has only gained ascendancy over alternative methods of validating beliefs because of the ubiquitous ideological propaganda in its favour. The notion of science-constitutive modernity resides generally in the popular historical account of how tradition has stood in opposition to science in ancient Greece and in the European Enlightenment age, or better put, how science has served the purpose of curing those cultures of traditional rot. Dewey and Russell's views in the contexts referred to above prepare one's mind to accept that notion. And because the Enlightenment age is particularly remarkable as a period of scientific discoveries in experimental (Newtonian) physics, and medicine (Weiss 1965) and given that *this* age tallies approximately with the period tagged 'modern' (in contrast to 'ancient' and the 'medieval') in the history of ideas (Habermas 1998) it has seemed natural to equate modernity with science. The notion is particularly encapsulated in Wiredu's (1980) definition of 'modernization' as the 'application of the results of modern science for the improvement of the conditions of human life' which Lauer (2003) refers to suppositionally. In this context Wiredu (1980) takes traditional to mean 'pre-scientific, or 'non-scientific.

To tie modernity simply to modern science, as Wiredu (1980) does, is, for many African scholars, open to suspicion and misunderstanding because science is commonly perceived as a Euro-centric concept whose link with modernization implies Westernization (Harding 1997). For example, Wiredu's definition of modernization could be construed to mean the sheer proliferation of the uses of modern technological products in the form of gadgets and labour-saving devices which derive mostly from the West, for the purpose of ameliorating the suffering of a people, and hence of mean Westernization. As such it tends to create suspicion in the mind

of cultural revivalists in Africa, including ethnophilosophers, who advocate a return to African indigenous value-system as a way to resolve the problem of the African predicament, and to restore her cultural identity, pride, and individual liberation (Gyekye 1997). To avert this suspicion, Gyekye (1997) may have been led to re-define the contrasted terms. Tradition, he says, is 'any cultural product that was created or pursued by past generation and that, having been accepted and preserved, in whole or in part by successive generations, has been maintained to the present' On the other hand, modernity is 'the ideas, principles and ideals covering, a whole range of human activities that have underpinned Western life and thought since the seventeenth century' (Gyekye 1997). But these anthropological definitions fail to elicit the essential point of contrast involved in the tradition versus modernity dichotomy. To wit, modernity as defined does not preclude tradition but is subsumable under it. For, if modernity is a set of 17th century ideas, principles and ideals which have informed or guided Western life till date it follows that as a set of western cultural elements, having been accepted and preserved over time, it has itself turned part of the traditions of the West. It is in this context that Lauer's disclaimer of the dichotomy as that which disowns from "Africans those traditions labeled 'modern'" is instructive: she implies that the cultural elements of modernity are traditions. Should we, therefore, accept Gyekye's definition of modernity, modernization would be no more than the activity of transporting Western traditions to a foreign culture for the purpose of implanting them therein, and this would mean Westernization.

It is appropriate at this point to indicate why the notion of science-constitutive modernity easily lends itself to suspicion and misunderstanding. The common place view of science is that it is what the men and women of the formal sciences, natural and applied, do in the confines of their laboratories and workshops. Apart from the fact that this view does not recognize the existence of other academic disciplines, including the Arts and the Humanities, it is not clear whether the advocated notion of modernity requires that everyone should turn scientist or that all facets of culture should 'scienticized', perhaps by applying scientists' methods and apparatuses to them. If this is so then, follow-

ing Kuhn (1970), the usage of 'science' is too narrow because it tends to rule out alternative rival methods or systems of inquiry and thought about how the world, natural phenomena and events could best be understood and explained. To this end, Feyerabend (1975) and he share the view that there is not one scientific method, or perhaps none at all, for comprehending reality but different incommensurable ways of seeing the world and practicing science in it (Kuhn 1970). Given also that an 'apparently arbitrary element, compounded of personal and historical accident, is always a formative ingredient of the beliefs espoused by a given scientific community at a given time, Kuhn (1970) has argued that scientific activities are to a large extent 'in no better state than those of religion'. In other words, science is not a system of objective processes but is always culturally bound.

The point of the foregoing is not to detract from the monumental achievement of modern science or its relevance to African socio-cultural conditions. It is rather to underline the fact that Western modern science as it is commonly perceived, apart from being a strait-jacket concept, impregnated with its peculiar ideological and cultural underpinnings, is not *primarily* definitive of modernity, nor does it need to be tied inextricably to modernity. This means that there is more to the tradition versus modernity dichotomy than Western modern science can help to explicate. That it has taken a pivotal place in most attempts to bring to the fore the sort of modernity that African cultures require today is however not surprising. For, given what modern science has done for Europe and North America it seems only natural to think that what African cultures need today is to develop *comparable* methods of inquiry, that is, comparable to those of Western science, for the purpose of pacifying human existence. These (African) cultures are, rightly or wrongly, thought to harbour persons who are at the brink of existence and perhaps near extinction owing to poverty in scientific and technological capability. But do African cultures really suffer from lack of science, or from lack of reflective attitude of Africans to their cultures?

THE TRADITION VERSUS MODERNITY DICHOTOMY

If the preceding arguments are successful in weakening and disengaging the necessary link-

age of modernity with science the question which then arises is: What makes the difference between tradition and modernity? In other words, what is the essential point of the tradition vs. modernity dichotomy? Popper (1965) would answer simply, 'the critical or argumentative attitude'. This is the critical attitude to the received contents of tradition which, he argues, was the innovation that the early Greek philosophers introduced to the largely religious culture of their time. As he (Popper 1965) puts it, they invented,

a new tradition – the tradition of adopting a critical attitude towards the myths, the tradition of discussing them; the tradition of not only telling a myth, but also of being challenged by the man to whom it is told.

To note here is that whatever comes on board as a replacement of an old tradition remains a tradition, though a new tradition. In the context also, 'myth' does not mean pre-scientific or non-scientific because all beliefs are equally mythical insofar as they are theoretical conjectures about the world, and are all products of one or another form of ratiocination. For Popper, all beliefs and theories are myths, and are reducible to traditions in Gyekye's sense of the word. What makes the difference between the myths of the old Greek tradition and those of the new tradition which was invented by the early Greek philosophers is that while the former were mostly accepted uncritically and unchallenged the latter were no longer regarded as sacrosanct or unquestionable conclusions but were open to critical discussion. The new tradition is what has been called 'science' which, in the words of Popper (1965), differs from, 'the older myths not by being something distinct from a myth, but being accompanied by a second-order tradition – that of critically discussing the myth. Science thus takes on a meaning that is different from the narrow, popular view of it as a highly specialized discipline. Although Popper (1965) goes on to say that the new tradition stressed the need for 'systematic observation undertaken with the intention of probing into the truth of the theory or the myth', it suffices to note here that this additional requirement is undoubtedly secondary to the need of a critical attitude towards tradition however closely bound the added requirement might be to it.

One importance point which was not before Popper but is crucial to the argument of this es-

say is that what the new tradition added to the old in early Greek culture, namely, the critical and adventurous attitude, is not a thing any humans needed to look out for beyond the confines of their culture. All humans as humans have the potential to develop and adopt a critical attitude towards any beliefs or conditions within the purview of their consciousness. In doing so any group of persons would not necessarily be copying or aping any other group, but would just be human as others are. Hence, in advocating that Africans should adopt a critical attitude towards African cultural beliefs and practices, as Wiredu (1980) does when he called for the need to combat the three evils of African cultural lag-to wit, anachronism, authoritarianism and supernaturalism, -one is not asking Africans to copy a foreign attitude, say, to replicate Western scientific culture, which is not already innate in them as humans.

Like Popper, G.M. Trevelyan (1955) gives us an insight into what constitutes the essential difference between tradition and modernity when he described the characteristic ethos which marked off the 18th century Enlightenment age from the earlier 'classical' age (Weiss 1965). The former was a society, he writes,

with a mental outlook of its own, self-poised, self-judged, and self-approved, free from the disturbing passions of the past, and not yet troubled with anxieties about a very different future which was soon to be brought upon the scene by the Industrial and the French Resolutions...In England it was an age of aristocracy and liberty; of the rule of law and...or individual initiative (Weiss 1965).

In contrast to this ethos was the prevalence among the people in the 'classical' age of,

the happy belief that the state of society and the modes of thought which they are accustomed are not mere passing aspects of an ever-shifting kaleidoscope, but permanent habitations, the final outcome of reason and experience. Such an age does not aspire to progress though it may in fact be progressing; it regards itself as not setting out but having arrived; it is thankful for what it has, and enjoys life without "deep questing which probes to endless dole". And therefore the men of this "classical" age looked back with a sense of kinship to the far-off Ancient World (Habermas 1998).

Trevelyan thus underlines the essential points of contrast between modernity and tradition as

lying not primarily in the scientific contents and capacity of the respective cultures but in the different intellectual attitudes to cultural heritage. According to him, while the Enlightenment *Zeitgeist*, or consciousness of the period, was marked off by a critical and reflective attitude towards cultural conditions, with little or no optimism that progress would necessarily follow, that of the 'classical' age was a spirit of intellectual self-complacency and acquiescence in old cultural habits of thought and practices. The contrast alleged does not in any way allude to one age or the other as being scientific or superstitious, logical or pre-logical, rational or irrational, inclined to truth or falsehood. Nor does the contrast make any reference to a specific method of the critical attitude with which new generation surpassed the old. One thing however is clear: while the older culture was 'closed', or so it seemed, to further interrogation because its ideals, principles and practices formed a fixed matrix which was considered beyond review the new culture threw its elemental contents 'open' to re-appraisal and reforms. In the latter case, if I may repeat, the attitude to culture does not encase within it any reference to a particular method of inquiry by which change and progress may be attained, nor does it prescribe any such method *a priori*.

CONCLUSION

The preceding analysis goes beyond the clarification of the difference between tradition and modernity to the clarification of the notion of modernity as not necessarily constitutive of what is commonly known as 'science'. The misleading view that modernity necessarily entails modern science as it is known and practiced by professional scientists in the Western fashion is mostly responsible for the aversion to modernization on the part of those philosopher and social reformers who advocate a complete return to African traditional culture through a process of cultural revival. The revivalists assume that modernity or modernization implies a quest to replicate and institutionalize Western cultural elements in Africa, and this would mean westernization. This assumption, we have argued, is false because modernity consists essentially in keeping a critical and adventurous attitude towards one's cultural elements.

In Africa the quest for modernization is one for an open culture in all spheres of human en-

deavour and in which beliefs and practices are subject to interrogation and amendable to revision. It requires an intellectual change of attitude which can be brought about by literacy education, patriotism and the strengthening of social and political institutions. A genuine programme of modernization would always and definitely require some methodic procedures, akin to those of modern science, which would take cognizance of African interests, moral and socio-political values. This means that African interests and values have to be identified. In this way modernity in Africa would be dissociated from its European origins and stylized from 'a spatio-temporally neutral model' into an African model for processes of development.

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