BOUNDARIES, DYNAMICS
AND CONSTRUCTION OF
TRADITIONS IN SOUTH ASIA
Cultural, Historical and Textual Studies of Religions

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This collection of essays is meant to explore the various forms that the theme and the notion of ‘tradition’ took within the South Asian context, during ancient and pre-colonial periods.

Designed by the editor to cover a significant selection of the specialized fields of knowledge that shaped classical South Asian cultural history, the aim of this volume is to offer a stimulating anthology of papers on the different and complex processes employed during the ‘invention’, construction, preservation and renewal of a given intellectual tradition.

In this regard, the contributors have expertly analysed a large variety of aspects, namely the transmission of traditional canons — both textual and practical —, the dynamisms and the strategies chosen for the renewal of a tradition, its internal and external dialectics, the procedures of its legitimation, the theoretical and pragmatic mechanisms of its survival, the criticisms of traditional knowledge systems, etc. Attention has also been paid to problems related to the primacy exercised by highly specialized traditional experts, to monopolies in the transmission of knowledge, to its means of cultural and political justification, and to the connections between a specific traditional field of knowledge and the surrounding social arena.

Hence the following essays, thematically arranged according to a sixfold partion (see, supra, the table of contents), are dense and rich in scholarship and I hope they will notably contribute to the contemporary Indological understanding of the crucial institute of ‘tradition’.

Such is the ambitious aim of this volume and I would like to express my deep thanks to those who duly deserve praises and tribute for such intellectual venture.

First of all, I wish to thank all the authors of the essays published
in this collection, since without their positive response to my invitation to the project this volume wouldn’t be of any value.

Furthermore, I am indebted with Patrizia Cotoneschi (Firenze University Press) and Pankaj D. Jain (Munshiram Manoharlal) for accepting the many challenges that this co-publication project implied.

Finally, I wish to thank Maria Piera Candotti, Piero Capelli, Mario Caricchio, Alessandro Graheli, Bruno Lo Turco, Nancy Nannini Aluigi, Cristina Pecchia, Marina Rustow, Francesco Sferra, Lara Tavarnesi, Vincenzo Vergiani, for their generous help in revising and completing the ponderous amount of work that such a large collection required.

In spite of my huge efforts to achieve a unified editorial profile, while respecting the specific editorial choices made by the authors, I feel that I succeeded only in part. Yet, any shortcomings or faults in this work can only be attributed to myself.

I really hope that these flaws will not greatly undermine the reader’s expectations.

Federico Squarcini

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I.

Introduction
Federico Squarcini

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. 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 legitimize 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’, 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.

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 understand the function of ‘tradition’ could start from the willingness to include the analysis of those elements that earlier strategies had underestimated or discarded. 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, 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’, which derives from the Latin action noun traditio-önis, which in its turn means either ‘consignment’ or ‘transmission’ or ‘passage’ or ‘surrender’.

The lemma traditio-önis is connected with the verb tradere, composed of trans (‘across’, ‘beyond’) and dare (‘to give’), of which the present tense is tradó 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’ (pramâñavidda) 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 étymologique de la langue latine (Ernout, Meillet 1985), the Lexicon latinitatis Medii Aevi (Blaise 1975), the Lexicon totius latinitatis (Forcellini 1940), the Thesaurus Linguarum Latinarum (1900-2001).
to ensure the correct and legitimate reception of a possession by an heir.\textsuperscript{6} Bequeathing property to one’s children is the clearest example of the physical nature of \textit{tradere}, as is attested in the Roman institution of \textit{traditio ficta}, namely the act of the legal consignment of a possession—subdivided into \textit{traditio brevi manu} and \textit{traditio longa manu}. The practical implications of this notion are also shown by some of its figurative usages, as is the case of \textit{tradere} in the sense of ‘betray’. This usage was influenced by the pejorative meaning of the notion \textit{tradere} already present in the text of the Bible,\textsuperscript{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 \textit{tradere} is complemented by the conservative and static meaning expressed by the Latin word \textit{traditio} (corresponding to the Greek \textit{παραδοσις}), which implies both the concreteness of ‘giving’ (\textit{datio}) and ‘delivering’ (\textit{trado [trans-do]}).

However, the meaning of \textit{traditio} that prevailed is that of a particular form of uninterrupted \textit{datio}, namely the continuous transmission of an original \textit{datio}, considered so unique and important to be perpetually re-enacted. Such an act of \textit{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 \textit{vehiculum}, the immediate contact with the \textit{originalis}—being a foundational instruction or an initial event.

Thus, the word \textit{tradere} covered many semiotic contexts. Yet, since it has vital importance, the act of \textit{tradere} demands a more in-depth investigation into its different social and political implications. This is inevitable insofar as any instance of \textit{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 \textit{transdens}, literally ‘someone who gives a certain thing [res]’), of the given object or content (\textit{traditum}) and of a recipient (\textit{reciipiens}).

This division of the act of \textit{tradere} into its three elementary components provides a preliminary attempt to reveal the factors and inter-

\textsuperscript{6} In Roman law, ‘consignment’ (\textit{traditio}) was acknowledged as the easiest way of transferring the ownership or possession (\textit{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.

\textsuperscript{7} In the Bible, the act of ‘hanging over’ is sometimes associated with leaving someone in difficult conditions or in the hands of hostile people. See, \textit{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.