Tradition Meets Modernity: Identities of Life vs. Identities of Death

Introduction

When I was invited to speak on the interplay of tradition and modernity, I recognised the hopeful discourse expected: how culture, rooted in its traditions yet responsive to change, can become a bridge between nations, fostering peace and understanding. It is a beautiful vision.

Yet before embracing it, we must confront a harder truth. Modernity, especially when it arrives suddenly and is framed as a return to tradition, is rarely gentle. It reshapes the deepest structures of society, disrupting established patterns of authority, belief, and belonging. In doing so, it often transforms promise into conflict.

If humanity is to survive the immense challenges ahead — particularly the ecological and demographic shocks that the coming decades will bring — we must learn to recognise and cultivate what I call identities of life, and to defend against identities of death. This is not simply a matter of moral choice; it is a strategic necessity.

History's Warnings

History offers a wealth of examples of how technological and social transformations have destabilised societies, sometimes with catastrophic consequences.

The invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in the mid-15th century was a revolution in human communication. It made Christian scripture accessible beyond the Catholic priesthood, empowering individuals to interpret sacred texts without clerical mediation. This enabled the Protestant Reformation — one of the great cultural transformations of European history — but it also unleashed more than a century of religious wars. The very tool that spread literacy and religious self-determination also became the conduit for ideological polarisation and sectarian violence.

In 18th-century Europe, the consolidation of national markets helped capitalism flourish. Borders were drawn and political authority centralised, making trade more efficient and economic growth more rapid. Yet this same process hardened identities into fixed, exclusive forms of nationhood, paving the way for nationalist wars and colonial expansion. The productive energies of modern commerce were shadowed by the destructive forces of imperial rivalry.

The Industrial Revolution brought profound advances in manufacturing, transportation, and scientific knowledge. But it also deepened class divisions, creating conditions ripe for revolutionary ideologies that, in their most extreme forms, claimed millions of lives in the 20th century. Socialism and communism offered visions of equality and justice, but when

implemented as totalising state projects, they often became authoritarian systems that curtailed freedoms and demanded conformity.

Claude Lévi-Strauss called this dynamic *"the ruses of history"*: moments when societies, facing disruption, retreat into an imagined past and reforge tradition into a political weapon. This has happened repeatedly:

- The French Revolution, inspired by Enlightenment ideals, cloaked itself in the civic virtues of ancient Rome — only to descend into the Reign of Terror.
- Defeated after the First World War, Germany wrapped itself in the mythology of the *Nibelungenlied* and Aryan racial theory, laying the ideological groundwork for the Holocaust.
- Post-war Imperial Japan revived the *Bushidō* code, a warrior ethic from its feudal past, to justify imperial conquest across Asia.
- In our own time, Islamist movements calling for a return to the purity of 7th-century Islam have produced the brutalities of ISIS and Al-Qaeda.

In each case, tradition was not a source of resilience but a rallying cry for exclusion, domination, and destruction. These are **identities of death**.

The Pattern Today

This same pattern is evident in our own century.

In Israel, what began as a spiritual return to Jerusalem in rabbinic mysticism is, Yuval Noah Harari warns, turning into a project of Jewish supremacism.

In India, the radical strand of Hindutva seeks to define the nation as exclusively Hindu, threatening to erode the pluralism that has been one of India's civilisational strengths.

In the United States, Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan reframes history as a lost age of purity, often accompanied by the exclusion of immigrants and minorities.

In Russia, the revival of Orthodox Christianity has been intertwined with a resurgence of imperial ambitions, seeking to justify territorial expansion as a return to historical destiny.

These are contemporary **identities of death**: traditions deployed to close the circle of belonging, to define outsiders, and to prepare the ground for conflict.

Could We Have Foreseen It?

The Enlightenment, beginning in the 17th and 18th centuries, sought to arm humanity with reason as a defence against the dangerous turns of history. Thinkers like John Locke, Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Rousseau argued that human affairs could be guided by rational debate, empirical evidence, and universal principles of justice.

In 1795, just a few years after the French Revolution began, Immanuel Kant published his *Sketch for Perpetual Peace*. He envisioned a federation of free states, the abolition of standing armies, a principle of non-interference, and a universal right of hospitality. These ideas prefigured what we now call international law and multilateralism.

But such visions were too far ahead of the political realities of their time. The French Revolution itself, which should have been a triumph of Enlightenment ideals, descended into violence and authoritarianism. Early 20th-century efforts, such as the League of Nations, failed to prevent the rise of fascism and the outbreak of the Second World War.

The lesson is sobering: even the clearest philosophical warnings can be ignored if they are not embedded in political institutions and cultural habits capable of resisting the pull of identities of death.

Enlightenment's Illusions

Knowledge, in itself, is not a safeguard. It can foster dangerous illusions.

- The illusion of ethno-racial mastery, seen in Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, where pseudoscience was used to justify domination.
- The illusion of historical engineering, in Karl Marx's conviction that materialism and technology could rationally construct a just society.
- The illusion, in UNESCO's 1967 Experimental World Literacy Programme, that literacy would automatically lead to tolerance and peace.

As Paulo Freire observed, literacy is never neutral: it reflects the agenda of those who control the curriculum. In many contexts, new literacy programmes have entrenched nationalism or religious orthodoxy, rather than fostering openness.

When traditional storytelling, theatre, and oral history ,laden with a symbolic content, are replaced by abstract "invented traditions," the result can be a loss of subtlety, empathy, and local nuance. In today's Bali, we witness the slow shift from tradition to "awareness of tradition" and crystallization of identity. More generally the post-Gutenberg world shows that access to the written word can first trigger fundamentalism before it paves the way to enlightenment.

Learning from Identities of Life

To counter this, education must be paired with the deliberate cultivation of identities of life — those that can carry multiple loyalties, layered traditions, and overlapping responsibilities.

Examples exist:

- Bhutan measures its progress not just in economic terms but through *Gross National Happiness*, integrating cultural preservation, environmental stewardship, and social wellbeing.

- Botswana has combined the traditional *kgotla* — a village assembly where consensus is sought — with modern democratic governance, maintaining political stability since independence.
- Indonesia, perhaps the most compelling case, faced a defining choice at its birth.

In June 1945, the Jakarta Charter included a clause obliging Muslims to follow Islamic law. Leaders from Eastern Indonesia warned this would fracture the new republic. Sukarno and Vice-President Mohammad Hatta, after consulting Muslim leaders from Java and Sumatra, removed the clause. They chose instead *Pancasila* — five foundational principles — and the ancient motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* ("Unity in Diversity").

Rooted in pre-Islamic traditions yet open to universal values, this choice allowed Indonesia to accommodate hundreds of ethnic groups, languages, and faiths within one modern state. It was a deliberate act of cultural engineering toward an identity of life.

The Ecological Test

The greatest test for identities of life will be ecological.

The Himalayas, known as the "Third Pole" because they contain the largest store of ice outside the polar regions, feed the Brahmaputra, Indus, Ganga, Yangtze, and Mekong rivers. These rivers sustain nearly two billion people. Yet climate change is accelerating glacial melt, altering monsoon patterns, and increasing the frequency of floods and droughts.

By mid-century, some stretches of these rivers may run dry for months at a time. Agricultural collapse, water scarcity, and habitat loss will force millions from their homes.

Imagine 2050: waves of climate-displaced populations moving downriver, across borders, toward coastal megacities already under strain. Farmers from the Indus Valley, fisherfolk from the Ganga delta, upland communities from the Brahmaputra, industrial workers from the Yangtze basin — all converging on cities where jobs, housing, and water are scarce.

These people will arrive with identities forged by memory, tradition, and often trauma. Under such pressure, identities will either adapt into identities of life — cooperative, inclusive, adaptable — or harden into identities of death — rigid, hostile, exclusionary.

Identities of Life and Death: Characteristics

Identities of Life

- Hospitality codes — *rahmatan lil 'alamin* in Islam, *manaakitanga* in Māori culture, *melmastia* among the Pashtun.
- Consensus traditions — *kgotla* in Botswana, *musyawarah mufakat* in Indonesia.

- Ecological reverence — *Tri Hita Karana* in Bali, *Pachamama* in the Andes.
- Ethical universals — Buddhist compassion, Christian neighbourly love, African *Ubuntu*.
- Cultural hybridity — festivals and rituals blending multiple origins.

Identities of Death

- Exclusive origin myths tying belonging to bloodline or sacred territory.
- Purity codes enforcing rigid separation.
- Victimhood nationalism freezing grievance into permanent identity.
- Missionary ideologies — political or religious — claiming a monopoly on truth.

From Identity to Economy

Identities of life cannot be sustained on an economy of death. Jacques Attali, in *L'économie de la vie* –from whom I derive my concept of identities of life/death, argues for a decisive shift in economic priorities toward sectors that defend and enrich life: health, food security, clean water, education, housing, democracy, culture, science, sustainable energy, and environmental protection.

These sectors, he notes, already account for 40–70% of GDP in many countries. To ensure resilience, he proposes raising this share to 80%. An economy of life provides the infrastructure that allows identities of life to remain open under stress — to welcome newcomers, to adapt without collapse.

An economy of death, by contrast, is extractive, unequal, and environmentally destructive. It thrives on scarcity and division, treating both people and nature as expendable. **If we want identities of life to prevail, we must translate these insights into concrete actions.**

What Must Be Done

To align identities with economies of life, several steps are essential, using existing institutions or creating new ones:

1. **Reframe UNESCO's mandate** — beyond safeguarding monuments and crafts, to recognise *treasures of wisdom*: living traditions that foster inclusion, cooperation, and shared responsibility.
2. **Reform education** — integrate universalist strands from every civilisation into curricula, so students encounter the common moral ground of humanity.
3. **Teach religion and global history differently** — presenting them as overlapping moral and creative legacies, not as competing absolutes.
4. **Institutionalise poly-identity practices** — consensus governance, hybrid festivals, and ecological rituals that model cooperation.

5. **Create a global cultural commons** — an open, non-state resource for educators, media, and policymakers.

Among the nations best placed to model this approach is Indonesia

Indonesia's Role

Indonesia is well-placed to lead by example. Its *gotong royong* — mutual aid — and *Pancasila* — unity in diversity — are not slogans but embedded social practices. The long-standing habit of seeing all religions as morally equal, and the pride taken in both pre-Islamic heritage and today's *Islam Nusantara*, show that a nation can carry multiple legacies without fragmenting.

Indonesia's leadership lies not in prescribing what others should do, but in demonstrating what **not** to do:

- Not to elevate one heritage above all others.
- Not to turn memory into a weapon.
- Not to close the circle of belonging, but to widen it. In the decades ahead, this widening of belonging may be the single most important safeguard against the centrifugal forces that ecological and geopolitical crises will unleash.

Conclusion

In the century ahead, when rivers may alternately flood and vanish, when millions may be uprooted, and when climate-shaken populations converge on already strained cities, identities of life will be essential to survival. They will not be optional virtues but practical necessities.

Yet identities of life will only endure if they are supported by economies of life. Without such a foundation, even the most inclusive traditions can wither under stress.

Indonesia's example shows that every nation can cultivate its own local humanism — rooted in its soil, faithful to its history, yet open to the world. The choice before us is stark: life or death, inclusion or exclusion, sustainability or collapse.

The time to choose — and to act — is now.