Where Yesterday Begins

Culture as a Double-edged Sword

INTRODUCTION

There is a man you have never heard of. He graduated second in his class, wrote the best final-year project his department had seen in a decade, and sat through seventeen interviews over two years without receiving a single offer. He was not less qualified, he was, however, simply less connected. The position he had earned on paper went, twice in a row, to someone whose uncle chaired the appointments committee. The third time, rather than wait for a door that had been bolted from the inside, he built a window. That man is not a symbol, and he is far from being a mere metaphor. There are, statistically, thousands of him across Nigerian law firms, hospitals, civil service corridors, and university departments. But his story interests me less as a tragedy, and more as a mechanism. Because, however distasteful, he learnt how to climb.

THE CAVE WE INHERIT

Socrates' allegory of the cave describes prisoners who have never seen the sun, chained since birth to face a wall. They watch shadows dance and mistake them for reality. The philosopher's task, for Socrates, is to drag them upward toward the light, toward truth, toward what is real as opposed to what is merely familiar. I want to repurpose that cave as a metaphor for culture, not ignorance. Culture is the cave, it is not a prison by design; it is, in most cases, a shelter of the accumulated wisdom of those who came before, stored and passed down so that each generation does not have to start from nothing. Jaroslav Pelikan drew the most useful distinction on this point; *"Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."* The former is a resources, and the latter, a cave.

Tradition is not proposed to be the inherent problem. The problem is what happens when tradition stops being a living inheritance and becomes an inert credential; or for this essay, when the question shifts from "what can you do?" to "who sent you?" In Nigeria, this shift has a name; “man-know-man.” It is the logic of the bolted door, the appointment secured by proximity to power, or connections instead of merit, as one would naturally assume. The cultural operating system of nepotism, a befitting name. And this produces a particular kind of

darkness, the foreclosure kind of darkness. The darkness that tells a hardworking person “that’s seat is reserved,” even if it’s for someone with less.

FOR EVERY ACTION

Newton's third law of motion says for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. I am not a physicist, and I do not intend to abuse the metaphor. But there is something structurally true in it for culture. A system that applies enough pressure in one direction will, eventually, produce a force moving in another. The question then becomes: what force does it take?

Nassim Nicholas Taleb calls this antifragility; the property of systems that do not merely resist stress but are also strengthened by it. "The resilient resists shocks and stays the same," he writes; "the antifragile gets better." A glass cup is fragile, a muscle, exercised under load, is antifragile. And a talent that cannot access the room through the front door, to such a degree that it is forced to engineer its own entrance, is antifragile in precisely this sense. It gets better because of the wall, and in spite of it.

It is easy to mistake this as a celebration of suffering, which is not the aim. The man locked out of seventeen jobs did not need to be locked out. His exclusion was unjust, and injustice is not a developmental programme. The concept is, when a culture of exclusion applies consistent, systemic pressure to a generation of capable people, a subset of that generation will generate innovations that, in time, become more durable than the system that excluded them. The wall does not deserve credit for the climber, but the wall does explain the climb.

The Nigerian fintech sector serves as an example of this pattern disrupt as companies like Flutterwave and Paystack emerged at a point where the formal banking system had become too slow, too rigid, and too detached from the realities of a digital economy that was already outpacing it. Their founders treated the problem at its root with ingenuity, designing payment systems that assumed speed, accessibility, and scale from the outset. The consequences extended beyond success, as Paystack grew into a platform significant enough to be acquired by Stripe, while Flutterwave expanded into a multi-billion-dollar payments infrastructure operating across the continent. What matters is the structural shift that followed. Sustained inefficiency within a system creates incentives that no longer point inward, but outward, and once enough activity begins to organize itself outside the original structure, the boundary between “alternative” and “establishment” dissolves.

Capability, when consistently constrained, reorganizes itself around the constraint, often in ways the original system neither anticipates nor controls. Over time, those parallel solutions acquire enough weight to redefine the terms of participation altogether. The room therefore becomes something that can be redesigned. Peter Drucker observed that “an innovation, to be effective, has to be simple and it has to be focused.” He was talking about product design, but the same logic applies to the innovation that emerges from necessity. Its simple, because complexity was not affordable.

WHEN INNOVATION EATS ITSELF

Joseph Schumpeter enhanced the description of economic development as a "circular flow" periodically broken by innovation. The innovator disrupts the equilibrium; the disruption becomes the new equilibrium; the new equilibrium eventually becomes the old order that the next innovator must disrupt. It exists on a continuum. Drucker highlights this stance in *Post-Capitalist Society*, he argued that the great organizational challenge is institutionalizing change without losing its spirit. An innovation that cannot be absorbed into the social fabric remains a curiosity, an innovation that is fully absorbed becomes invisible, which is Drucker's measure of true success; an innovation has "arrived" not when it is celebrated, but when it is no longer called an innovation at all. It is simply the way things are. In the near future, possibly even today, a new generation of young Nigerians will have to build around Flutterwave’s gaps the same way Flutterwave was built around the banks’ gaps. This is as Drucker would say, the system working exactly as a healthy society should work, where each generation inherits the tools and the obligation to remake them.

THE BOX AND WHAT IS OUTSIDE IT

We speak often of "thinking outside the box" as if the box were an accident. We presume it to be a random constraint that a sufficiently bold thinker can simply discard. But that’s fallacious; the box is our culture. It is the accumulated set of assumptions, procedures, and power arrangements that define what counts as normal, legitimate, and meritorious in a given society at a given time. Pelikan's point would be to read from the other direction, if tradition is the living faith of the dead, then what the living inherit are boundaries. And ingenuity, real ingenuity, requires that boundary. Without a box, there is no "outside the box" thinking. Therefore, without culture, there is no pressure. Without the wall, there is no reason to climb.

Edmund Burke, writing about the social contract across generations, argued that “society is a partnership… not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those

who are dead, and those who are to be born." The implication Burke did not draw, but which this essay insists on, is that this partnership is not always equitable. The dead sometimes leave arrangements that benefit their descendants more than the strangers who arrive later. Culture, in this sense, is an inheritance with a will attached, and the will is not always fair. But even an unfair inheritance can be contested. Even a closed estate can be entered through litigation, innovation, or sheer persistence. What Burke understood was that the continuity of society is a project, and every generation that refuses to simply accept the terms of the previous one's project is, in the deepest sense, doing exactly what society requires of it.

Clayton Christensen called this disruptive innovation, the pattern by which new entrants, precisely because they lack access to the resources of incumbents, are forced to approach problems differently, and in doing so, they reframe the problem itself. The incumbent's comfort is the disruptor's opportunity, similarly, the tradition's rigidity is the innovator's opening. What culture closes by becoming exclusionary, ingenuity reopens by becoming transformative.

UNWITNESSED MERITS

I am a Nigerian law student. I say this not to place myself in the essay as evidence, but because I think there is something dishonest about building a theoretical argument from other people's exclusion without acknowledging one's own. I am not in a war zone, I do not carry a water bucket on my head for the cameras. My disadvantage is not visible, which is, in itself, part of the disadvantage. The global eye tends to require that suffering be photogenic before it is acknowledged, but invisible systemic pressure is still pressure nonetheless.

I have watched colleagues with half my preparation walk into opportunities because of a phone call made by a relative I do not have. I have sat in rooms where the unspoken qualification was not what you had done but who had vouched for you, or who you knew. And I have spent a significant portion of my education building the things that connection could not build for me; a reputation, a record, a voice, a presence that speaks before I enter a room.

I say none of this with bitterness, or at least, I try not to. Here are my two cents, nevertheless, the students in those rooms who were given the opportunity they had not earned were not always sharpened by it; they did not always innovate. Why would they? The room was already guaranteed. It is the person outside the room who has to figure out how to get in and in figuring it out, invents a method that no one inside the room had thought necessary.

Drucker wrote, in *The Effective Executive*, that the task of the effective person is to build on her strengths and convert constraints into direction. "Intelligence, imagination, and knowledge," he argued, "are essential resources, but only effectiveness converts them into." What I am claiming is that a culture of nepotism, paradoxically, can force that conversion. It creates an environment where effectiveness is not optional. Where the unconnected must become, by necessity, extraordinarily effective because that is the only currency they have.

I longed, for a long time, for someone to see something in me and act on what they saw. I have come to understand that this longing is human, which isn't the inherent problem. The problem is building a culture in which the only vision that counts is the one confirmed by blood or patronage. That culture stunts the people it excludes, but it also, against its own intentions, sharpens them.

This is, incidentally, what a healthy culture does by design and what a broken one does by accident. A functioning meritocracy sharpens people through competition that is real, conversely, a culture of nepotism sharpens people through exclusion that is unjust. Both produce capable individuals, only one produces a society worth sustaining. Drucker's entire career was an argument for the former: organizations and societies that deliberately cultivate people, that take seriously enough the question of what each person can contribute, generate more durable value than those that reserve opportunity for the already-arrived. The fintech founders are proof of that argument because merit, given any opening at all, will find a way through.

THE NEW TRADITION

There is a question I have been circling and will now answer directly; "is this a good thing?"

No, or at least not entirely.

The antifragility argument accounts for the survivors, it has nothing useful to say to the rest. The antifragility argument should not be allowed to smuggle in a defense of nepotism. A system that forces excellence out of exclusion is not producing excellence efficiently. For every person who climbs the wall, there are others who simply leave (evident in the brain drain that has hollowed Nigeria's professional class for two generations), or others who give up and join the system they once hated (the corruption cycle), or those who simply disappear into the mass of invisible talent the formal economy never touched, and never will.

Drucker would insist on this discomfort as his concept of social innovation was focused less on making peace with broken systems, rather, it was about building new social contracts that serve people more effectively than the old ones. The fintech founders did not build Paystack to vindicate exclusion, on the contrary, they built it to make exclusion unnecessary. Hustle as personal survival strategy versus hustle as the raw material of a new cultural norm. The former is reactive and temporary, the latter is generative and lasting. The first climbs the wall, the second, eventually, tears it down and builds a door.

When hustle becomes a culture of meritocracy and when the next generation inherits not just the tools of the innovator but the expectation that tools will be built, then the cycle has completed itself productively. The innovation has become the tradition, and that tradition, if it remains living rather than merely inherited, will produce the next wave of innovators who find new walls to climb, new rooms to enter, new systems to disrupt from the outside. This is what Pelikan meant by the living faith of the dead, a set of commitments that the living generation must actively choose to carry or set down and replace with something better. The real innovation, in other words, is not my hustle, the real innovation is when hustle becomes the new culture.

CONCLUSION

"Tradition is the living faith of the dead." I keep returning to Pelikan's sentence because it is the most accurate description I know of what every generation inherits from the one before it. Where yesterday begins is the point where the previous generation's innovation has settled into custom, and the new generation must decide whether to receive that custom as a foundation or a ceiling. In a healthy culture, it is a foundation, something to build from. In a culture of nepotism and foreclosure, it becomes a ceiling, the shadow on the walls of a cave.

But the final paradox, one that gives this essay its title: even a ceiling can be the beginning of a tomorrow. Because the ceiling defines the room, and the room defines the box, and the box, as I have argued throughout, is what makes outside-the-box thinking possible at all. The cave is where the philosopher discovers that the light exists. We are all, at some level, working with the materials of yesterday, the question is whether we receive them as constraints or as raw material. The entrepreneur who constructs an ecosystem from friction or the professional who turns a closed door into a methodology is using the tradition against itself, in service of something the tradition did not intend but the future requires.

Yesterday does not end at midnight. It begins, again, in the hands of the person it leaves behind.

AI Disclosure

In accordance with competition guidelines, the following is disclosed regarding generative AI assistance:

AI Tool Used: ChatGPT, Claude and Gemini

Prompts Used Includes:

1. *Help me identify thinkers who view culture, tradition, and innovation as a cycle rather than a linear progression*
2. *Bring together the following ideas [raw notes and concept fragments provided] into a structured coherent and logical outline.*

Placement of AI-Assisted Content: AI assistance was used in the brainstorming and structural organization phases. The essay's arguments, personal narrative, voice, and prose are the author's own.