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Book Reviews

REVIEW ESSAY

The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India. By SHELDON POLLOCK. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006. 703 pp. $75.00 (cloth).
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Let me begin by saying clearly: Sheldon Pollock's magisterial essay on the history and fate of Sanskrit is the kind of scholarly synthesis and insightful interpretation that comes along, at most, once in a generation or two. It is a bold work, panoramic in scope, forthright in conception and argument, and extraordinarily rich in philological-historical detail. Pollock takes as his subject, first, the emergence, sometime around the start of the Common Era, of a cultural and conceptual order couched in classical Sanskrit, a "cosmopolis" ultimately extending from Sind (or even further west, into present-day Afghanistan) to Java and Bali in the east; and second, the eventual displacement or reconfiguration of this cosmopolitan or "superposed" order by regional cultures that arose in profound dialogue with it in the course of the first half of the second millennium CE. The broad analogy with second-millennium Western Europe, and specifically with the long history of Latin, is explicit, as are the distinctions that need to be made in order to differentiate historical South and Southeast Asia from the European parallel (and from other cosmopolitan linguistic cultures, such as the Arabic-Persian and the Chinese).

There is no doubt that Pollock's work, the first of its kind ever attempted for South Asia, has changed the field irrevocably. It is also a book that generously invites disagreement and that openly speaks in the language of humanistic science, presenting strong hypotheses that are, by their very nature, open to challenge, correction, or modulation. In the following short review, I will mostly keep away from matters of historical or philological detail, many of which are highly controversial anyway, and will instead attempt to engage with what I see as the book's major themes and claims.

Pollock is interested in the problem of power—more specifically, in the inter-meshing of cultural (literary, scientific, ideological) production with the politica domain. Still more specifically, this is (among other things) a book about th history, and to some extent the differential typologies, of political formations i South and Southeast Asia in light of their relation to the Sanskrit language an the particular cultural contents that the use of Sanskrit might imply. From

certain point in the early centuries CE, "power in India now had a Sanskrit voice" (p. 122). To my knowledge, no one before Pollock has asked the important questions before, certainly not with the same scope and panache: Why is it, and how—in what historical modalities, evolving over time—that state formation in South Asia is so intimately bound up with Sanskrit? Merely posing the question in this way has the potential, as Pollock shows, to liberate us from the classical Weberian framework that posits "legitimation" (and its ethical concomitant, theodicy) as the necessary axis around which political structuring revolves. For India, it now appears that we have to deal seriously with grammaticalization, or what Pollock nicely names "language care" (p. 165), as a primary political force: He speaks of philology as a "precondition for power" and of "the power of grammar and the grammar of power as mutually constituting forces" (p. 168). This formulation is something of a breakthrough, a real breath of fresh air. The Weberian *Problematik* is not, I think, without its uses and can, perhaps, be restated in somewhat more persuasive terms; but Pollock has put in place the terms of another analytic design—no less universal in implication than the Weberian—that may ultimately allow a more satisfying explanation of the South Asian case.

He articulates the riddle of politicized Sanskrit very trenchantly. The very idea of the Sanskrit cosmopolis, for which Pollock certainly holds the patent, would seem to require some kind of explanation, which somehow continues to elude us:

> There was no event of conquest; no "Sanskrit" polity had conquered the subcontinent, let alone beyond. New universalist visions of power did arise at just this time ... but none ever took on a presence real enough to effect such a transformation the way Romanization followed in the train of Roman legions ... No religious revolution had taken place, and no new revelation was produced in Sanskrit to stimulate evangelism, nor did any transregional movement or institution even exist to propagate such a revolution, had one occurred. What transpired seems to have happened according to some cultural process of imitation and borrowing less familiar to us as causative than conquest or conversion, some impulse toward transculturation that made it sensible, even desirable, to adopt the new Sanskrit cultural-political style as an act of pure free will. (p. 133)

At various points in the book, Pollock does make interesting suggestions in the direction of possible explanations of this phenomenon; some of them have to do with the unique forms of expressivity that Sanskrit offers (see especially pp. 254–58). The nuanced reading of literally dozens of historical contexts, as well as major texts never regarded before in light of such issues (e.g., Bhoja's *Śṛṅgāra-prakāśa* and the *Mānasollāsa*), serves to fine-tune the argument and to ground it, usually in compelling ways. And yet the large-scale thesis—the great vision of cosmopolitan, universalizing diffusion followed by regionalization—comes complete with a set of less convincing assumptions or conclusions that, to my taste, distort the picture and destabilize some of Pollock's claims.

Simplifying ruthlessly, we have the following basic reading of the history: In the early centuries CE, beginning possibly, and not by chance, in the foreign-ruled west of the subcontinent, Sanskrit was transformed from what was hitherto a sacerdotal-liturgical language into a dominant medium of political discourse, on one hand, and of elite literary production (with its related grammars and other sciences), on the other. For nearly a thousand years, the resultant Sanskrit cosmopolis, remarkably uniform in conception and resilient in practice, expanded and endured. When, toward the end of the millennium, processes of regionalization gradually replaced properly Sanskritic idioms with newly localized but also somewhat universalized vernacular forms, one result was the notorious "death of Sanskrit," which sometimes looks more like a retrojected, though unpremeditated, scholarly linguacide. Added to this whodunit aspect of the book is the uncanny way that everything seems to happen in neat units of one thousand years correlated nicely to the Western calendar—although when it comes to individual cases of regionalization, Pollock is clearly sensitive to questions of timing and synchronicity (e.g., the conspicuous "time lag" in vernacularization between the boldly innovating south—Tamil, Telugu, and, with special emphasis, Kannada—and the oddly lethargic, or conservative, north; see pp. 392–93).

It is a powerful thesis and, as with other powerful analytical models, the real beauty and fascination lie in the details. But, immersed as I am in the rather parochial second-millennium universe of South India (to use Pollock's own time-frame), I cannot help wondering how, or whether, the grand design applies there. I will start with the more accessible and simpler objection from this later period, which I know best, and then work my way back to certain aspects of the Sanskrit cosmopolis at its height.

One can easily grant the notion that Sanskrit—the cultural complex implied by the term—conduces, historically, toward translocal and "transethnic" (p. 254) claims. The local bandit who wants to become king speaks publicly in some kind of Sanskrit, in or beyond or above his native vernacular. On second thought, we might want to suspend the "above." What kind of a hierarchy is it anyway? Certainly not a vertical one, as we have so often been led to expect. But Pollock is certainly right to insist on the advantages of Sanskrit for translocal empowerment. Of course, Sanskrit can also serve entirely local purposes (e.g., when Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita in the seventeenth century composes the *Śiva-līlārṇava*, telling, in Sanskrit, the stories of Śiva's sixty-four games or amusements in Madurai). Indeed, in a way, this is Pollock's point: The transregional, universalistic purchase of the canonical first-millennium *kāvyas* gives way to a literary production aimed at essentially local audiences. But he also insists (wrongly, in my view) that the more dramatic creative impulses in these later, local contexts were usually—indeed, almost exclusively—couched in the vernacular. It is as if Sanskrit withered on the branch when "court intellectuals" decided "to abandon the global language of Sanskrit and speak locally in their literary and political texts" (p. 415). Apparently one cannot have, or anyway did not have, intense literary expressions on a large scale in both Sanskrit and a regional language simultaneously.

No doubt questions of taste and sensibility come into play at this point. Still Yigal Bronner and I have argued at some length that the "regional Sanskrit"

literatures of the second millennium may have distinctive, creative features that go beyond what even the canonical poets were capable of achieving (See our "A Cloud Turned Goose: Sanskrit in the Vernacular Millennium," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 43 [March 2006]: 1–30). We even attempted to formulate a law: What is lacking in geographical range is (at least sometimes) made up for by greater depth. I cannot repeat the argument here, but let me say, at least, that highly inventive Sanskrit poetry continued to be produced in many regions of the subcontinent right up to the twentieth century. In Vizianagaram and Tirupati, in Mithila, Gwalior, and Devagiri, Sanskrit was one more, in certain ways privileged, available medium for making poetry; such poetry tended to have uniquely expressive features that make sense of this linguistic choice. In these localized contexts, Sanskrit continued to play "hyperglossic" roles—another Pollockian term referring to "a relationship of extreme superposition (hyper- between two languages that local actors knew to be entirely different" (p. 50)—but in a new way. We are still at the beginning of any attempt to define that new way analytically, with an awareness of features proper to each particular context. But it is clear, at least to me, that Sanskrit did not share Latin's fate. Although people are fond of comparing the Tamil poet Kampa<u>n</u> to Dante, for example, and the comparison might even make a certain sense, it is not the choice of the regional language over the universal or cosmopolitan one that allows us to associate these two oeuvres. Rather, at least in south India, intense regionalization in the literary realm tended to go hand in hand with highly innovative "Sanskritization," to use an old term—that is, continuous experimentation with both new forms of Sanskrit literary production and the canonical terms, categories, and modes of Sanskrit-informed culture and theory more generally (for a trenchant critique of currently prevalent notions of Sanskritization, see pp. 513–14). There were, of course, tensions, rivalries, and all kinds of exotic combinations, many of them internal to the emerging vernaculars themselves; but far from contributing to the demise of Sanskrit as a powerful imaginative vehicle, these very tensions provide acute evidence of its continuous cultural vitality. Note that this is not an issue that can be resolved statistically. It is not the sheer volume of continued Sanskrit literary production that matters (though that volume is immense) nor even the new parameters of circulation—admittedly far more limited for second-millennium Sanskrit literature than for the classical canon. The decisive point has to do with the nature of the creative impulse itself, with the expressive range available to the poets, the complexity and dynamics of their aesthetic and political universes, and, in a fundamental way, with what is meant by the word "Sanskrit" itself.

To see the problem in its deeper aspect, we have to go back to the first-millennium "universal" Sanskrit canon in both its literary and erudite domains, for it is this canonical world that is, in Pollock's argument, so radically and systematically inflected and ultimately subverted by the vernacular shift. But what exactly was being subverted? Somehow intrinsic to the wider vision of the cosmopolis is an insistence on the uniformity and normativity of Sanskrit production over the first thousand years and across the whole expanse of cosmopolitan space. Again and again, we read of Sanskrit's "changeless linguistic

organization" (p. 365), the "astonishing stability" of its "culture-power formation" (p. 39), the "homogeneity" and "unique linguistic uniformity and stylistic coherence across the entire cosmopolis" (p. 256), the "transregional consensus about the presuppositions, nature, and practices of a common culture, as well as a shared set of assumptions about the elements of power—or at least about the ways in which power is reproduced at the level of representation in language" (p. 19), and thus the persistence of a vast collective "world without difference" (p. 257). This world was, it appears, subject to a pervasive normativity in which "the particular exists only as a vehicle, or excuse, for the paradigmatic" (p. 140, with reference to politics) and in which "practices conformed to rules, while rules were never constituted out of practices" (p. 167, with reference to the "Sanskrit thought world" more generally). Thus, Pollock speaks of remarkably stable articulations of heroic kingship in a courtly Sanskrit idiom shared over centuries throughout the cosmopolis; of the organization of geopolitical and cultural space, again conventionally patterned and recurrent over vast periods of time; of characteristic processes of "textualization" and grammaticalization, surprisingly regular and for the most part heavily prescriptive. I have the uneasy sense that this notion of uniformity and normativity is sometimes linked in nonincidental ways to another kind of argument about power, one that is rooted in an ideological critique focused on a certain "theodicy of privilege" (p. 42) and related images of domination by groups claiming a monopoly on the cultural and material resources that access to Sanskrit might offer. Such a critique seems to me both unconvincing and singularly out of place in a work of such scholarly forcefulness.

But even if we set aside the last point—I may be wrong about it—what are we to do with the argument about monolithic, normative uniformity spread over a thousand years? Reading these statements, I sometimes wonder whether Pollock and I are looking at the same historical continuum. Where he sees uniformity, I tend to see the most remarkable heterogeneity, local innovation, and context-sensitivity, and by no means only in the "vernacular millennium." Where he sees context-free, theoretically unchanging rules and paradigms, I tend to see mechanisms of empirical instantiation and assimilation—for example, in the supple *purāṇic* articulation of entirely localized cult and myth, probably the major vehicle of popular religious innovation from the sixth century on. One could ask, do not the *purāṇas* come replete with a normative ideology, the *pañcalakṣaṇa* scheme? They do indeed; but, as has been elegantly shown by the late Friedhelm Hardy, among others, this theoretical normativity was, in fact, a largely hollow frame within which the most diverse contexts could easily be accommodated. Similarly with the *dharma* literature and with grammar, the queen of Indian sciences: that Pāṇini's empirical, descriptive, and generative grammar was eventually seen as prescriptive is one not-insignificant part of a much wider story that must include the well-articulated alternative models that Pollock himself describes. I would, moreover, be inclined to argue that a wide-ranging principle of singularity—the irreducible value of the unique, individual, context-dependent utterance—helps shape the entire classical discipline of poetics (*alaṅkāra-śāstra*) and, even more strikingly, ongoing poetic praxis. Indeed, it can be shown that the classical "cosmopolitan" canon

is mostly composed of works that survived—and thus were canonized—precisely because each of them marked a moment of striking innovation and change. There is, it seems to me, very little that is substantially uniform, apart from superficially shared conventions, in the entire long history of Sanskrit poetry; and here we can safely let the millennium divisions slip away.

But what, after all, do we mean by "Sanskrit," and what kind of cultural—or, for that matter, political—*work* does "Sanskrit" do? (this is Pollock's telling and very helpful turn of phrase). Of course, we know there is a classical language that, over time, came wrongly to see itself *sub specie aeternitatis*, that is, as at least morphologically unchanging. In practice, Sanskrit was quite the opposite of fixed; indeed, its capacities to assimilate variation, to generate dialectical subsets, and to "regionalize" its syntax and lexis are among the most salient features of the language. In this respect, if one really needs a classical European analogy, we would do much better to look to Greek, with its inherent heterogeneity, at least up to the time (very late, almost modern) when the pandits' *katharevousa* solidified, rather than to Latin and the Latin-derived vernaculars. And because the linguistic paradigm is situated at the very heart of this book, informing its historical vision and radiating outward into diverse cultural contents, here, too, we might imagine a kind of bottom-up model in which local materials, profoundly variable, continuously crystallized their singular modes of feeling and understanding in intensified media of expression that they called "Sanskrit." Such linguistic intensification is, in fact, probably the deeper meaning of a term such as *saṃskṛtā vāk* (Rāmāyaṇa 5.28.18–19). It could happen in an astonishing number of distinct cultural patterns, all of which necessarily entered into conversation with inherited normative claims and practices, some couched in classical Sanskrit, some in other "Sanskrits," so to speak. Vernacularization may have accelerated the process of differentiation, as Pollock shows, but hardly at the expense of Sanskrit; rather, broadly viewed, Sanskrit has retained, right up to modern times, a kind of noncoercive elasticity and expressive virtuosity that have been there all along, fulfilling powerful "workly" roles and needs. Think, for example, of the rich Sanskrit production at the nineteenth-century Vizianagaram court in northern Andhra, the largest cultural center between Calcutta and Madras: There, Sanskrit served together with many heterogeneous forms of cultural production—tiger dancing, wrestling, magic, *harikathā*, Urdu poetry—to underwrite the formation of a quite new type of polity that was unique to this region. As in any first-millennium state, Sanskrit poetry and scholarship were woven into this web and remained integral to its self-perception. In a way, it is precisely this elegant mechanism of continuous cultural self-invention, with its salient—but also widely variable—political ramifications, that Pollock's monumental essay so powerfully documents. Who is to say that even a globalizing, English-dominated universe, let alone many centuries of vernacular "poetries and polities," will put an end to Sanskritization in this sense?

These are some of the issues. A book of this magnitude raises many more even as it opens up enticing comparative vistas. We might, in particular, want to view the Sanskrit cosmopolis in close relation to an Arabic one (as Ronit Ricci has recently suggested in her study of Islamicization in Java and in Tamil Nadu, "Translating Conversion in South and Southeast Asia: The Islamic Book of One Thousand Questions in Javanese, Tamil, and Malay" [PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2006])—because both Sanskrit and Arabic have served, in closely parallel ways, as generative cultural nodes operating historically in conflated multilingual, diglossic, and "hyperglossic" environments. In any case, our debt to Pollock is great. He has pitched the discussion of the role of Sanskrit in large parts of Asia over the *longue durée* at a level, and an intensity, never before achieved.

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ASIA: COMPARATIVE AND TRANSNATIONAL

Transnational Migration and Work in Asia. Edited by Kevin Hewison and Ken Young. New York: Routledge, 2006. 256 pp. $140.00 (cloth).
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Transnational Migration and Work in Asia is an informative, interdisciplinary volume that brings together essays on contemporary migration in East and Southeast Asia by scholars in Hong Kong, Australia, and Thailand. The volume is best understood as a collection of case studies and politically engaged discussions dealing with compatible, although not always consistent, aspects of contemporary migration within the region. Many of the essays were originally published in the *Journal of Contemporary Asia* in 2001, 2004, and 2005. By grouping these essays together and incorporating a few additional pieces, the volume illustrates two important, although perhaps now widely acknowledged, points: First, migration is playing a key role in shaping political economic and social processes throughout Asia; and second, migrant laborers in the region are vulnerable and severely disadvantaged on account of government policies, broader political economic processes, and discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, and citizenship.

The book's short introduction explains its focus on the life cycles and experiences of semiskilled and unskilled migrants in the region. Though the introduction clearly explains the shared orientation of the chapters, it might have better situated the book's approach within wider debates about migration or globalization. The remainder of the book is organized into three sections. The first section comprises two articles that are intended to set out the broader historical and theoretical contexts of contemporary migration. Adrian Vickers's essay in this section provocatively reframes labor migration in Indonesia in terms of