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VERNACULARIZATION IN THEORY

IN THE EARLY CENTURIES OF THE SECOND MILLENNIUM, wide areas of Eurasia, and most dramatically India and Europe, witnessed a transformation in cultural practice, social-identity formation, and political order with far-reaching and enduring consequences. I call this transformation vernacularization, a process of change by which the universalistic orders, formations, and practices of the preceding millennium were supplemented and gradually replaced by localized forms. The local worlds created by vernacularization, which took on ever sharper definition over time, are now giving way under the pressure of another and more powerful universalizing process, one of whose consequences has been to make us more aware of the very historicity of these local worlds.

A key site for understanding vernacularization is literary culture. It is here that we most clearly perceive intentional language change and encounter the most significant representations of a society's self-understanding and a polity's power. In vernacularization local languages are first admitted to literacy (what I sometimes call *literization*), then accommodated to "literature" as defined by preexisting cosmopolitan models (*literarization*), and thereby unified and homogenized; eventually they come to be deployed in new projects of territorialization and, in some cases, ethnicization. By this process vernacular

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literary cultures gradually encompassed and superseded the translocal codes, aesthetic forms, and geocultural spaces that had earlier been prevalent. These changes in literary culture not only correlate with transformations in social identity but appear at times to converge with a shift in the perceived scope of political power. For concurrently with vernacularization a previously dominant aspiration to transregional rule seems to have been supplanted by more limited if not bounded orders of power. This contributed crucially in some parts of the world to the formation of national states; elsewhere, other forms of polity, as yet poorly understood, came into being.

To study vernacularization is to study not the emergence into history of primeval and natural communities and cultures, but rather the historical inauguration of their naturalization. For it was during the course of the vernacular millennium that cultures and communities were ideationally and discursively invented, or at least provided with a more self-conscious voice. This naturalization took place by a double process of reduction and differentiation: As unmarked dialect was turned into unified standard, heterogeneous practice into homogenized culture, and undifferentiated space into conceptually organized place, vernacularization created new regional worlds.¹ Inside these worlds was the indigenous and natural; outside, the exogenous and artificial. Of course, this transformation did not happen everywhere in a similar manner. Not all historical processes of the cultural production of sameness and difference are the same, and understanding what may have been distinctive about the content of vernacularization in the various new worlds, such as those in southern Asia before European colonization that form the subject of this essay, is a precious if elusive prize.

At the most general level, what makes the potential difference of the non-West hard to grasp is an epistemological determinism embedded in the very categories that we use to know it. Twenty years ago students of Asian history were already seeking to resist what they saw as intellectual imperialism in the export of Euro-American models and presuppositions in the study of non-Western cultures. Yet the critique itself was contradictory. Even while denouncing the epistemic domination of the West it demanded analysis that “discerns a general

order . . . for India and elsewhere,” rejected as futile the idio-graphic (which leads to “an endless series of noncomparable and culture-specific ‘patterns’”), and regarded as pernicious any categorization that renders the non-West radically different. While the phrase “intellectual imperialism” may sound dated today, the problem it articulates has not vanished, and the contradictions of the critique are those with which we are still living.²

Beyond this general epistemological trap (where the outcome of inquiry is predetermined by the very problematics that inform it) and the unhappy choice between a homogenizing universalism and a ghettoizing particularism lie two more difficulties for non-Western studies. First, the conceptual objects constituted by vernacularization in early modern Europe, foremost among them the nation-form, now appear to comprise a certain teleological necessity. It is hard to imagine alternative cultural-political meanings of this process when it has come to be, as it everywhere has, locked into national narratives. Vernacularization, it seems, must universally signal the protohistory of the nation. The second difficulty is whether we can even get to that history to query it, given the impact—or at least the estimation of the impact—of colonialism. As a generation of brilliant South Asian historians has sought to demonstrate, colonialism effected changes in the economic, social, political, and cultural spheres that produced the present while making it appear to be the past. The development of underdevelopment; the congelation of religious identities and their political mobilization (“communalism”); the rigidification, and for some even the invention, of caste; the establishment of a centralized state; the production of the nation, and of “India” itself—these are all colonial and new but have been presented under the guise of the precolonial and traditional.³ This guise, for its part, is the artifice of the Western knowledge formation called Orientalism, and in view of the scholarship currently available it would appear that the claim often made—that, epistemically, Orientalism is untranscendable—is true.

The task of thinking through the history and meaning of the non-European vernacular millennium, therefore, has large obstacles to overcome. We must attempt to reconceptualize the key

terms of the problematic, culture and power, from within our empirical materials, resisting at once the precepts of nationalized, colonialized, and orientalized thinking, and even perhaps of normal social science. It is typical of such science, as the common sense of modernity and capitalism, to reduce one of these terms (culture) to the other (power)—a reduction often embodied in the use of the concept of legitimation of power.⁴ There is no reason to assume that legitimation is applicable throughout all human history, yet it remains the dominant analytic in explaining the work of culture in studies of early South and Southeast Asia. A related antifunctionalist complaint could be brought against transhistorical economic explanations of social change. It is not to deny the role of the material world in the formation of collective identities and political orders, but rather to capture what may be different about that role under capitalism, to suggest that in earlier epochs the grounds for social change, even radical change, might not be epiphenomenal to the economic but rather located elsewhere, in some more autonomous aesthetic imperative, for example, such as a new desire for vernacular style.

Unless we suspend such prejudgments as legitimation and economism in our historical analysis of vernacularization and the formation of collective identities and political orders with which it is related, I do not see how we can hope to perceive what may be different about the relation of culture and power at other times and places. Yet it is easier to reject the conceptual instruments, such as legitimation invented in modernity, in order to explain it than to replace them with convincing new theorization developed from the stuff of precoloniality.

It is in part the challenge to understand how culture relates to power that accounts for my concentration on literary language, though there is an additional consideration. If identity formation and the social coherence of a polity are in part *mentalités*, it is reasonable that language (the foundation of *mentalité*) should figure large in both the real-world production and the theoretical analysis of polity and identity. Language is thus fundamentally a “primordial” phenomenon but not in the sense the term has recently (and I think erroneously) acquired. Primordialism should not be taken to refer to priority in time—to attachments

thought to be perennial, ever present, and only awaiting instrumentalization—but to priority in social consciousness, and thus may be contrasted with second-order civic sentiments of belonging. Used in this sense and not, as typically, as an antonym of “instrumental,” “socially constructed,” or “recent,” the term is an important addition to our conceptual apparatus. It certainly should not conjure up transhistorical forms of consciousness: For something to become a “first-order given,” it has to be culturally produced. This is now obvious with respect to such primordial phenomena as race and regionalism, for example, but it also applies to language itself (or what Clifford Geertz, in the essay that effectively introduced the term “primordial” into discussions of national sentiment, called “linguism”).⁵

For exploring the meanings and sociopolitical dimensions of the vernacular epoch, students of South Asia find themselves in an uncharacteristically enviable position. We possess in the domain of literary culture textual materials that are unique in their combination of antiquity, continuity, and multicultural interaction. These materials show that with respect to the production of literary texts, something unprecedented came into being in the period between roughly 1000 and 1500. At different places and at different times (and perhaps for different reasons, though it is this that needs investigation) people in southern Asia began to make such texts in languages that did not travel—and that they knew did not travel—as far as Sanskrit, the language that had monopolized the world of literary production for the preceding thousand years.

Admittedly, this characterization of cultural processes, as local or regional in contrast to global or transregional, as less-traveled in contrast to well-traveled, needs to be qualified. The categories are obviously relative, and in any case are meaningful only as construed in local discourse. But such qualification should not be allowed to obscure what is after all a real and important difference between cosmopolitan and vernacular literary cultures. Sanskrit literary texts circulated from Central Asia to Sri Lanka and from Afghanistan to Annam, and participating in such a literary culture meant participating in a vast ecumene. To produce a regional alternative to it and to elect to remain within a limited world was therefore to effect a break, which the agents

themselves understood to be a break, in cultural communication and self-understanding.

The alternative world that vernacular literature creates becomes an alternative only given the presence of a “superposed” or dominant cultural formation of a transregional sort: Greek over Latin, Latin over French, Chinese over Vietnamese, Sanskrit over Javanese. And it becomes a world—a self-adequate literary culture according to the prevailing scale of norms—only by appropriating the signs of superposition in everything from lexicon and metric to rhetoric, genre, and aesthetic. Choices underlie the production of literary texts, whether vernacular or cosmopolitan, and in their interplay they constitute an intricate social phenomenon that necessarily comprises an element—however hard to capture—of cultural identity formation. Writing entails choosing a language (or, often, creating a language by the very production of texts), and thereby affiliating oneself with a particular vision of the world. While language choice itself is no self-evident matter, choosing a language for literary text production most importantly implies affiliating with an existing sociotextual community, or summoning a potential community into being, and thus has defining social significations. But it has, equally, defining political significations, since the primary site of vernacular production everywhere at its commencement was the site of political power, namely, the royal court.

Understanding the choice of language for making literature, then, and especially the radical reordering of choices in a world in vernacularization, may help us understand something about the history and nature of collective identities and political orders. It is from the act of reading-performing, hearing, reproducing, and circulating literary texts that a significant portion of group self-understanding and perhaps solidarity derives.⁶ And this is especially the case when a notable feature of the texts in question is the very fact of their using vernacular language to make literature and thereby demonstrating its adequacy for such use. Whatever else it may be, literature in the vernacular millennium is a social act, with specific political and geocultural determinants.

While the importance of vernacularization, thus conceived, seems obvious, I often wonder whether I have got something

quite wrong when I observe how little systematic attention the matter has received. Few detailed accounts of its history exist for any part of the world, let alone as a supraregional, macrohistorical phenomenon, and even fewer theorizations that help us to understand its social and political significations. Those that are available offer neat explanatory packages identifying vernacular cultural change as a result of material and social transformations, industrialization, for example, or so-called print-capitalism. They are hardly above criticism in their own domain let alone adequate for the South Asian materials presented in this essay, but if they do not work it is difficult to figure out what to substitute—that is, to understand what vernacularization means in cultural-political terms, and why the vernacular epoch began when it did.

Difficulties only increase if we take the final step, toward comparative cultural-political analysis. Indian vernacularization and its relation to changing conceptions of community and polity seem structurally similar to developments occurring in many other places. Examples from eastern Eurasia include Java in the tenth century, Siam in the fourteenth, and Vietnam in the fifteenth. In Vietnam, for instance, it is then that a demotic script is developed (*chữ nôm*, an adaptation of Chinese characters for the writing of Vietnamese sounds), by means of which Vietnamese literature was able for the first time to present itself in a non-Chinese form. The significance of this cultural-political move at the time, though not leading to full vernacularization until much later, must have been great, for it took place in a world where, as one scholar put it, the standardization of writing, like the standardization of wagon axles, was a metaphor for good government. And it occurred at a watershed moment in intellectual-political history when, along with a nostalgic indigenization, the localization of Chinese cultural materials is to be found in a number of domains.⁷

Better known, of course, are the examples of vernacularization from western Eurasia. In the supersession of the Latin ecumene by script vernaculars in late-medieval Europe we may note parallels with the Indian developments, and not only in point of chronology, that are astonishing. And the role of vernacularization in the making of early European modernity in the political and

social spheres—though in precisely the way I am formulating it this question seems understudied even for Europe—may suggest something of an analytical model for India. Yet it is just the elements of this model that I want to suspend for now. If the view from Western modernity suggests a particular kind of correlation among language, collective identity, and the political order, this may be only a European particular for whose universalization we have as yet little warrant.

VERNACULARIZATION IN PRACTICE

From around the beginning of the common era, the hitherto largely sacral language of Sanskrit came to be used for the first time as a vehicle for literary and political expression throughout South and much of Southeast Asia. The quite extraordinary story of how all this came about need not be restated here.⁸ Suffice it to say that by the middle of the millennium, there are clear signs everywhere in southern Asia by which literati and their courtly patrons could recognize a common culture and in which we can perceive the presence of a kind of cosmopolitan community. A strong rule obtains throughout this cosmopolis regulating the functions of Sanskrit and vernacular languages: Sanskrit alone was employed for the production of literary and political texts, the latter being the royal genealogies and eulogies (*praśasti*) that often formed the prologue to inscriptions. Vernacular languages, most of which came to literization first through the mediation of Sanskrit, were used—but this was their sole use—for the production of documents (specifying the boundaries of a land grant, for example). For the greater part of the history of this cosmopolitan formation, “literized literature” or expressive texts committed to writing (the Sanskrit term is *kāvya*) could be made only in the transethnic, transregional, and (according to its own self-understanding) transhistorical language of Sanskrit and never in a local code.⁹ This is something both the theory and practice of Sanskrit culture corroborate. Given that the cosmopolitan culture of the Sanskrit ecumene was increasingly restricted to the expressive and divorced from the documentary, its relation to power seems to have been far more

aesthetic than instrumental, a “poetry of power,” perhaps, in an aesthetic state.

The history of literary culture in southern Asia for a period of some five centuries beginning a little before 1000, however, shows everywhere a decisive turn away from Sanskrit, whereby it is gradually supplemented by local language and eventually supplanted for most purposes of literary and political communication. The cultural processes at work here are disparate and complex, but most cases seem to have three components in common: Superposed literariness (and its philological appurtenances) is appropriated and localized; the geocultural sphere of literary communication becomes itself a matter of literary representation, something we might call literary territorialization; and vernacular literary production becomes a central concern to royal courts. I want to illustrate these features across a variety of literary cultures, in however summary a manner, in order to demonstrate the reality and cultural-political character of this vernacular transformation.

Kannada, a language found in the present-day South Indian state of Karnataka, is in many ways a paradigmatic case.¹⁰ For about a thousand years until the eighth century, ruling lineages of the region expressed their political will generally in Sanskrit. Only then does Kannada, first literized in the fifth century, begin to be used for the documentary portion of inscriptions; by the thirteenth century, most dynastic inscriptions, including eulogistic texts, are in the vernacular. In the ninth century its first literary texts are produced, some four hundred years after the language is first inscribed (a timelag found almost everywhere). The new literature is profoundly self-conscious; it is concerned above all with what it means to produce literature in Kannada as opposed to Sanskrit, and with the identity of the world for which this literature is produced. “The Way of the King of Poets” (*Kavirājamārgam*), a treatise on vernacular poetics composed at the Raṣṭrakūṭa court around 850, shows this clearly. Adapted from a seventh-century Sanskrit treatise, “The Mirror of Poetry” (*Kāvyādarśa*), “The Way” aims first to constitute Kannada as an epistemological object worthy of analysis by providing it with theory, and, by conducting the discourse in Kannada itself, to make this a language of science

even while establishing it as a language of literature. It also seeks to discipline usage, thereby investing the language with both the stability and the dignity that characterize all literary language in India on the Sanskrit model. Yet another crucial interest is placing literary culture in the world, and constituting the social group above all as participants in that culture by plotting out its specific geocultural sphere:

Between the Kaveri and Godavari rivers is that region (*nāḍu*) of Kannada, a well-known people-area (*janapada*), an illustrious outstanding domain within the circle of the earth. Within this, there is a smaller region between Kisuvolal, the renowned great city of Kopana, Puligere, and Omkunda, where the very essence of Kannada is found. The people of that region are able both to speak in the awareness of what is seemly and to reflect in the awareness of what has been spoken. By nature they are clever and even without deliberate study they are proficient in the usages of literature.¹¹

The entire apparatus of literary knowledge that the text hereby introduces was thus understood to have application in a specific place, and only there; for a specific people, and only them. And in stark contrast to the rootless and placeless cosmopolitan Sanskrit—literally “the refined” or “the grammatically analyzable” or even (resonance from an archaic period) “the sacramental”—place and language have here become fully homonymic (Kannaḍa, or *Karṇāta[ka]* in Sanskritized form), as they will in most of the other vernacular worlds.

A second key text in the production of the Kannada vernacular is the *Vikramārjunavijaya* of Pampa (ca. 950), an adaptation of the Sanskrit epic, the *Mahābhārata*. The localization of a superposed epic tradition is, to be sure, a common step in the elaboration and ennoblement of a regional code; witness Livius Andronicus’s *Odyssey* that inaugurates Latin literature in 240 B.C. The Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, for its part, has inestimable importance for the production of influential forms of both political imagination and an imaginary institution of a transregional world before colonialism—not “India,” and yet some conceptual object extending from Nepal to Assam to the southern peninsula, and thence to Sind, Qandahar, Kashmir.¹² Throughout this

text, perhaps the world's greatest tale of the nature of political power, the subcontinent as a whole and as a limit is projected at every important juncture to be the crucial frame of reference for both the culture that the epic embodies and the political power it so ruthlessly dissects. It is this geographical imagination that Pampa adjusts to his primary narrative project by transforming the capital city of the epic prototype into the capital of his patron King Arikesari II, and making the grand circumambulations of the quarters of the subcontinent, around which the action of the Sanskrit epic is organized, into a circuit of the central Deccan. The political and cultural space of the epic has been reduced to the Kannada world, and with it the vision of how and where political power functions.

Comparable vernacular strategies may be observed throughout the Indian world in the following centuries. To the east of Karnataka in what is today Andhra Pradesh, we know that vernacular intellectuals first experimented with inscribed Telugu in ninth- and tenth-century epigraphs, but the tradition of circulation and reproduction of vernacular texts begins only in the mid-eleventh century.¹³ It is little wonder, given the model available in Kannada, that the first of these texts is Nannaya's adaptation of the *Mahābhārata*, produced at the court of the Veṅgi Cālukyas (ca. 1050), a work composed in accordance with the formal requirements of Sanskrit literature and in a new cosmopolitan idiom that will remain dominant in Telugu for centuries to come. Some generations later a geographical entity called "Andhra" would be described by a court poet to the vassals of the Kākatiya kings (the Godavari delta is "the very heart of the land of Andhra, its seven rivers like seven veins of nectar running from the center of a lotus"), and a contemporary vividly expresses at once to the newness of the vernacular invention, its production of place, and the role of the court when he writes "Earlier, there was poetry in Sanskrit . . . but the Cālukya kings and many others caused poetry to be born in Telugu and to be fixed in place . . . in the Andhra land."¹⁴

A dramatic change in literary culture occurs in the Tamil world under the later Cōlas (sometimes rendered "Cholas," ca. 1000–1200). If the much contested conventional dating is accepted, Tamil saw the production of a written literature in the

Sangam or “Academy” of the early centuries of the common era (subsequently largely lost). Yet the language by which political will expressed itself in Tamil country for most of the first millennium, even in the realm of the Pāndyan kings, legendary site of the Sangam, was Sanskrit. From around 1000, the Cōlas began to inscribe their spectacular political eulogies in Tamil. This development is linked to others in the wider literary sphere. We find a new literary territorialization through a mapping of the “region of pure Tamil” language (*cen-tamīl-nilam*): “To the north of the river Vaikai (on whose banks is situated the city of Maturai), to the south of the river Marutam, to the east of Karuvūr, to the west of Maruvūr.”¹⁵ With the production around the same period of an adaptation of the Sanskrit “Mirror” (*Tantiyalamkāram*), a new grammar based on Sanskrit categories (*Vīracolīyam*), and Kampan’s magnificent version of the Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa*—all courtly productions—a new epoch of Tamil literature commenced, the themes and idiom of which all indicate the localization of the cosmopolitan aesthetic.

In Sri Lanka, despite the fact that documentary Sinhala is literized as early as the second century B.C., and some literary Sinhala graffiti dates from the fifth or sixth century, an innovation in literary culture fully comparable to what we see elsewhere occurs at the end of the millennium as vernacular writers began to select and appropriate formal and thematic features of Sanskrit poetry. Paradigmatic is the “Crest Jewel of Poetry” (*Kaṣṣilumina*, Skt. *Kāvyaçuḍāmaṇi*) of King Parākramabāhu II (ca. 1250), a poem deeply imbued with Sanskrit literary ideals. Here too the Sanskrit “Mirror” was localized under the name “The Ornament of [Our] Own Language” (*Siyabāslakāra*, Skt. *Svabhāṣālamkāra*), and a new grammatical and poetical treatise was composed, “Compendium of Principles” (*Sidatsaṅgarā*, Skt. *Siddhāntasaṃgraha*). It is during this period, too (under Parākramabāhu I, r. 1153–1186), that the island attained something approaching political unification by throwing off subordination to mainland polities, and for the first time literary representations of a newly coherent geocultural space appeared; the

Pūjāvaliya, a twelfth-century poem, provides a detailed description of the island personified as a beautiful woman.¹⁶

The Sanskrit cosmopolitan formation had included a large area of Southeast Asia, where an exemplary instance of vernacularization may be found in Java. In Sanskrit epigraphical records available from the early fifth century on, Javanese never speaks literarily but is restricted for some four centuries to the domain of the documentary. At the beginning of the second millennium, an extraordinary efflorescence of courtly literature, without parallel elsewhere in Southeast Asia for centuries, manifests itself in the emergent polities of eastern Java. This body of texts, especially the *parvvan* (or *wawachan*, Skt. *vacana*) and *kakawin* (Skt. *kāvya*) literature—including versions of the Sanskrit epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*—is comparable in every way to the vernacular compositions of the same period in South Asia, in respect to form (complex Sanskrit metrics), language (a highly Sanskritized register of Javanese), localized representations of political power, and geocultural expositions.¹⁷

The shift in the choice of codes for making literary and political texts that began in South India, Sri Lanka, and Java around 900 and reached maturity by 1200 occurred in northern India at a somewhat later date and under conditions of political change different from what obtained in the south. It remains disputed just what the rise of new ruler lineages in the north, the Delhi Sultanate and its successors from the fourteenth century, meant to the breakup of the Sanskrit cosmopolis. We do know that vernacularization here is, in the first instance, the work of Muslim intellectuals associated with these lineages.¹⁸ But soon non-Muslim courts are vernacularized as well. In fifteenth-century Gwalior under the Tomar dynasty, for example, Braj gradually came to be used as a language of state (though political eulogy in the vernacular nowhere becomes common in northern India), and for the first time literary texts were produced that attempted to recreate the cosmopolitan idiom of Sanskrit in that language. In Viṣṇudās's *Mahābhārata* of 1435 (and in his *Rāmāyaṇakathā*), old subject matter is redeployed in a way relevant to the concerns of contemporary Gwalior, with respect to their culture and its relationship to the

past, their present political circumstances, and, not least, their relationship to a new literary code.¹⁹

It would be possible to chart comparable literary-cultural changes in most of the rest of southern Asia over the following centuries. For Gujarati, for example, we begin to find texts that constitute the language as a literary vernacular by the end of the twelfth century; for Assamese by the fourteenth; for Oriya and Malayalam by the fifteenth. In almost all cases courtly literati were centrally involved in their production.

By appropriating Sanskrit models for inscriptional and literary expressivity, remapping epic space, invoking new sociotextual communities that would inhabit the new vernacular places and (re)produce themselves by reading/hearing those new vernacular texts, courtly intellectuals in southern Asia at the start of the second millennium created a wholly new kind of cultural formation. Although the cosmopolitan code of Sanskrit is not eliminated, anymore than Latin was eliminated in vernacular Europe, its significance in the literary sphere and in the articulation of the political dramatically decreased. All this we can see, measure, and know. What is far more difficult to make sense of—in any given case, let alone for the vastly varied world of late medieval South Asia—are the political and social meanings of these cultural transformations.

FROM IMPERIAL TO VERNACULAR POLITY

The forms of polity that appear in later medieval India, with which the vernacular transformation may be correlated, take on clearer definition against the background of the earlier political world of South Asia. What characterizes much of that world for almost a thousand years—from the middle of the fourth century B.C., when political history takes on a sharper image with the Mauryas, to about the fourth century in the south and perhaps as late as the ninth century in the north—is the existence, or at least purposeful representation of the existence, of large-scale imperial polities. I say “imperial” even though empire is everywhere notoriously resistant to coherent definition, while our understanding of exactly how these political formations worked in early India remains very imperfect.²⁰ There is little reason to

believe, for example, that anything comparable to the Roman empire ever existed in India, with its bureaucrats and military apparatus spread over vast territory and exercising control over everything from garrisons to standardized weights and measures. And at times one does suspect that in attempting to map the territorial expansiveness that to some extent must define empire, we may only be mapping an illusion of historians pressed with inventing classifications for India's political past.²¹

Yet there is also little doubt that the universalistic polity was a dominant ideal in early India. Among a number of ruling lineages, including the Mauryas (320–150 B.C.), the Kuṣāṇa/Śaka (Indo-Scythians) (150–300), the Śātavāhanas (225 B.C.– A.D. 250), the Guptas (320–550) and their various successor political formations in the north (especially that of the Gurjara-Pratihāra, ca. 750–950), and, in Southeast Asia, the Khmer of Angkor (900–1300), the exaction of tribute, the command of military resources, the formation of matrimonial alliances, the enactment of political ceremonies and symbolic practices (temple building, the establishing of victory pillars) so as to mark a sphere of influence—all this could be exercised limitlessly, without regard for ecological, cultural, or any other boundary. In other words, *rājyam* or imperium, as we may discern it up to about the middle of the first millennium, strove for, and in some practices seems to have achieved, translocal spread.

In contrast to the history of change in literary and political language that we can trace with some certitude, the history of change in the structure of polity in India for the millennium between the disappearance of the last empires and the colonial encounter (the history of the Mughals excepted) remains obscure.²² Two dominant models, one the feudal and the other the so-called segmentary, give radically different accounts of the political and moral economy of the period. They agree, however, that the state is rather hard to find. In the latter model it consists of hierarchically parcellated authority with ritual hegemony at the center, and in the former it withers away under vast transfers of wealth to a feudal nobility. Whatever the model, scholars seem primarily concerned with how much “central coercion” and “incorporation” may be said to have existed. In terms of practices of power, the state may be defined as the agency that

embodies the capacity to raid and loot; to build capital cities and sometimes temples; to gift land to Brahman, Jain, and other communities and to endow religious institutions; to grant revenue income to loyal military men and to extract taxes; to attempt to perpetuate these practices in the transfer of power; and to enshrine the fame of the patriline and patronize poets to do so. Most of these practices show substantial continuity over a long term, though in any given instance the whole assemblage (the “state”) seems to have been a pretty fragile affair. As for its cultural dimension (despite what we saw was the central role of the royal court in the great vernacular transformation), it is notable for its absence from the scholarly literature; an important recent survey mentions culture just once.²³ If analysis of middle-period polity is only beginning, analysis of polity in relationship to culture can hardly be said to have begun.

Given the conceptual disarray, it is difficult to speak confidently about change in the medieval political order. In the domain of the geopolitical, however, one may detect a new development beginning around the start of the second millennium that, if not a mere artifact of the kind of sources we have, would be of major significance: the forsaking of the universalistic model of imperium coupled with a new political regionalization (in some areas perhaps accompanied by greater centralization through conquest and bureaucratization of the older core area). The image of “(limited) universal sovereignty” inherited from the imperial world may have survived in some sense and even been actualized through periodic looting adventures to distant lands, but lasting dominion no longer was sought beyond the enlarged core. While political power usually remained distributed among local ruling lineages, in some ways it appears that the expanded central zone attained a kind of fit with the then-crystallizing literary language areas. A good example of this process is found in Tamil country under the Cōḷas.

In one of his most suggestive essays the late Burton Stein examined the production of regionality in the premodern Tamil world.²⁴ Stein also perceives that new regions (“cultural subregions”) had become identifiable by the twelfth century, though he nowhere addresses the macrohistorical questions raised by this newly visible division of political and cultural space. Yet his

observations on the mechanisms by which it was produced in Tamil land, even thus limited, have wider pertinence. Stein distinguishes between “circulatory” (or functional) and “cognitive” (or formal) regions, the former constituted by the actual movement of people through space, the latter produced through linguistic criteria and the representation of place in textual remains. Before the twelfth century, these two regions of *Tamilakam* did not coincide. Under the Cōla overlords, however, circulatory space attained a certain isomorphism with cognitive region, a closer fit “between the conception of a Tamilakam covering a substantial part of peninsular India and the actual movement of quite ordinary people within that larger, cognitive region.” The most significant cultural component of this circulatory world was not the armed force of the state or its political administrators but the cosmopolitan-vernacular literary texts of Cōla dynastic inscriptions in the Tamil language that these two groups disseminated about the region. Such texts both articulated in their representations and produced by their actual diffusion a cultural-political space, the “actual and deliberate demarcations of the region of [Cōla] overlordship” that constituted “a macroregion of distinctive and homogeneous cultural quality.”

Stein’s account (corroborated by the history of Tamil literary culture described above) flags key features of the cultural-political transformation that South Asia witnessed in late mediocrity. These include three noted above that are present in virtually every case of literary vernacularization: the new definition of culture-space, the importance of superposed models for local-language literary creation, and the interest of the court in the production of vernacularity. What causal factors account for all this, and why this all happened when it did Stein does not tell us, and twenty years later we are not much closer to knowing.²⁵ Any cogent hypothesis would need to reach conceptual clarity about the causal relationship between cognitive region (and the language practices that constitute it) and circulatory (political) practice—in other words, about what kind of relation literary vernacularization can bear to the creation of vernacular polity.

The decision among courtly literati to abandon the global language of Sanskrit and speak locally in their literary and

political texts inaugurates a determinate literary-cultural dynamic. Vernacular language choice, within the context of Sanskrit cultural norms and activities, entails a commitment to a range of disciplinary language practices (grammaticization, for example) and technologies for reproduction (especially writing) that ensure the unification, standardization, and above all differentiation of the vernacular code. Whereas in “real life” there may be not languages but only language-continua—where “Kannada” imperceptibly merges into “Telugu” (like “French” into “Italian”), so that in fact Kannada and Telugu (and French and Italian) should not even be regarded as pregiven points on a spectrum—an important effect of literary vernacularization is to divide that continuum. The language boundedness that results has a logic akin to the logic of spatial boundedness, though each has its specific instrumentalities. The former (pertaining to Stein’s conceptual domain) deploys grammars, dictionaries, and literary texts to discipline and purify, but above all to *define*. In the same way, related cultural-political practices such as the distribution of royal inscriptions (in Stein’s circulatory domain) divide homogeneous space. The unification of vernacular language not only partakes of the logic of the unification of a new type of political place, but is historically copresent with it.

The divisions of linguistic continua and homogeneous space into vernacular languages and heterogeneous places accordingly represent a cultural act, not a natural fact. They are not givens—yet they are not, for all that, unreal. The dichotomy some draw between the natural and the social in theorizing regionality is thus too reductive to accommodate materials such as these.²⁶ The production of vernacular places is at once a social, historically contingent phenomenon and one not constituted solely by representation. In late medieval southern Asia such places are brought into existence by the literary-language practices of vernacular intellectuals and corroborated by the inscriptional-material practices—textual signs of material transactions such as land gifting—of ruling lineages. Thus the distribution pattern of Kannada inscriptions issued by Kannada-speaking Cālukyas (ca. 1000–1200) or of Marathi inscriptions by the Marathi-speaking Yādavas (ca. 1100–1300)²⁷ signifies not so much accommoda-

tion to natural language areas as the continuing reproduction of a division of vernacular locations that these real practices themselves had recently created.

Such language-, literary-, and culture-areas, undoubtedly hazy in thirteenth-century Tamilakam and everywhere else, nonetheless had begun to constitute something like a limit of political practice there and elsewhere. Unlike the ancient Śātavāhanas, the western Cāḷukyas of the twelfth century did not seek overlordship deep into Telugu- or Tamil-speaking areas; on the contrary, the political domain of the Cāḷukyas came to approximate the culture-region as described in the principal Kannada literary texts discussed above.²⁸ In the same epoch, the Solankis of Gujarat, or the Yādavas of Maharashtra, unlike the imperial Indo-Scythians, did not extend their power outside the newly emerging Gujarati or Marathi vernacular zones. The Gajapati domain to the east (ca. 1100–1500), unlike that of Kharavela of a thousand years earlier, seems to have grown increasingly symmetrical with the domain of Oriya. Somewhere in this newly regionalized, unmapped mapping seems to lie a readjustment of the vision of political dominion; what we now find are best designated not imperial but vernacular polities.²⁹

Yet if language and place were becoming mutually constitutive through the representations and circulation of vernacular texts—our first two key factors—the third factor, the role of the court, rarely finds direct articulation. None of our texts, however courtly in origin, shows explicit concern with the political coherence of the cultural locales they create. In the case of Kannada, for example, despite the growing symmetry between conceptual realm and Rāṣṭrakūṭa/Cāḷukya overlordship under which many of these very texts were produced, no Kannada literary or documentary text articulates anything like a Kannada political enterprise; the political as an overt territorial project is unspoken.

Something important about this paradox—the presence of a geocultural discourse in the absence of a geopolitical one—may be captured by an etymological exercise. In Kannada, the term *nāḍu*, “area” or “locale,” which plays an important role in the construction of a vernacular polity in the Kannada-speaking Deccan, is antonym to *kāḍu*, uncultivated forest. The operative

metaphor involved in the concept accordingly evokes human labor and (agri)cultural transformation, and the place of the social world is thus counterposed to the space of the natural world. When Pampa claims for himself the title “teacher of the *nāḍu*” by his literary achievement, he has in mind a cultural as much as a political place, a regional world that one teaches as well as rules and that exists as much through literary circulation as through dominion.³⁰ In the semantics of political place in Latinate Europe, by contrast, “*regio*” bespeaks a religious act of the *rex* that produces what it decrees.³¹ The power to turn space into place is thus embodied in radically different forms of social agency in the two worlds. South Asian kings are clearly interested in vernacular places, but it is the poet who creates them.

This is the first of what we shall see to be a number of Euro-Indian incommensurabilities. And it is important to explore these in order to grasp that while the morphology of the vernacular millennium as a cultural phenomenon may be everywhere comparable, its significations as a phenomenon of power may differ in fundamental ways.

EUROPE VERNACULARIZED

The vernacularization of Europe in relation to political processes appears to be an astonishingly understudied question. In 1992, the editor of the new *Oxford History of Medieval Europe*, while rightly noting that a major factor in “the new diversity” that marked the late Middle Ages was “the exploitation of a variety of languages in important writings,” confessed to be at a loss to explain the development: the origins of the vernacular turn are as “mysterious” as its results are “obvious and spectacular.”³² Thus, too, M. T. Clanchy says: “[So] much remains speculative about the beginnings of writing down vernacular languages in Europe . . . why a growing number of patrons and writers in the twelfth century [in England] ceased to be satisfied with Latin as the medium of writing and experimented with ‘Romance’ and ‘French’ instead.”³³ There does not even seem to be agreement on who did what to whom. We are left to follow our party sympathies when trying to adjudicate

among Gramsci, who held that vernacularization came from the national-popular below rising up against a Latinizing “mandarinism” (the vernaculars are “written down when the people regain importance”), E. R. Curtius, who was convinced it came from re-Latinized elites above (without whose contribution the vernacular literatures become “incomprehensible”), and centrists for whom agency disappears altogether; people do not actively choose culture, and the vernaculars just “emerge.” The whole question remains mysterious and speculative in part because vernacularization is rarely studied as a social or political phenomenon. Even the most sustained historical sociology of courtly culture and the civilizing process, that of Norbert Elias, almost totally ignores language and literature.³⁴

The breakup of the Latin cosmopolitan world, the regionalization of cultural-political production in western Europe during the eleventh to fourteenth centuries, the structural linguistic differences, and even asynchrony of north-south vernacularization (in crude language-family terms, Germanic Europe and Dravidian India contrasting with Romance Europe and Indo-Aryan India both in the pace and nature of their vernacularizing processes) constitute a historical transformation strikingly similar to what happens in medieval southern Asia.³⁵ Elsewhere I hope to spell these parallels out in greater detail, rethink the political processes involved, and assess the various explanations scholars have offered for these events. An initial pass through the material suggests considerable disagreement and imprecision. One scholar has recently argued, for example, that King Alfred and his successors (ninth-tenth centuries) established a new vernacular and bilingual *grammatica*, “in which an English and Anglo-Latin literary culture were tied to national identity and ideology.”³⁶ Most students of national identity would find this claim hopelessly anachronistic. At the other end of the geographical and historical spectrum, texts like Dante’s *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and *De Monarchia* (early fourteenth century) have elicited strongly divergent interpretations. A political scientist argues that the two tracts—and thus implicitly, the very relationship of culture and power—represent parallel and nonintersecting concerns for Dante, whereas a literary historian insists that Dante’s political, linguistic, and

aesthetic theories are thoroughly intertwined and grounded in “national” thought of a decidedly modernist cast.³⁷

Clearly, much remains to be sorted out, but what I understand at present of the politics and sociology of European and Indian vernacularization suggests that, however similar the actual processes appear to be, their conceptual foundations, social uses, and thus meanings differ sharply, especially when viewed in conjunction with larger political and social trends. I want to review a few of these differences here, starting at a rather abstract level.

Late-medieval Europe and India differ profoundly on the question of language multiplicity. In the former, multilinguality is tainted with the guilt of diversity: Babel marks an original sin, and European cultural politics in early modernity can arguably be interpreted, at the level of language, as a project of reduction and hence purification.³⁸ India, by contrast—though it knew forms of will-to-power in the realm of language and even narratives of language decay—never mythologized the need to purify, let alone sought to purify, original sins of diversity through a program of eradication. Diversity was not a punishment, multilinguality was not a sin that needed to be expiated, and though in practice it led to a diminution of multilingual capacities, vernacularization was never conceptually opposed to them.

There seems to be in early modern Europe what may be formulated as an overdetermination of literary vernacularization by religious vernacularization. This can be seen throughout the history of the vernacular turn, from the very beginning (the West-Frankish *Sequence of St. Eulalie* 881; indeed, most literature preserved to the end of the eleventh century is religious poetry, much of it translated from the Latin) to the high-water mark, Luther’s Bible. This is evidence of an important confluence of communicative, social, and religious factors, including the growing decay of Latin competence, the desire for easier access to religious knowledge and for simplifying religious practices, and the assertions of religious individuality on the part of European rulers.

Here, too, India looks different. Sanskrit communicative competence remained largely undiminished in South Asia (including

the north, where vernacular writers typically received serious Sanskrit education). The most important Sanskrit holy texts remained untranslated during the vernacular revolution. Instead, vernacular writings themselves became new scriptures, such as Śaiva “sayings” (*vacana*) in Kannada, hagiographies in Marathi, *tantras* in Javanese, and even a Tamil Veda in the *Tirumurai*. The earliest literary production in many vernaculars was in any case more concerned with the terrestrial than the transcendent (Pampa himself makes the distinction, *laukika*, “this-worldly,” versus *āgamika*, “scriptural,” and labels his *Bhārata* the former). And although I cannot illustrate the fact here, religious pluralism rather than individualism is characteristic of medieval rulership. The European principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*, where “each local ruler dictated the religious denomination of his own territory,” is off the South Asian conceptual map.³⁹ Forms of religious identity may have grown increasingly regionalized during this period (as in the new pilgrimage circuits in thirteenth-century Maharashtra), but the nature of the polity as such seems unaffected by such developments. Governance and religion, in the most important late-medieval meanings of the latter term, were more thoroughly divorced than is usually recognized.⁴⁰

When literary vernacularization is fully engaged in western Europe in the late medieval period, an invariable concomitant seems to be the production of what one author has called “origin paradigms.” These were meant to provide other literary cultures with conceptual bases comparable to what fourteenth-century Italy envisioned as the renewal of Roman power. We have no synthetic account of such national-literary origin mythologemes, but what one finds in Iberia (speculations on the Greek sources of the Spanish language), France (on the Celtic-Gallic or Germanic-Frankish sources of French), and England (on the Celtic-British sources of English) indicates that some kind of important “cultural-political mechanism” was widely in operation.⁴¹ What this suggests, too, is a broad concern with origins, purity of descent, and exclusion of mixture, as well as a sense of historical necessity and a growing conception of peoples as the subject of history.

The concerns of vernacular intellectuals in India are totally other. Nowhere in the manifold data on language, identity, and polity for precolonial South Asia does anything like ethnicity—which for purposes of this discussion we may define as the politicization of group sentiment—seem to find clear expression. Participation in a literary culture was not participation in a religious group of narrow construction or an ancestral group of biological necessity. There never was in South Asia a linkage of “blood” and “tongue” as already in medieval Europe⁴²—even the concept “mother tongue” is unknown—and cultures were not closed systems. Choice of literary language was not the result of personal destiny; speakers of Konkani could choose Kannada, as speakers of Malayalam chose Sinhala. Nor at any time before the postcolonial era can we observe the production of what has been called fictive ethnicity, where “the frontiers of kinship dissolve” and a new “circle of extended kinship” comprising “the people” comes into existence.⁴³ Indian vernacular cultures demonstrate little concern for the Herderian “uniqueness” over which national cultures of the present obsess. On the contrary, all strive for a kind of equivalence by their approximation to Sanskrit cosmopolitanism. The vernacular turn was not a quest for authenticity, nor was it informed by any kind of vision, historicist or other, of tribal unity. There is in fact hardly any propagation of shared memories or common descent.

A final and crucial feature of European vernacularization, perhaps related to the highly marked status of linguistic diversity, is a linkage of *ethnos-imperium-language*. Whatever its original meanings may have been, the threat that Jeremiah’s God makes to the Hebrews, “I shall impose upon you a people whose language you shall not know,” becomes for the early fourteenth-century councilor of Charles V of France, Nicole Oresme, a proof-text for rejecting transnational imperial government: “And that is therefore something as contrary to nature as if a man should rule over a people who do not understand his mother tongue.”⁴⁴ It is but a step from this to the ordinances of Villers-Cotterêts issued by François I in 1539 requiring the use of “*langage maternel françois*” in all judicial and administrative proceedings.

The kind of ideational conjuncture presented by Oresme, famously echoed in the next century by Lorenzo de' Medici for Tuscan and Antonio de Nebrija for Castilian, has never been directly expressed in any Indian text before modernity. The newly regionalized world of South Asia shows vernacularity but without, it seems, "vernacular mobilization," in Anthony D. Smith's idiom. And yet, while it may be that the modern nation turns compatriots "into co-nationals through a process of mobilization into the vernacular culture" (for "only then can the old-new culture become a political base" for the political and cultural competition of modernity), we have no obvious reason to accept—certainly not for Europe but perhaps not even for India, where power was clearly concerned with culture—the correlate of Smith's argument, that the old culture of nonmodernity "had no other end beyond itself."⁴⁵

THE END OF THE VERNACULAR MILLENNIUM
AND THE START OF ANALYSIS

At every turn in this inquiry we encounter in South Asia transformations in culture similar to those of early European modernity but that relate to power in ways less easily equated. To understand literary vernacularization in Europe from the fourteenth century onward—the vernacularization that helped make early modern Europe modern—as the nationalization of literature may be a teleological view, but it is not unreasonable given the conjuncture of factors noticed above. But what are we to do with vernacularization where the telos is absent and the national symmetry of state and culture never emerged in the instrumentalized, rationalized way it did in European modernity? How, in other words, can we understand the South Asian vernacular turn as a problem of both culture and power outside of a national narrative?

These are hard problems, which scholars of Asia prefer to avoid, concentrating instead on the apparently more consequential, and certainly more manageable, interactions of Asian polities with European colonial regimes. At any rate, it is assumed that the transformations in polity, sociality, and cultural consciousness generated by colonialism are the ones that really

count in the making of Indian modernity; to study the precolonial is to engage in counterfactual scholasticism.

In addition to this, most scholars of vernacularization, looking through a lens crafted in Europe, have treated it as a nineteenth-century phenomenon. This is the case with the two most influential theories of the production of vernacular formations in the past decade, Ernest Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism* and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*.⁴⁶ However they may diverge on other matters, both highlight cultural-cognitive processes based on language, especially standardized literary language, in the production of nation-consciousness. Neither account, however, has anything of substance to say about the historicity of these literary languages in the first place; yet it is precisely on a secure determination of this matter that much of the validity of the two theories rests.

Gellner's theory of modern nationalism rests on the shifting boundaries of literary and nonliterary cultures. In agrarian societies, we are told, a wide gap is opened up by the fact that rulers participated in high literary cultures typically larger than any polity, while the ruled participated in low nonliterary cultures that were typically smaller. The former are based on transethnic and transpolitical idioms (Latin, Arabic, etc.); the latter, by contrast, are unwritten and "invisible." The conclusions Gellner draws from all this for a theory of the nation are major: "[P]erhaps the central, most important fact about agro-literate society is this: almost everything in it militates against the definition of political units in terms of cultural boundaries. . . . One might put it this way: of the two potential partners, culture and power, destined for each other according to nationalist theory, neither has much inclination for the other in the conditions prevailing in the agrarian age."⁴⁷ All this changes in industrialized societies, where the demand for an educated workforce requires a standard literary language, produced either by the generalization of high literary culture or, more often, by the elevation (i.e., literary vernacularization) of the low. It is the state that creates this culture, and thereby the coincidence of the units of power and culture—nationalism—is produced.

A long vernacular millennium is not easily accommodated in this neat model.⁴⁸ The simple dichotomy between transregional

ecumene and invisible local vernacular before modernity that forms the bedrock of his thesis crumbles when we realize that unified vernacular literary cultures were produced in the course of the first half of the second millennium from within the heart of Eurasian “agro-literate” societies themselves. On the one occasion Gellner alludes to the actual history of literary cultures in Europe, he asks what might have happened had industrialization begun “during the High Middle Ages, before the development of vernacular literatures and the emergence of what was eventually destined to become the basis of the various national high cultures.” But it was precisely in the High Middle Ages that many European vernaculars reached maturity, and thus well before the industrialization that he takes to be their causal condition (and well before the print-capitalism that Anderson believes first served to “‘assemble’ related vernaculars” into unitary and codified literary languages). These considerations make it hard to agree that “No-one, or almost no-one, has an interest in promoting cultural homogeneity” in preindustrial society or that we should consider it “absurd” to find local culture linked with a political principal before modernity.⁴⁹

By questioning these models I am not suggesting that all vernacularizations exhibit the “desperate concerns” that Gellner sees in nineteenth-century Europe, or that they should be interpreted as “national”-cultural processes. “National” (not to speak of “nationalism”) refers to that specific set of European practices for which the term was invented, and which through colonialism came to be exported to the rest of the world.⁵⁰ We are still obliged, however, to put under scrutiny the causal models developed to explain that nationalism. As I see it, the historical logic of two of the most influential theories of the nation are confounded not only by what happened elsewhere in the world but in their own domain, and fail to help us understand—perhaps impede us from even seeing—what did happen, let alone understanding the ways this linkage may have varied throughout Eurasia, and the implications of such variation—the other possible “ends” of culture beyond itself—for a coherent social theory of the non-European. Moreover, the functionalism embedded in these models and a more subtle teleology work to rule out, *a priori*, any alternative social-theoretical possibilities.

To seek to understand the culture-power relation over the long term, accordingly, is to try to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. In order grasp the non-European, non-“modern,” nonnational, we are required to set aside the conceptual objects and apparatus constituted by European modernity and nationalism without having anything to put in their place. The critique of Orientalism and of historical knowledge in their strong forms also purports to make the precolonial past, and the past as such, unknowable in any veridical sense. And anyway, that past—the very discourse of vernacular origins—has already been polluted by the politics of cultural identity in much of the world, contemporary India included. All that most scholars are prepared to say about those forms of cultural expression and representation produced in middle-period Asia—call them primary forms—is that they have provided the raw conceptual materials and resources for derivative (colonized and, later, modernized) thinking about political sovereignty and collective identities: cultural-nationalist movements such as the DMK (or “Dravidian Advancement Movement”) in Tamil Nadu, or the forces of “linguism” that brought about the reorganization of regions into linguistic states in India in the 1950s.

Strong as these objections are, none is fatal to a reconstructive historical project, so long as they are built into it. That we can make veridical statements about the colonial past and about Orientalism itself implies both a more generalizable possibility of historical truth and some kind of access to knowledge of what Orientalism falsely imagined. We can also chart the ways in which derivative representations have reworked primary ones. And a serious commitment to historical-anthropological reflexivity can help neutralize epistemological determinism. Far more paralyzing than all this is also something simpler: the absence of deep empirical scholarship about the core questions of the development of polity in relation to culture. This is the vexatious legacy of a set of disciplinary practices that for too long rendered the humanities indifferent to the social world, and the social sciences indifferent to the world of the aesthetic and expressive. It is this deficiency that makes any statement about the matter essentially guesswork at present.

In the first half of the second millennium in many parts of Eurasia we can perceive a transformation in the literary-cultural domain unprecedented in its novelty and scope. Whereas some traits seem to be widely shared—there is clearly a new prestige in going vernacular as there had previously been in going cosmopolitan, and an imitative quality informs the entire historical development (to every regionalized world its own *Mahābhārata*)—no unified theory may account for the manifold relations to the social and political domains in which this transformation took place. In the Kannada world, vernacularization was unquestionably a project both supported and directed by ruling elites, who simultaneously with the vernacular turn began to circumscribe their aspirations to transregional overlordship. The polity took on increasingly regionalized traits that seem congruent with the vernacular project. Yet the linkage between political and cultural transformation may not be easily homologized with what we find in, say, sixteenth-century France or Spain. Exclusivist, originary, ethnicist ideologies never arose in Karnataka before colonialism (even in modern Karnataka cultural nationalism is conspicuous by its absence). Nor did any Kannada writer, even while mounting so similar a defense and illustration of cosmopolitan vernacularism, ever aim at du Bellay's goal (a decade after Villers-Cotterêts) of producing a "Gallic Hercules" who would "draw the nations after him by their ears with a chain attached to his tongue."⁵¹ This does not mean of course that all questions of power are absent the production of Kannada cultural difference—and it is difference that vernacularization produces, at the level of language, literature, and geoculture—for why create difference at all except within a field of power? It is only to say that at present we have neither an adequate account of the histories of vernacularization nor a theory of the culture-power relation open enough to the nonmodern to address these questions.

Yet these are questions, I would stress in concluding, that are worth pursuing. The age of vernacularity that commenced at the beginning of the millennium is ending at its close. Capitalist globalization—a form of transregional cultural change far more powerful and coercive than what marked the age of empires

and civilizations—along with “fading states” and the emergence of new transnational political entities testify to this. The vernacular literary cultures that were the visible signs and substance of the great transition are everywhere disintegrating; an epoch of “postliteracy,” as some name it, has begun, “where national languages take on the status of dead languages” and “make their appearance in the postmodern space only because they are out of work.” Indian writers in English thus proclaim a new cosmopolitanism, and go so far as to declare, despite a vernacular millennium of literary production, that their “Indo-Anglian” literature constitutes “perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books.” And last, the territorialization of culture that began with vernacularization is being re-placed, literally, by cultures that will not stay in place, by “areas on the move” through migrations and diasporas; the cultures and peoples created during the vernacular epoch may persist, but it is no longer easy to find them as points on a map.⁵²

It is precisely its imminent end—the dusk of Diana’s owl—that enables us to grasp the fact that the vernacular millennium once began. And if we have a better sense of how it began, and a more discriminating account of its very different paths of development in different worlds, we may have a better understanding of why it is ending and where we may be headed, of what choices people made or did not make in the past and what may be available in the future. For if Wallerstein is right to predict that “the decline of the West, the decline of the American empire, the decline of capitalism” may offer the possibility “of creating a new and better historical system, provided we judge well,” then he may also be right that “studying the operations of past historical systems without the distorting lens of linear universalism may well be an essential element in the struggle.”⁵³

ENDNOTES

¹“Regional worlds” is a phrase adopted from the Ford Foundation post-area-studies project designed by Arjun Appadurai in collaboration with Steven Collins and myself (1996).

- ²See Richard G. Fox, ed., *Realm and Region in Traditional India* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University, Program in Comparative Studies on Southern Asia, 1977), ix–xix. The question remains vital (“Orientalist” replacing “imperialist”) in studies of early Southeast Asia; cf. Craig J. Reynolds, “A New Look at Old Southeast Asia,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 54 (2) (1995): 429.
- ³See, for example, Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993); Sudipta Kaviraj, “The Imaginary Institution of India,” in Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey, eds., *Subaltern Studies VII* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- ⁴Compare Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1978), 212–301.
- ⁵Clifford Geertz, “The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States,” in Clifford Geertz, ed., *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1963), 105–157. An anthropological critique that complements my historicist one is offered in Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 146–147.
- ⁶I mean something like the process of imagining in Benedict Anderson’s imagined community, one only intensified by print-capitalism and by no means created by it.
- ⁷See O. W. Wolters, *Two Essays on Dai-Viet in the Fourteenth Century* (New Haven, Conn.: Council on Southeast Asia Studies, 1988), 27, vii, 31–32, and Nguyen The Anh, “Le Vietnam,” in P. B. Lafont, ed., *Initiation à la péninsule indochinoise* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1996), 113–139. The arguments in Victor H. Mair, “Buddhism and the Rise of the Written Vernacular in East Asia,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 53 (1994): 707–751, especially 722, do not hold for either Vietnam or other realms in southern Asia.
- ⁸See my essay, “The Sanskrit Cosmopolis, 300–1300,” in Jan E. M. Houben, ed., *The Ideology and Status of Sanskrit* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 197–247, especially 201–217.
- ⁹Sanskrit’s equally cosmopolitan cousins, Māhārāṣṭrī Prakrit and Apabhraṃśa, were also used, but restrictedly and (after A.D. 300) never for political texts.
- ¹⁰For detail on Kannada vernacularization see my article “The Cosmopolitan Vernacular,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 57 (1) (1998): 19–28.
- ¹¹*Kavirājamārgam* 1. 36–38.
- ¹²Compare Pollock, “The Cosmopolitan Vernacular,” 15–16.
- ¹³On the early use of Telugu, see S. Nagaraju, “Emergence of Regional Identity and Beginnings of Vernacular Literature: A Case Study of Telugu,” in Sheldon Pollock, ed., “Literary History, Region, and Nation in South Asia,” *Social Scientist* 23 (1995): 8–23.
- ¹⁴The citations are from *Bhīmakhaṇḍamu* of Śrīnātha, and Nannecōḍuḍḍu’s *Kumārasambhavamū*. I thank V. Narayana Rao for these references, and him and David Shulman for their translations.

- ¹⁵From Ḥampūraṇar's commentary on the *Tolkāppiyam*; later commentators, as noted by Zvelebil (whose translation I cite here), extend the area. See Kamil Zvelebil, *Companion Studies to the History of Tamil Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 136.
- ¹⁶Charles Hallisey, "Sinhala Literary Culture in History" (unpublished manuscript).
- ¹⁷On *kakawin* see P. J. Zoetmulder, *Kalangwan: A Survey of Old Javanese Literature* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff), 1974, and on political allegory, S. O. Robson, "Kakawin Reconsidered," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 139 (1983): 291–319. See also Robson's translation of the fourteenth-century *Desawarnana* ("Description of the Place") by Mpu Prapañca (Leiden: KITLV, 1995).
- ¹⁸These include the Sufis Baba Farid (d. 1266) and Daud of Jaunpur (fl. 1379). On the first see Christopher Shackle, "Early Vernacular Poetry in the Indus Valley," in Anna Libera Dallapiccola and Stephanie Zingel-Avé Lallemand, eds., *Islam and Indian Regions*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1993), 259–289.
- ¹⁹The characterization is that of R. S. McGregor "Viṣṇudās (A.D. 15c) and his Rāmāyaṇa-kathā" (unpublished manuscript).
- ²⁰See, for example, Gérard Fussman, "Pouvoir central et régions dans l'Inde ancienne," *Annales ESC* (4) (1982): 621–647.
- ²¹Fox, *Realm and Region in Traditional India*, xxiii.
- ²²Hermann Kulke, ed., *The State in India: 1000–1700* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995) summarizes current debates and illustrates the conceptual disunity.
- ²³*Ibid.*, 262.
- ²⁴Burton Stein, "Circulation and the Historical Geography of Tamil Country," *Journal of Asian Studies* 37 (1) (1977): 7–26.
- ²⁵Eurasia-wide migrations of nomadic pastoralists during the period may have some bearing on these questions, but the linkage awaits clarification. See J. H. Bentley, "Cross-Cultural Interaction and Periodization in World History," *American Historical Review* 101 (3) (1996): 766–768; Jos Gommans, "The Eurasian Frontier After the First Millennium A.D.," *The Medieval History Journal* 1 (1) (1998): 125–143.
- ²⁶Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 221.
- ²⁷Compare the find-spot map in S. G. Tulpule, *Prācīna Marāṭhi Korīva Lekha* (Pune: Pune Vidyapith Prakashan, 1963), 47.
- ²⁸B. R. Gopal, *The Chalukyas of Kalyana and the Kalachuris* (Dharwad: Karnatak University Press, 1981), 386.
- ²⁹Contrast Kulke, *The State in India*, 242–262. The imperial ideal did not suddenly vanish, anymore than in post-Ottonian Europe, but faded slowly away with intermittent attempts at re-actualization.
- ³⁰Pampa makes this claim in *Vikramārjunavijaya* 14.62.

- ³¹Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 221.
- ³²George Holmes, ed., *The Oxford History of Medieval Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 327–328.
- ³³M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 218. On the crucial role of the court see David Howlett, *The English Origins of Old French Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), 165–166.
- ³⁴Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 188, 168. (Similar if more learned is Erich Auerbach's view of the vernaculars struggling for emancipation from the tyranny of Latin; see his *Literary Language and its Public in Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965].) Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), viii, 383–388 (compare the epilogue by Peter Godman, 650–651). The “emergence” of the vernaculars is found in Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization, and Cultural Change, 950–1350* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 198. Corrections are offered in P. O. Kristeller, “The Origin and Development of the Language of Italian Prose,” in *Renaissance Thought*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 122.
- ³⁵Except for the locale of vernacular theorization. This is expected where linguistic difference from the cosmopolitan code is greatest (as in South India); Europe is anomalous here. See Karl-Otto Apel, *Die Idee der Sprache in der Tradition des Humanismus von Dante bis Vico*, 3d ed. (Bonn: Bouvier, 1980), 104.
- ³⁶Martin Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture: “Grammatica” and Literary Theory, 350–1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 14, 415.
- ³⁷See, respectively, John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, 2d ed. (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 4, and Klaus Garber, ed., *Nation und Literatur im Europa der frühen Neuzeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1989), 12–13.
- ³⁸For the Jacobin Abbé Gregoire, for example, France in 1794 was “at the Tower of Babel” and the new “truth” demanded a common language and “eradication of dialects.” Compare R. D. Grillo, *Dominant Languages: Language and Hierarchy in Britain and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 24.
- ³⁹Hagen Schulze, *States, Nations and Nationalism: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 130.
- ⁴⁰The common view that finds “no question of a ‘divorce’ of religion and politics” in early India (André Wink, *Land and Sovereignty in India: Agrarian Society and Politics under the Eighteenth-century Maratha svarajya* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986], 16–17) exaggerates the importance of Brahmanical theory and mistakes that theory for what counted as “religion” in the four or five centuries before colonialism.
- ⁴¹Garber, *Nation und Literatur im Europa der frühen Neuzeit*, 36.

- ⁴²Schulze, *States, Nations and Nationalism*, 108.
- ⁴³Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 1992), 86–105. Presumably caste endogamy inhibited such integrative ethnicity at any level that really counted.
- ⁴⁴Cited in Serge Lusignan, *Parler vulgairement: Les intellectuels et la langue française aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles* (Paris: Vrin, 1986), 111.
- ⁴⁵Anthony D. Smith, “Towards a Global Culture?,” in Mike Featherstone, ed., *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity* (London: Sage, 1990), 184.
- ⁴⁶Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
- ⁴⁷Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 141, 50, 10–12. His definition of “culture”: “[A]t least provisionally acceptable criterion of culture might be language.” Ibid., 43.
- ⁴⁸Other dimensions of the model have been challenged. See Stein Tønnesson and Hans Antlöv, *Asian Forms of the Nation* (London: Curzon Press, 1996), 6 (preindustrial education standardization); Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 52ff. (a longer-term narrative of “nation”); Liah Greenfield, “Nationalism and Modernity,” *Social Research* 63 (1) (1996): 3–40 (nationalism in sixteenth-century England); Daniel A. Segal and Richard Handler, “How European is Nationalism?” *Social Analysis* 32 (1992): 1–15 (the constitutive role of colonialism); and Otto Dann, ed., *Nationalismus in vorindustrieller Zeit* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1986).
- ⁴⁹Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 78–79, 10–12; Ernest Gellner, “Nationalism and Politics in Eastern Europe,” *New Left Review* 189 (1991): 127–134; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 46–48. Gellner’s principal case, Islam, carries an additional irony, for it enabled the vernacularization of numerous literary cultures, in India as early as 1100 (Mas’ud Sa’d Salman).
- ⁵⁰Even “protonational” is disqualified by its teleology. Contrast E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 46–79.
- ⁵¹“Tirant les Peuples apres luy par leurs Oreilles avecques une Chesne attaché à sa Langue” (*La Deffence, et Illustration del Langue Françoyse*, ed. Versailles 1887 [1549], 162).
- ⁵²See, respectively, Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*; Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and James Piscatori, eds., *Transnational Religion and Fading States* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996); Denis Hollier, “Literature as a Dead Language,” in Marshall Brown, ed., *The Uses of Literary History* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 239; Salman Rushdie, “Damme, This is the Oriental Scene for You!” *The New Yorker*, 23–30 June 1997, 50; Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference,” *Current Anthropology* 7 (1992): 10.
- ⁵³Immanuel Wallerstein, *Geopolitics and Geoculture: Essays on the Changing World-System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 237.