Dancing _the_ Self

PERSONHOOD AND
PERFORMANCE IN
THE PĀṆḌAV LĪLĀ
OF GARHWAL

William S. Sax

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FOR SYLVIA

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Introduction

The Performative Construction of the Self

In 1978, when I was a student at Banaras Hindu University, Richard Schechner and Linda Hess asked me to contribute to their ongoing study of the Ramnagar *rām līlā*, a spectacular annual dramatization of Tulasi Das's Hindu epic *Śrīrāmacaritamānasa* (the Hindi *Rāmāyaṇa*) by interviewing members of the audience.[1] That work introduced me to a kind of performance that was not merely entertaining but also "efficacious," to use Schechner's term. In their respective historical and cultural contexts, various kinds of performance are efficacious in all sorts of ways: shamanic performances heal, legal performances bind, political performances ratify, religious performances sanctify. Performance studies, exemplified by the work of Schechner and Turner,[2] raised a whole set of questions that have intrigued me ever since, the most important of which concerns the issue of efficacy: How do such performances achieve their ends? The topic is made more complex by the fact that many such performances can be and have been analyzed as rituals.[3] Moreover, in India, both folk and classical performances of epic literature seem, almost without exception, to take a ritual form (see later discussion). And yet, in the anthropological literature there are few categories as vexed as that of "ritual," for which a

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1. For more on Ramlila, see Awasthi 1979; Hein 1959, 1972; Lutgendorf 1991; Schechner 1983; and Schechner and Hess 1977. My research for Schechner and Hess became my M.A. thesis and was published as Sax 1990a.

2. See especially Schechner 1977, 1983, 1990, 1993; and Turner 1974, 1982, 1986.

3. See, for example, Atkinson 1987; Good 1994; Höfer 1992; Kapferer 1983, 1997; Köpping and Rao 2000; Schieffelin 1985, 1998; Tambiah 1979; and Turner 1981 [1968] for healing rituals; Aronoff 1977; Kertzer 1988; and Turner 1974, 1986 for political ones; and Gluckman 1965 for legal ones.

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large number of competing, and often opposed, definitions have been advanced.[4]

One of the most useful resources for thinking about the relationship of ritual to efficacious performance is Tambiah's (1979) essay on performative approaches to ritual, in which he advocates the integration of cultural accounts of rituals with attention to their performative and contextual features. Tambiah argues that, although it is evident that many rituals seek to convey cosmological information (by which he means not only religious cosmologies but also legal codes, political conventions, social class relations, etc.), it is also true that the performance of ritual is always linked to the status claims of participants, in other words, to relations of power and to the various contexts—social, political, religious, and so on—of the performance. Through various performative media, such as dance, music, and drama, a heightened experience is produced in the ritual, thereby indexing (and often altering) social relations while simultaneously legitimating them via cosmological paradigms. Cognitive content and sociological efficacy—meaning and function—are thus linked via the media of performance. In this book, I follow Tambiah's lead and attempt to illustrate how a particular genre of public performance achieves the cognitive task of constructing (at least in part) personal "selves" as part of a nexus of social relations while legitimating them in terms of an overarching cosmology.

Tambiah based much of his argument on the seminal work of the English philosopher J. L. Austin (1962) regarding "performativity" in language. Austin is perhaps best remembered for his demonstration of the way in which certain kinds of linguistic utterances should be regarded not merely as propositional statements that can be subject to rational judgments of truth or falsity but also and more important as efficacious "speech acts" that are subject to normative judgments of felicity or legitimacy. For example, if a wedding officiant says, "I now pronounce you husband and wife," this utterance is in fact the doing of an action (i.e., the marrying of a man and a woman), and the proper question to ask of it is not "Is it true?" but rather "Is it efficacious?" (in Austin's terms, "Is it felicitous?"), that is, did it accomplish its intended task? Judgments of felicity or infelicity will in turn depend on a whole set of ancillary social conditions: Did both persons intend to marry each other? Was the officiant legally empowered to perform weddings? and so on. Such actions as greeting, promising, baptizing, naming ships, sentencing criminals, celebrating Mass, exorcizing demons, and installing chiefs have been subject to Austinian and quasi-Austinian performative analyses by Tambiah and others, in what has become a rich and extensive literature. The great value of this approach lies in the way in which it shifts the terms of analysis of ritual away from judgments of truth or falsity, according to which ritual and its practitioners must inevitably be

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4. See the useful summaries of ritual theory by Bell 1992; Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994; and Tambiah 1979. Bell skirts the definitional problem by writing of "ritualization" rather than ritual, while Goody (1977) suggests that the category be rejected outright.

regarded as mystified, irrational, or downright foolish,[5] to judgments of felicity, according to which ritual is seen as one of many human devices for ensuring an ordered social existence.

Many social scientists persist in viewing ritual, rather like laughing or crying, as expressive of inner states and not directed toward concrete ends.[6] "Expressive" action is contrasted with "instrumental" action, defined as a purposive and effective means toward a conscious end: building a machine, for example, or scratching an itch. The expressive-instrumental dichotomy associates such activities as ritual and drama with an internal psychological realm of feeling and sentiment, while instrumental action is associated with an external, and more powerful, realm of economics and politics. Such a dichotomy is inconsistent with—even opposed to—the kind of model I want to advance, in which ritual is seen as helping to shape the world rather than being passively shaped by it. Following Inden, I seek to leave behind talk of actions "expressing" or "symbolizing" some underlying and essential reality and instead to show how actions—in this case, the actions of public ritual performance—"*make* what order there is in the human world" (1990, 26). In particular, I want to show how *pāṇḍav līlā* does not merely reflect the "selves" of those who participate in it but actively creates them.

Unfortunately, the view of ritual as (merely) expressive is persistent, partly because it reflects common wisdom, being rooted in a dualism of matter and spirit that is a recurrent feature of Western thought. Tambiah and Austin provide useful theoretical resources for challenging this dichotomy, Tambiah because his analysis focuses attention on the mutual constitution of meaning and function, Austin because he exposes the way in which instrumentality often hides, as it were, behind expressivity, and vice versa.[7] A third resource for criticizing the expressive-instrumental dichotomy is

5. This is an inevitable consequence of the "intellectualist" approach to religious belief and practice, as exemplified by the work of Tylor and Frazer and summarized by Skorupski (1976). Cf. Bloch 1974, 1986, 1987; Staal 1975.

6. See, for example, Cannadine 1984; Stallybrass and White 1986, 14. In his useful discussion of the epistemological difficulties that Western social scientists can get into by an unreflective extension to other cultures of their own ideas about (theatrical) performance as "illusion" or "deceit," Schieffelin (1998) also fails to realize that these difficulties are at least partly due to the very dichotomy of expressive versus instrumental that he employs. To the extent that we can learn to stop trying to reduce performances to a set of propositional statements and begin to evaluate them as performances (e.g., Austinian "felicity"), then the difficulties discussed by Schieffelin will disappear.

7. Cf. O'Hanlon's criticism of the expressive-instrumental dichotomy within the subaltern studies movement in South Asian historiography, as one example of the "habitual dichotomizing of conventional social science, and its tendency to obscure the real ambiguity and contingency of the fixed identities for which we continually search." Such a model "fails adequately to displace familiar classifications of activity—the economic, the political and the cultural—from their familiar and respected roles: roles which, in their insistence on a clear distinction between the material and the ideal, the instrumental and the symbolic, have themselves been a formidable ally in elite historiography's denial of a political significance to a whole range of subaltern activity" (1988, 213–14).

Pierre Bourdieu's writing about the various forms of capital: not only accu-
mulated (i.e., conventional economic) capital but also educational capital
embodied in qualifications, cultural capital acquired through one's class and
upbringing, and symbolic capital, which often takes the form of public ritu-
als, dramas, parades, and other forms of display, such as the ritual perfor-
mances described in this book. The crucial point about these forms of capi-
tal is that they are interconvertible, so that educational capital can be
converted into economic capital in the form of a high-paying job, and an
expenditure of symbolic capital in a ritual performance can be recaptured
as cultural capital in the form of enhanced marriage alliances. Some phi-
losophers and social scientists regard public ritual displays as irrational ex-
penditures of time, effort, and money: as Hocart would put it, they may
know (conventional) economics, but they do not know people. However,
Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital shows how these apparently "irratio-
nal" events do indeed exhibit a kind of implicit rationality, how they serve
the real interests of specifiable persons and groups—in short, how appar-
ently "expressive" action is often at the same time deeply "instrumental"—
and in chapter 4, I apply this idea to performances of pāṇḍav līlā.

In sum, my contention is that performance theory is a valuable resource
for understanding how performances—and especially public ritual perfor-
mances—serve to create, reaffirm, and alter collective worlds of meaning
and relationship. However, one question has rarely been asked by perfor-
mance theorists: How is the self constructed in and through performance?[8]
Before beginning to address this question, it is necessary to review the re-
cent literature on self, person, and identity.

Anthropology and the Disappearance of the Self

Within the human sciences generally, the "self" has recently been de-
clared dead. A battalion of poststructuralists, postmodernists, social con-
structionists, deconstructionists, feminists, and others have killed it, claim-
ing that the notion of a permanent, bounded, autonomous self residing at
the human core—a notion that is said to be central to the "Western tradi-
tion"—cannot withstand critical scrutiny. Derrida, for example, employ-
ing his master concept of differance, claimed to deconstruct the "classical
subject" of Western metaphysics, revealing it to be nothing more than a
nexus of relations.[9] Similarly, Foucault's aim was to create a history of the
ways in which Western culture makes human beings into subjects, and in
emphasizing in his later work the role of power in the social construction

8. Three important exceptions are Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*
(1959), which is in many respects foundational for performance studies, Judith Butler's (1993)
analysis of the construction of gender in and through performance, and Schechner's "The
Restoration of Behavior" (in Schechner 1985).

9. Derrida 1978; cf. Buck-Morss 1977; Johnson 1981; Sampson 1989.

of the subject, he argued that the modern, "Western" self is not the agent of its own life story but the transient result of a set of policing processes set in motion by various discourses of power (1980, 115). Foucault contends that the self "is no more than a congeries of theories about its nature," and that theories of the self "are a kind of currency through which power over the mind is defined and extended" (Hutton 1988, 135).

Contemporary anthropologists have not been slow to apply such ideas to non-Western cultures.[10] Geertz's (1983) discussion of Javanese personhood has become a classic of the genre, and a more recent, outstanding example is Dorrine Kondo, who in her analysis of female Japanese factory workers contends (following Derrida) that "selves which are coherent, seamless, bounded, and whole are indeed illusions," and that "[t]he unitary subject is no longer unified" because, like all signifieds, it exists only relationally, as a play of differences (1990, 14, 36). Kondo asserts that in mainstream anthropological studies of the self, "[t]his 'self' is almost never contradictory or multiple, and traits of the "self" are held to be equally characteristic of all members of a society" (1990, 36–37).

I have a number of reservations about this approach. To begin with, numerous anthropologists, philosophers, and psychologists have pointed out that discussions regarding self, personhood, and identity are often clouded by inconsistent and imprecise terminology.[11] Spiro, for example, discerns no fewer than seven distinct ways in which the concept of "self" is employed in this literature (1993, 113–14). Rather more cautiously, Harris argues that anthropologists should distinguish between the "individual" as a biological member of humankind, the "self" as a locus of reflexive self-awareness, and the "person" as a "human being publicly considered as an agent" (1989, 600–602). That the self as a locus of subjectivity (Mauss's *moi*) is a human universal, a viewpoint in the geometric sense, logically prior to and necessary for the development of culturally variable forms of subjectivity and/or personhood, has been argued persuasively by Harré on philosophical grounds (1998; cf. Spiro 1993, 111). At the same time, it seems indisputable that the whole person, as understood in and constituted by a particular cultural and historical context, varies enormously from culture to culture. We are thus left with a large—and largely indeterminate—gray area lying between the poles of biological and existential universals on the one hand and cultural particulars on the other. As I note later, there is simply not enough empirical work, in India or anywhere else, to draw final conclusions about the degree to which concepts of self and person vary among cultures. Therefore, along with Foley (1997, 263), I remain agnostic about claims regarding either the universality or the absolute cultural relativity of notions of

10. See, for example, Carrithers, Collins, and Lukes 1985; Daniel 1984; Lutz 1988; Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990; Marsella, DeVos, and Hsu 1985; Rosaldo 1984; and Shweder and Bourne 1984.

11. See Carrithers, Collins, and Lukes 1985; Fogelson 1982; Harrè 1998; Harris 1989; Murray 1993; Spiro 1993.

self, personhood, individual, and the like. In what follows, I deal primarily with cultural constructs relating to personhood. Whereas these constructs have mostly to do with self-representation,[12] it is important to note that they are not simply concepts or texts or cognitive facts: they are public, embodied performances. This makes all the difference, as I shall argue later.

Another reason for my skepticism about the supposed "challenge" to conventional Western theories of the self is my growing doubt about whether this challenge is as radically new as it claims to be. As we have seen, Kondo asserts that decentered or multiple "selves" are nearly absent in mainstream anthropology. However, she provides no examples of such writing, and it seems to me that, on the contrary, anthropology anticipated many of the claims of the poststructuralists. Louis Dumont's contrast between Western individualism and Indian holism is an obvious case from the anthropology of India, but there are many older examples as well. For over a century, anthropologists have maintained that the Western concept of the "individual" is a particular historical and cultural product. According to Durkheim, for example, individualism is "itself a social product, like all moralities and all religions. The individual receives from society even the moral beliefs which deify him. This is what Kant and Rousseau did not understand. They wished to deduce their individualistic ethics not from society, but from the notion of the isolated individual" (1898, 12n.).

Continuing in the Durkheimian tradition, contemporary anthropology has retained a theory of relative, "decentered" identity as one of its core theoretical concepts. Werbner has put this nicely:

> A guiding truth of anthropological theory, at least since the publication of The Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1940), has been that group membership is always relative. If social agents bear multiple (and sometimes contradictory) identities, these are typically highlighted or foregrounded situationally and selectively, in opposition. The further important insight contained in Evans-Pritchard's analysis, and one which bears directly upon current debates about identity and social movements, is that these sited identities are valorised in the last instance not by simple material interests or ecological exigencies, but by the moral values of sociality which constitute these interests and constraints within given contexts. (1996, 82)

In his provocative summary of the relations between psychology and postmodernism, Sampson (1989) lists six challenges to the psychological notion of the self or subject as a unique, integrated whole that is a center of awareness, and anthropology, or "cross-cultural investigation," is first on the list.[13] This should come as no surprise because anthropology, at its heart, is the study

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12. Spiro (1993, 114) would say that they have to do primarily with self-presentation.

13. The others are feminism, social constructionism, systems theory (because it gives primacy to relations rather than entities), critical theory (which maintains that such a no

of cultural difference, and thus it is only to be expected that, as connoisseurs of the exotic, anthropologists should take particular delight in savoring the variety of cultural constructions of the person, just as they savor differences in language, social structure, costume—even cuisine. Mainstream anthropological thought thus unites with poststructuralism and postmodernism by calling into question any theory that posits an autonomous self as either an elementary or a universal ontological category.[14] On the contrary, the self is generally viewed by anthropology as a contingent sociocultural construction.[15]

It may well be that the coherent, seamless, bounded, male subject that has been so heavily criticized is something of a straw man. Influential Western theorists such as Erikson, James, and Mead insisted long ago that "the self is relational through and through" (Spiro 1993, 139). Fogelson (1982) has raised some provocative questions about the intellectual pedigree of the recurring image of a non-Western native whose individuality is subsumed in society. Both Murray and Spiro have been especially critical of the tendency to reduce the great diversity in conceptions of self and person to a simplistic opposition between "the West" and "the rest," in which the former conceives the self/person as "*essentialist, autonomous, bounded, stable, perduring, continuous, impermeable*, or *unitary*," while the rest conceive of it as "*pluralist, fragmented, emergent, dialogic, relational, inconsistent*, and *culturally determined*" (Murray 1993, 6, 3–4, italics in original). Spiro is at pains to insist on the diversity of cultural conceptions worldwide, while Murray discusses the internal diversity of the "Western" tradition.

Finally, I am bothered by the way in which postmodernists like Gergen (1991) or Grodin and Lindlof (1996) breathlessly announce the "new" discovery that the self is "decentered," in apparent ignorance of the fact that Indian psychologists made this point centuries and even millennia ago.[16]

Hinduism and the "Dividual" Self

Hindu theories of the self, both learned and popular, are remarkably similar to the ruminations of postmodernists and social constructionists, and

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tion of self is merely an ideology contributing to reproduction of relations of production), and deconstructionism (which challenges the primacy of the subject [or author]). Note that Sampson relies for his definition of the "North American version of psychology's subject" on anthropologist Clifford Geertz.

14. Gerholm (1988) lists a number of features—plurality of perspectives, fragmented cultural systems, shaping of different private experiences, "hard surface," the ruling, and reinvention of tradition—that he regards as characteristic of postmodernism, and one is struck by the degree to which they are characteristic of mainstream anthropology as well.

15. Indeed, at the moment, the discipline seems to have rejected its old search for the universal bases of human subjectivity, such a search being regarded not only as quixotic but also—even worse—as "essentialist."

16. It could also be argued that Derrida's ideas about relationality were also anticipated by the *sphoṭa* theorists among the Indian grammarians.

it is nothing short of scandalous that this similarity has been so little no-
ticed in the West. The irony has been nicely captured by Bharati, who points
out that whereas conventional Indian social scientists have consistently
attempted to assimilate Western ideas, Western social scientists have equally
consistently failed to take Indian ideas seriously, except perhaps for a few
stray Jungians and other cultists (1985, 190). Hindus have generally dis-
tinguished between the eternal Self (here spelled with a capital S), or *ātman*,
as a locus of awareness, and the ephemeral person (*manuṣya*, *log*, *ādamī*, and
so forth in the vernaculars of the north) whose caste, class, gender, person-
ality, and subjectivity are transient, contingent effects of antecedent, karmic
causes. A late and influential model of this sort is found in the *Vedāntasāra*
of the fifteenth-century monk-scholar Sadananda (1968; see esp. verses 61ff.;
Cf. Staal 1983–84). According to the philosopher Gerald Larson, one of
the five postulates of a "protean *Urphilosophie* of South Asia" is that "the
self or soul (*puruṣa* or *ātman*) is clearly distinguished from the psychic appa-
ratus so that the notion of 'self' or 'soul' has nothing to do with notions of
mind, ego, intellect, personal identity, and so forth" (1993, 112).

The valorized Western "individual," the self as a locus of creativity,
moral value, and so on, is not merely ignored in Indian texts; it is positively
disparaged.[17] As Bharati puts it, "All Hindu traditions talk about the self
either in order to reject its ontological status (as in Advaita Vedānta just
quoted, and in Buddhism), or to assimilate it to a theological and meta-
physical construct, which is a self with a capital 'S.' When any of the Hindu
traditions speak about what might look like the individual, like an empiri-
cal self, it is not to analyze but to denigrate it" (1985, 189).

According to Bharati, the average Hindu's intuition is "thoroughly
informed by these seemingly recondite concepts." But this assertion is called
into doubt by Spiro, who has argued that "one cannot validly infer actors'
conception of the self, let alone their mental representations of their own
self, from the normative cultural conception" (1993, 120). Similarly, Lukes

17. The denigration of the ego in South Asian religions and spiritual disciplines is well
known and need not be elaborated here. But since this is a book on ritual drama, it should
perhaps be noted that the theme repeats itself in classical Indian aesthetic theory as well,
particularly in one of its central concepts, that of "generalization" (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*), origi-
nally propounded by Bhatta Nayaka and later developed by the great aesthetic and tantric
philosopher Abhinavagupta: "During the aesthetic experience, the consciousness of the
spectator is free from all practical desires. The spectacle is no longer felt in connexion with
the empirical 'I' of the spectator nor in connexion with any other particular individual; it
has the power of abolishing the limited personality of the spectator, who regains, momen-
tarily, his immaculate being not yet overshadowed by *māyā*" (Gnoli 1985, xxi).

One can compare this doctrine with the heavily aestheticized, devotional theology of
the Bengali Vaishnava movement of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which it influ-
enced. The latter movement was among the most influential forms of Indian religiosity, and
many contemporary Hindu sects are direct descendants of it. Although the Vaishnavas'
goal—to unite with God—was quite different from the goals of classical aesthetics, never-
theless the basic techniques for doing so involved effacement of the individual ego
(Haberman 1988; Wulff 1984).

argues that Mauss himself, as well as "most of" the contributors to the volume of which Lukes was coeditor, understand the category of the person "as a *structure of beliefs*."

> They discern an underlying structure of belief beneath the varying cultural forms; and they interpret these forms as expressing or representing that structure, more or less adequately. Indeed, they allow (and this is partly what makes such interpretation appear "deep") that some forms misrepresent and distort the underlying structure (for explicable reasons) and can be interpreted as such misrepresentations and distortions. (Lukes 1985, 285–86)

Ultimately we must face the question: How can we get from cultural conception to experience of the self? Can we get there at all? It is certainly true that there is a lack of studies, anthropological or otherwise, of the relation between normative cultural conceptions of the self, and the lives of actual persons in South Asia. If we search the literature for answers to the question of how religious ideas concerning the ephemerality of the small self and the permanence of the big Self relate to the cultural praxis of contemporary Hindus, we are likely to be disappointed. Answers to such questions would have to be based on sustained research, both ethnographic (to understand how empirical persons and selves are manifest in daily life) and historical (to see how such selves might have changed in response to particular historical conditions). No such study has yet been done, though the work of McKim Marriott constitutes an initial attempt to address the relevant issues.[18] Drawing upon a variety of sources, from Indian sciences such as medicine, astronomy, and law, as well as from literature, philosophy, soteriology, and especially ethnographic reports from India's diverse regions, Marriott has constructed an "ethnosociological" model (i.e., a formal model based on indigenous rather than Western categories) of the Hindu person as a "dividual" composed of shifting and inherently unstable substance, while his students and colleagues have provided a number of focused ethnographic accounts of these dividuals' lives, deaths, exchanges, and other transformations. What is important for present purposes is that Marriott's model (based on an unrivaled knowledge of Indian ethnography) confirms that Hindu thought, both learned and popular, also anticipates postmodern and poststructuralist "deconstructions" of the person/self in the sense that it accords no ontological primacy to the phenomenal "person" or "individual," regarding it as a mere appearance, the temporary effect of a variety of underlying causes.

Another way of bridging the gap between normative cultural conception and lived experience is by focusing, as I have done in this book, not simply on ideas as found in prescriptive texts but rather on ideas that are performed and texts that are embodied. Indeed, one of my central conten-

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18. See Marriott 1990 and the essays therein; also Marriott 1988.