Shared Idioms, Sacred Symbols, and the Articulation of Identities in South Asia

Kelly Pemberton
Michael Nijhawan

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Acknowledgments

When we first conceived the idea of editing a volume on identity in the South Asian context, we had little sense of how long, and sometimes frustrating, the journey to completion would be. While the idea came from our participation on a conference panel, "'Hindu Na, Nahin Musulman': Shared Idioms of Piety and Sanctity," at the Association for Asian Studies annual meeting in 2002, our work in individual chapters, and on the volume as a whole, has moved far beyond the aims and vision of that panel. In the interim, we have acquired a more nuanced understanding of the questions of identity (as a field of study) and identification (as a process of articulating the self) this volume investigates. While we, the editors, have benefited from extended conversations with each other by e-mail and phone, our study has been enriched far more deeply by conversations and collaborations over the years with colleagues and friends who have challenged us to think beyond our initial concepts and assumptions and to push the question of identity—and identifications—much further. In that respect, we have a few people to single out for special thanks. Tony Stewart and Joyce Flueckiger provided initial encouragement and advice (and the requisite warnings) for embarking on this project. Jack Hawley, Amina Yaqin, Jenny Takhar, and Huma Dar provided valuable input on the theoretical framework for this volume in the early stages of its composition. Our friends and family provided moral and emotional support through the years we spent revising and seeking publication for this volume, and we thank them, too. Finally, thanks are also due to Erica Wetter, our editor at Routledge, New York, to Debbie Ruel, our copyeditor, and Terence Johnson, our production manager at IBT Global, and to the anonymous readers who critiqued individual chapters and the volume as a whole. While the work has been significantly enriched by their comments and support, we assume full responsibility for the ideas—and errors—found in the pages of this volume.

Introduction

Toward an Integrative Hermeneutics in the Study of Identity

Kelly Pemberton and Michael Nijhawan

Over the past quarter century, numerous volumes that take up the question of identity have been published, and indeed, identity has become a question of central importance within the field of South Asian studies, as in the human and social sciences more broadly.[1] Some have addressed the question on epistemological or ideological terms, privileging the role of institutions and other structuring entities (such as the state or the market place) upon constructions of identity. Recent studies of the middle classes in India, for instance, have debated their characterization as a product of consumerism and/or market forces, of emerging forms of political culture, or of a Westernized subculture that enjoys privileged access to global transnational capital (or information) flows. Others have sought to remedy this problem by prioritizing empirical and experiential evidence over purely structuralist frameworks of analysis.[2]

In some cases, historical (text-critical) and anthropological (participant-observation) research has yielded rich portraits of encounters between diverse socio-cultural groups in the Subcontinent, with emphasis in recent decades on how locally embedded forms of practice and dominant representations of what is "normative" stand in relation to each other. Postmodern hermeneutic methods[3] typically characterize these encounters in two ways. First, the relationship between dominant representations and local "micronarratives" is couched in the language of conflict, particularly where a struggle over resources or desire for access to certain forms of power (e.g., economic resources, control over symbolic capital, or influence within or over institutions of governance) is apparent. Second, where they involve "fruitful encounters"—particularly at the level of the so-called "popular" or "vernacular" religious experience—this relationship is often depicted as one of syncretism.

Several recent studies of "Hindu–Muslim" conflict implicate the political order in sustaining "communal violence" and, concurrently, in mobilizing the power of rhetoric to both create and interpret riots as evidence of the incompatibility of the two groups.[4] More often than not, such works obscure the permeability of such boundaries, and offer little substance for understanding the place of contingent factors in the production, reconfiguration, or transformation of knowledge and action. Furthermore, such a methodological position forces one to resort to notions of "the state" as a self-evident category that is imposed on everyday spheres of action, and works to obscure how, specifically under conditions of violence, the multifaceted aspects of state power (perceived both as a threat to and as a guarantor of security) mediate forms of local agency. Scanning the landscape of new anthropological and sociological work on violence and identity formation, one notices the importance given to the production of voice and agency in everyday realms of life, precisely because it is in those heterogeneous everyday worlds that we can observe both the ability of symbols to mobilize actors along lines of exclusion and the persistence of shared idioms that allow for processes of recuperation and recovery.[5] This recent work affords greater possibilities for charting the shared worlds of everyday practice in a range of other areas of social and cultural production in South Asia. Our focus on "shared idioms" indexes this broader preoccupation within contemporary scholarship on South Asia. This task assumes crucial importance in a time of renewed violence in that region, as around the world, sustained by ongoing processes of "re-essentialization" and boundary-drawing along sectarian, political, religious, and ethnic lines. Furthermore, these processes are now often produced within a broader transnational dynamic in which (e.g., the Gujarat riots in 2002) diasporic organizations provide an organizational and ideological component of fundamental importance.

The other oft-cited model of social relations in South Asia, syncretism (or hybridity), is employed in a pejorative, neutral, or meliorative manner to designate the intermixture of two or more different religions. The premises of this model rest on an intrinsic view of religion as a bounded system of signs, symbols, and set(s) of meaning(s), which the syncretized variant draws upon to forge something that is neither wholly the original nor wholly the "Other." As an interpretative model, syncretism fails to offer an adequate explanation of the confluence of factors that make up, and affect the articulation of, identities; rather, it underscores an oppositional framework between official/hegemonic and popular/subaltern religion. In so doing, syncretist interpretive models offer explanations of identity and experience that make possible a number of troubling presumptions: one, the existence of a "pure" (and thus somewhat "hegemonic") hybridized variant (as opposed to the cultural borrowing that is germane to most forms of religious, social, ritual, and literary expression), two, the essentially transgressive nature of this variant, and three, the "privileged" position of syncretism in relation to identities that do not define themselves along such lines.[6]

TRANSLATION REGIMES

A more promising suggestion for conceiving these relationships is suggested by Tony Stewart in his essay "In Search of Equivalence," which calls attention to the practical notion of "strategizing"—through the use of the local vernaculars—on the part of the early Bengali Muslim writers in the endeavor to understand and be understood by the Hindu "Others" they encountered and sought to translate into an Islamic perspective.[7] This analytic framework incorporates a theory of linguistic and cultural translation that, in our view, brings us closer to some of the actual strategies, narrations, and creative forces depicted in the chapters that comprise the first part of this volume. The chapters by Amy Bard and Valerie Ritter, and Arvind Mandair carry forward some of the concerns raised by Stewart's discussion of translation, demonstrating the transformative potential of discursive resignifications, and thus highlighting several key operative variables within processual modes of identification and naming, or the means and mechanisms by which identification or naming is carried out. These include the influence of common structuring elements, the ends sought by interlocutor(s), and the impact of critical moments in time.

The challenges of interpreting acts of literary production are highlighted in Bard and Ritter's chapter, "A House Overturned." This study demonstrates how shared linguistic signifiers—as marshaled in the translations of the small-town pandit "Hariaudh" (1865–1947)—can actually work to produce difference. As the authors suggest, the translation of an early-twentieth-century *marsiyah*, or mourning poem, dedicated to the memory of the massacre of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson and his entourage on the battlefield of Karbala, from Urdu into Hindi's literary Braj Bhasha dialect, was no mere adaptation. Drawing upon two closely related notions of affect—one (epistemological) in which authors consciously work to produce an emotional sense within their audiences, and the other (literary) in which existing local perceptual frames themselves can produce particular responses to narrative performances—the authors argue that the process was one that involved an intense engagement with similar evocations and meanings, purported to be experienced "differently." The very fact that the *marsiyah* genre in Urdu, which is associated with a world-transforming stage in Islamic history, could be used by the architects of such processes to differentiate and distill a separate Hindi (and Hindu) identity from a fairly plural linguistic and literary landscape, suggests that the range of vocabulary and imagery available to early-twentieth-century writers of Hindi was still quite broad, indeed, and that the esteem with which the Urdu and Persian literary forms were held by the learned classes was slow to disappear even after the Hindi language movement took hold.

In Mandair's chapter, difference figures as a catalyst for the creation of a master narrative of "Sikh religion" by the noted ideologue Bhai Vir Singh. Bhai Vir Singh's narrative seeks to seamlessly weave divergent concepts of divinity into a coherent whole by collapsing earlier strands of theological inquiry by leading Sikh interpreters with Sikh commentaries on the translation of Sikh scripture by the nineteenth-century German linguist Ernest Trumpp. Mandair argues that despite the obvious flaws and implicit prejudices in Trumpp's (eventually debunked) translation project (with its denial of a Sikh monotheism separate and distinct from premodern Indic narratives of a Supreme Being), it drew renowned Sikh commentators into a kind of theological discourse that led them to repress any connection to broader Indic beliefs and practices (such as idol worship) and work to prove the monotheistic nature of Sikh religion. The intriguing fact about Mandair's approach is that it deftly sidesteps a constructivist argument that would posit a syncretist origin (as contrasted with a purified version) of Sikh identity, instead crafting a convincing case for rethinking the translatability of such concepts as religion, God, and theology—as they have emerged from Western intellectual traditions—into Indic contexts. In so doing, Mandair simultaneously highlights the "symbolic violence" that is committed toward any notion of Sikh tradition when transcendence is collapsed and subsequently used to blur the boundaries between the idea of God (a transcendent entity) and a method of inquiry (universalizing, or seamless translation across cultural boundaries).

As with these two chapters, an emphasis on process, rather than identity or community as such, allows several other contributors to this volume to point to group activities in which essentialized class-based, ethnic, caste, religious, sectarian, or ethnic monikers of collectivity are transformed into persuasive mobilizers for group action. Consequently, our sense of "sacred symbols" is not intended as a reification of the religious (a category, as we argue further, that has itself come under scrutiny), but draws upon the power of symbols to catalyze groups along exclusivist lines of identity and belonging. Here a distinction between intention and effect must be taken into consideration, since the anticipated consequences of acts of identification and naming, particularly when carried out by the state or by social elites, are not necessarily realized or even adopted by the targeted social actors.

We see this outcome in the chapter by Amina Yaqin on the makers of Pakistan's national identity. In her chapter, Yaqin discusses the state's strategic appropriation of signifying discourses about the Pakistani nation. By sponsoring the textual productions of three iconoclastic "national" poets and literary icons—Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Jamil Jalibi, and Fahmida Riaz—Pakistan sought to transform the fragments of the nation into a cohesive, loyal whole by delineating a unique and homogenous Pakistani self that was predicated upon both its putative difference from the Indian Other and the minimization of ethnic and regional differences among the nation's citizens. Notably, many of the signs and signifiers these poets used as tools of identification and naming were interwoven, intersected, and clashed with interpretations of Islam in the country and city, state and nation. Yaqin argues that whether they situated themselves within or outside of the hegemonic narrative of the nation as articulated by the state, these three authors were stymied by their own myth-making efforts, while their cultural productions worked in quite opposite fashion to underscore the continued ability of regional and ethnic loyalties to operate as centrifugal forces, undermine the state's efforts at homogenization, and ultimately expose the state's inability to contain and channel those forces.

The contradictions engendered by efforts to re-envision the nation have frequently produced violent outcomes in the case of Indian Muslims, according to Huma Dar. Taking as her point of departure a reading of the poem "Farewell" by the Pakistani poet Agha Shahid ‘Ali, Dar argues that portrayals of Indian Muslims in popular film, literature, and narrative are all too often inscribed with the uneasy tension between India and Pakistan, and with a "tyrannical" discourse that is reflective of anti-Muslim pogroms in India. In her assessment of cultural constructions of the Indian Muslim, Dar unapologetically criticizes the self-conscious "liberalism" of many Indians today as being limited in its willingness to protest the continued vilification—and persecution—of Indian Muslims. Through the works she surveys, Dar identifies and deconstructs several key tropes that reinforce some of the stereotypes that emerged from the early days of Indian cinema: the rapacious feudal lord, the underworld gangster-terrorist, the hypersexualized courtesan, and the oppressed, veiled, yet sensual female. Drawing upon three important discourses of naming that have appeared in recent Hindi films, Dar provides a nuanced perspective on the continued suspicion of Indian Muslims in India today. Dar's stark commentary on depictions of Muslim Indians in a select group of historical, poetic, and literary pieces, and documentary and feature films, lays bare the lasting effect of Partition for constructions of the Indian Muslim "Other" and calls into question the ability of liberal Indians—and the state—to overcome these effects within the current cultural and political landscape.

Admittedly, despite the promise that these critical approaches hold for shattering essentialist notions of identity as a coherent category, in the world out there we often find a fusion of flexible and primordial identifications. This, of course, has been observed before, and the question has been raised whether a constructivist position (especially a radical postmodern position) has maneuvered itself into a paradox of argumentation.[8] In the words of the sociologist Rogers Brubaker and the historian Frederick Cooper, "a constructivist notion of identity leaves us without a rationale for talking about ‘identities’ at all and [is] ill-equipped to examine the ‘hard’ dynamics and essentialist claims of contemporary identity politics." The conflation of ‘identity’ as social and analytical category would result in an "uneasy amalgam of constructivist language and essentialist argumentation," which is not just "a matter of intellectual sloppiness" but instead "reflects the tension between the constructivist language that is favored in the current academic climate, and the foundationalist or essentialist message that is important to acknowledge if appeals to ‘identity’ are to be effective in practice."[9]

IDENTITY TALK

The work of Brubaker and Cooper provides us with a conceptual toolkit that splits up the identity category into a range of more manageable terms (such as "bounded groupness," "self-identification," and "narratives") that can perform the work of analysis effectively. We certainly agree that one should try not to collapse different levels of analysis into one broad category (identity) without taking into account the multi-sited, historically and culturally shifting parameters of identity formations. This should be evident from the different approaches taken in each individual chapter. However, Brubaker and Cooper articulate a deeper concern about the possible erosion of a classical standpoint of social science theory through explorations of identity formation. The continued engagement of scholarly practices in "identity talk" could eventually lead, they propose, to a weakening of analytical precision, which is foundational to any sociological, anthropological, and historical inquiry.

While there is no easy response to the question of how best to avoid "identity" as a foundationalist category, contributions to this volume seek to offer more nuanced approaches to the problem, in part through an orientation towards the realm of practical experience, consciousness, and politics and in part through a questioning of the very metaphysics of identity. Two issues should be clarified here at the outset. First, as with many other categories in the social sciences and humanities that are of immediate relevance in practical terms, the idea of a completely detachable and objectivist use of these categories outside of the realms of practice stipulates a false image of separateness that we cannot subscribe to. Far from describing Brubaker and Cooper as naïve "positivists," we nonetheless believe that part of their argumentation draws a false distinction between the realms of theory and practice. This, indeed, is a crucial issue that begs the question of the translatability of epistemological categories between theory and practice (and Western and non-Western discourse, one might add) and that poses another set of questions related to how to conceptualize the notion of agency.

As a way to start thinking about this problematic, we take terms such as "ritual," "religion," or "community" and consider how these have shaped the self-understanding of social actors and interpreters of "tradition" in South Asia and elsewhere, with careful attention to the relationship between the symbolic and material conditions of self-identifications, on one hand, and the forces that can override, mediate, or modify these self-identifications, on the other. In so doing, we seek to understand the genealogy of those terms—without ascribing them foundationalist status—by considering regimes of translation that mediate between different discursive realms in each case. Srilata Raman, for instance, demonstrates how narratives of identity can be constructed both discursively and materially by instigating processes of self-fashioning through reiterated bodily practices. In her work on Maraimalai Adigal, a Tamil scholar and

Dravidian ideologue who wrote extensively on Tamil culture in the early twentieth century, Raman demonstrates how racial ideologies have served as a blueprint for narratives of Tamil identity that hinged on the politics of linguistic nationalism. Adigal's *Velala Civilization* delineates a distant, classical Tamil past that is both an archaic and an arcadian landscape, a community rather than a state or a nation, governed by reciprocal relationships, by food and diet, and demonstrating the features of an organic society. This society is a crucible for certain moral values, and the Velala, the high-caste non-Brahmin with traditional ties to the land, embodies these values and is both the creator and the lynch-pin of this society. The "hard" and "soft" historiographical practices which underlie Adigal's vision rely almost overwhelmingly on then-extant, dominant Orientalist idioms of "Aryan" and "Dravidian." Yet, as Raman argues, even while Adigal's historiography exists within such a dominant tradition and even shares some of the latter's fundamental methodological practices and assumptions, its emancipatory potential arises out of what might be called a "critical-political hermeneutics" which marks its departure from the shared idiom. Such a hermeneutics enables, in turn, the development of a parallel historiography situated in a space between social suffering and social assertion, between shame at the present and pride in a past, between a caste-based and egalitarian society and between an irretrievable lost past and utopian future world.

The regimes of translation that inform modes of social interaction between researchers and interlocutors and the broader (geo)political discourses in which these are embedded have been amply analyzed,[10] and only a few of our chapters address this concern directly. The crux of the matter, however, is that academic reasoning is, by the very nature of its endeavor, implicated in a complex discursive process of translation. Having acknowledged the intricacies (and universalizing tendencies) of identity discourse in history and religious studies approaches, we must be similarly concerned with issues of representation in our work. In our ethnographic chapters in particular, we might also unwittingly sustain relations of dominance and subordination in our "innocent" efforts to "articulate the other" for the benefit of a (largely) academic audience. And so it is clearly important that we emphasize what others before us have brought up as a critique of this discourse of detached objectivism: a move from "speaking for the other" to "speaking with and listening to the other" necessarily involves the idea of transformative knowledge that has potential implications for both sides of the dialogue. Thus, we recognize the need to move beyond mere definition and naming that obscures more than it reveals, and worse, silences the voices of those we claim to present, refashioning them to our own liking. Heeding the words of the feminist philosophers Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman, we seek to develop the tools to learn to hear the voices of others who do not speak like us, and in so doing, to avoid "reducing to ourselves" those we seek to understand.[11]

For contributors to this volume, exploring the genealogy of the politics of identity formation in modern South Asia represents more than an academic endeavor; it also reflects a serious commitment to the lives of the people we are concerned with and to which we are connected in a number of ways. By marshalling (and interrogating) key theoretical developments while seeking to situate our analyses in contemporary examples of social, political, and religious forms of life, and in bringing together scholars from a range of sub-disciplines within the field of South Asian Studies, the chapters in this book thus want to push current debates on identity forward. We seek to accomplish this task not merely by interrogating the usefulness of identity as an analytical construct as such, but by simultaneously seeking to capture the complex processes through which we come to understand emergent forms of sociality and community formation, focusing our lenses on two areas in particular. First, we consider those translational and transgressive moments in which essentialized, bounded symbols of group belonging are mobilized into action. Second, we investigate the many everyday worlds of life in which such symbols are reworked, cracked open, resignified, and resituated within a broader, shared universe of social interaction and ethical orientation. This is important precisely in the moment in which the re-essentialization of identities manifests itself in the scenarios of political violence and urban riots in recent decades.

Indeed, much of this can be understood as a product of hard-core nationalisms and exclusivist identity politics, which today are also connected to globalization and the uncertainty this process has induced.[12] As we shall further argue, these processes unfold in a context in which the shared social, cultural, and religious worlds of everyday life are under constant transformation, with deep repercussions on the form and meaning of boundaries existing between groups and individuals. And yet, it is precisely here in these "messy scenes" of identity politics that we must intervene without just refuting the use of "identity" as a category of inquiry. When we therefore evoke the notion of "shared idioms" of everyday cultural and religious conduct, we reflexively point to those vital elements of identity formation as an ongoing process and the historical product of creative human interventions. The dilemma for us becomes one of how to talk reasonably about identity as something that is simultaneously grounded in the everyday, historically conditioned, and susceptible to change and (re)interpretation. This question is taken up more pointedly by the chapters in Part II of this volume.

AGENCY, RITUAL, AND NAMING

In the second part of this volume, identity emerges even more as "a moveable feast" than as a classification that is tethered to the notion of a unitary, bounded self.[13] This fluidity is captured by the interplay between the oral and the written in the crafting of the South Indian Marathi Varkari tradition as taken up by Christian Lee Novetzke. His study highlights the ways in which individual and group activities (and, more specifically, their memorialization—both literary and praxis-oriented)—can transform monikers of collectivity into what Bruce Lawrence and David Gilmartin have called "mobile collective identities," which index repertoires of language, behavior, knowledge, and "voice" that transcend both externally imposed and self-imposed definitions.[14] Looking largely through the lens of the "Jnandev Samadhi," a narrative describing the self-entombment of the thirteenth-century Marathi saint Jnandev, in the Maharastrian town of Alandi, Novetzke uncovers how time, place, objects, performances, dreams, and the written word have all converged to memorialize this important saint of the Varkari religious tradition. These elements came together in the sixteenth century, largely through the efforts of the Varkari Brahmin scholar-saint Eknath, who rediscovered the site of Jnandev's *samadhi* with the aid of a dream, re-inaugurated the ritual remembrance of this event, and, according to many, edited the textual record of "Jnandev's Samadhi." The multiple meanings of the Jnandev memorial, described as a "scriptural tomb" by Novetzke, are reflected in the term *samadhi* itself. It refers to the ritual act of self-entombment which Jnandev performed as a result of his desire to enter the permanent meditative state of *sanjivan samadhi*; the place where Jnandev is believed to still reside, deep in this meditative state; and the text that memorializes both the ritual act and the place where it occurred. According to Novetzke, text, event, performance, and place in this tradition stand at a critical juncture in the intersection of the worlds of memory and history.

Drawing primarily from rich ethnographic materials, the other chapters in the second part of the volume also set out to examine social actors' ability to fashion their individual and collective selves. They do so by fleshing out domains of relative autonomy at critical moments in the articulation of identity. This domain can be conceptualized in distinctively different ways, as all four chapters in this section demonstrate. As a general point of departure, many would agree today with a notion of agency that results from a dialectic of constraining and enabling forces as they are built into historically emergent and culturally varying forms of life. No matter what example we look at, individual or group proclivities do not represent a closed system of signs and meanings, but rather, reflect the practical functions of language, its signs, and its signals (as distinct from its "structure"). Apparently, the term "relative autonomy" recalls Pierre Bourdieu's now classical notion of habitus. In Bourdieu's work, habitus occupies a space between the reproduction of an objective "field of relations" of which, Bourdieu would argue, people are inevitably a part, and the culturally formed and embodied patterns of social action within "systems of durable, transposable dispositions."[15] Habitus, which according to Bourdieu resides in human institutions, representations, and practices, and emerges as meaning, perception, and action/reaction, is regulated by structuring forces (and itself may act as a structuring force) without amounting to mere obedience to established "rules." His understanding of the effect of structuring forces upon human action rejects overly deterministic, mechanistic explanations of social action, but it also rejects the idea of intentionality (or strategizing) as an adequate explanation for human action.

Bourdieu's important insight into the relationship between human action, on one hand, and the mechanisms that produce and regulate them, on the other, has provided some fodder for theorizing the dialectic between structuring mechanisms and the conditions under which these mechanisms engender blueprints for action. It has been observed that his theoretical model of action privileges the actor's "practical" logic and experience of reality, coupled with ingrained knowledge (learned since childhood) of "recognized" beliefs and practices (that is to say, "recognized" within his or her own cultural and social location). There are merits and shortcomings to this view. Yet, through the notion of habitus, we can locate a relatively autonomous domain of action that is both structured by external, antecedent structuring forces, and capable of re-structuring (or reinterpreting) those forces.

This interplay is suggested in Diane D'Souza's chapter on the emergence of female orators (*zakira*s) among Indian Shi'ah Muslims. Their contemporary role as purveyors of collectively shared and experienced memories of faith, suffering, and resilience may challenge dominant discourses about gender roles and women's leadership, but it has also helped Shi'ah women exercise self-confidence and feelings of self-worth in their everyday lives. According to Shi'ah sacred history, the precedent of a woman reciting the events that led to the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Husayn, on the battlefield of Karbala can be found in the original recitation performed by Husayn's sister Zaynab shortly after this tragic episode in Islamic history, although women orators were largely unknown until the late nineteenth century. Rather, women tended to participate in such assemblies as interested spectators and organizers; this was true even for all-female gatherings, where men would act as reciters of the Karbala events. D'Souza speculates that the growth in numbers of female *zakira*s occurred because of several factors that encouraged this development: the influence of Muslim reformers who sought greater rights and opportunities for women to participate in the larger public arenas of activity; an extant tradition of poetry recitation; and the growth in numbers of educated women. Unlike among Sunni Muslims, the rise of gender justice issues to the wider realm of public discourse did not seem to produce a crisis of conscience among Shi'is in India. In fact, D'Souza maintains, far from being a mere sound piece for the performance of ritualized mourning, the *zakira* has come to be seen as voicing the collective memory of the Shi'ah community. This includes not only the events at Karbala, but also the intricacies of Shi'ah tradition, belief, and history. As such, the figure of the *zakira* has come to embody the strength and importance of women's leadership among Shi'ah today.

Even though Bourdieu successfully theorized the dispositional aspects of social actions, his model is still rooted in a framework that prioritizes class positioning and allows for little variation within the circumscribed field of a specific cultural habitus. Habitus alone seems rather inadequate to conceptualize agency as a process that operates discursively and self-reflexively. Furthermore, the notion tends to ignore that, even within a confined socio-cultural domain, there might exist convergent modes of self-fashioning and self-cultivation that sometimes overlap and sometimes consciously counteract.[16] Anthony Giddens' work was instrumental in posing a process of self-reflexivity as central to a notion of agency.[17] While drawing upon a notion of (virtual) structure as both impeding and enabling independent action, he has also introduced a concept of intentionality that drives the constant flow of social conduct. According to his "double hermeneutic," established social concepts tend to filter back into society, where they affect individual (and social) thinking. Because individuals are increasingly capable of and inclined toward self-reflexive thinking, they monitor the flow of human activities and its products, and adapt their own individual actions to their evolving understandings of these activities and products. This potentially transformative capability is both a consequence and a diagnostic of power.

We see this process in action in all of the chapters in this part of the volume. The authors' observations suggest a self-reflexive motive for such adaptation, but it is also one that is deeply embedded in social practices and institutionalized forms of cultivating the self (e.g., through "idealized" personalities and modes of "performance") as understood by the subjects who are discussed in these chapters, and as articulated by the authorizing discourses that seek to name those subjects (or, more precisely, those speaking as their representatives). While denying primacy to either institutional structures or the agency of those venerating sacred texts/sites, these chapters suggest that processes of naming and identification are better understood in terms of a dialectic of individual choice on one hand, and the structures, influences, and predispositions that constrain and shape them, on the other, than as a conflict between these variables. In that sense, there is a resonance of Giddens' insights into how actors are capable of assessing and reinterpreting structural constraints *in the very process of action*. Unlike Bourdieu, who addressed this problem as a dialectic between habitual practice and strategically organized (if not always strategically intended) conduct, Giddens relocated processes of reflexivity in the discursive realm. Human conduct, Giddens argued, is above all characterized by modes of discursive transformation and (moral) orientations around questions of accountability.[18]

However, this begs the question as to how Giddens would conceptualize the relationship between discourse and practice in the context of formally prescribed and stipulated acts of ritual practice, where the question of form, aesthetics, and ethics is intrinsically linked to the very understanding of agency as a culturally specific and effective form of (social, self-) transformation. As all of the chapters in Part II are centrally concerned with a discussion of identity in the disputed terrains of ritual conduct and performance, it is worthwhile to take up this specific point. For it seems to us that notions of agency are even more complex to fathom than it is indexed in Giddens' theory of action that, despite its universal claims, rests on a particular notion of self and subject that is not necessarily shared by the subjects in our encounters.

Scanning the academic literature on ritual, it appears that conceptualizations of ritual for considerable time went hand in hand with attempts to demonstrate the capacity of ritual to create and reassert group cohesion. Because of the sweeping claims that have resulted from such approaches in ritual studies, scholars have more recently re-interpreted the notion of ritual in the context of performance theory, in the context of a theory of embodiment, or dismissed the "mega-category of ritual" altogether (reminding us of Brubaker and Cooper's critique of such broad categories lacking analytic value).[19]

Webb Keane has convincingly argued that rituals are intrinsically linked to understandings of agency, while they do not necessarily correspond with a Western rational subject as the sole author and agent behind rituals as meaning-generating and socially transformative acts. He also shows that ritual complexes, especially if they entail the transaction (or expenditure) of material goods (such as animal sacrifice), become key sites for understanding the contest over boundaries of putatively hegemonic discourses on religious and national identity. This does not suggest that a new, "imaginary" (understood in the specific sense of connotatively "inauthentic") quality of the ritual practices is necessarily being "re-invented" in every case. Rather—and this is something the chapters in this volume highlight as well—ritual practices may serve as empowering mechanisms (for individuals or for sub-groups within a larger collective) even as they appropriate the language of subservience.

Empowerment in this context can be understood in terms of the ability to project new meanings of selfhood that acquire extrinsic, as well as intrinsic value, symbolic as well as economic capital. To that end, all of the chapters in this part of the volume emphasize the agentive component of ritual praxis, which serves as a point of engagement for the acceptance—or rejection—of an actor's symbolic communication of authenticity, sincerity, and spiritual or moral authority by others, and the reflexive nature of ritual, which serves to orient the individual (or group) to particular productions of subjectivity that may appropriate the language of a more dominant group, philosophy, or worldview. Rituals as bodily practices might underscore sincerity of purpose and mark piety; they help forge new, economically and spiritually lucrative relationships; they underscore connections with the past, enabling a sense of rightful belonging; and they facilitate the emergence of well-respected players in highly charged, emotive practices that encapsulate the worldview of a group self-identified as a faith community.

In the case of Sufi mystics, a sense of Muslim "self" in relation to others can appear rather more ambiguous, if ritual performances that simultaneously draw upon devotion to "Islamic" (i.e., grounded in notions of Islamic Shari'a) and "universal" moral and ethical visions of faith are any indication. Particularly in recent decades, such performances may serve to maintain or open avenues for group cohesion and redefinition, as the chapter by Kelly Pemberton demonstrates. For the "servants" (*khadim*s) of the renowned shrine of the Sufi saint Mu'in ud-din Chishti in the northwest Indian state of Rajasthan, acts of identification and naming carried out by them serve to cultivate relationships of sacred exchange. Calling these acts "rhetorical strategies," Pemberton argues that by highlighting or de-emphasizing the aspects of Mu'in ud-din's identity that evoke themes of communal harmony, the *khadim*s are able to acquire, retain, and meet the needs of the diverse pool of clients who visit the shrine seeking the favors of the saint. They are also able, with these strategies, to reinforce their claims of spiritual authority and qualification to represent the saint and mediate competing claims of "authenticity" in order to distinguish themselves as "good" Muslims in response to Islamic reformers' criticisms of contemporary Sufi shrines and their servants. Pemberton's chapter lays out a number of variables to highlight the ambivalence that characterizes attempts on the part of the *khadim*s to balance their own sense of Islamic propriety with their obligation to serve the needs of pilgrims, many of whom are not Muslim. She argues that in the case of the Chishti servants of Mu'in ud-din's shrine, notions of "Islamic," "authentic," and "universal" values are articulated in response to strategies for cultivating and sustaining relationships of sacred exchange, and that the *khadim*s must be able to deftly shift among all three concepts in order to remain effective and convincing to their clients. At the same time, she sees these acts of identification as producing a kind of dissonance among the *khadim*s, who are in fierce competition with each other for clients and other resources, who remain keenly aware of their status as a controversial minority among Muslims, and whose ranks are plagued by corruption.

Sharing this perspective on the practical mastery of ritual and its multiple implications for the process of identity formation, the chapter by Michael Nijhawan highlights processes of contestation and internal ambiguity when deliberating on the production of alternative discourses within a particular field of religious practice. While the *dhadi* singer-performers and orators with whom Nijhawan interacted often characterized their community's voice as one that has been devalued under the contemporary system of patronage, Nijhawan warns against viewing such discontent simply as the staging grounds of resistance to the "normative" values of Sikhi. Nijhawan's hermeneutic pivots upon two key problematics: one, an interrogation of the conceptual frameworks of reflexivity and agency as destabilizing mechanisms vis-à-vis fixed notions of community identity, and two, an evaluation of subjective processes of self-identification as mechanisms that transform and are transformed by subjects' perceptions of the inherent potentials of religious languages and practices. Nijhawan argues that the connections between *dhadi* singer-performers and Sikh patrons can be characterized in part through prevailing idioms of hegemonic relations. *Dhadi* discourse and practice has increasingly come to be identified with a particular version of Sikh Khalsa identity. Adopting Sikh principles of moral authority and pious conduct along with outward markers of Sikh identity (such as the adoption of the symbols of Khalsa) has become instrumental to the performance of Sikh dhadi. Nonetheless, the *dhadi* performers' criticisms of Sikh disdain toward their community is often cast in a language of servitude that is reminiscent of traditional patron–client relations in Punjab, in which the bard occupies the position of the low-caste *mirasi*. Yet the language of social orphanage, Nijhawan argues, is translated into a reflexive and affirmative form of self-identification that transcends the notion of subjugation, by making use of what Nijhawan refers to as the "emancipatory potential" of the language and idioms of the dominant Sikh model. Looking at performative contexts through the lens of the "performative voice," Nijhawan sees some of the connections between performance and social power as indexing a process of self-assertion: Social differences between the *dhadi* and other groups within the Sikh community are subsumed under a more encompassing (and potentially self-transforming) concept of morality and piety through which *dhadi* performers are able to reassert their centrality in the Sikh domain.

A FINAL WORD

The written and the oral; the performed, embodied, and articulated; localized, nationalized, and universally conceived notions of belonging: the chapters brought together in this volume are motivated by a common interest in exploring some of the intricacies of these relationships. The twin notions of "shared idioms" and "sacred symbols" that shape this volume suggest both a search for common ground and boundary-drawing processes at work in the articulation of identities, while individual chapters seek to locate "sites" of these two modes of identification and some of the conditions that give rise to them. The rubric that frames this volume ultimately seeks to accomplish this task by highlighting and problematizing the truth-claims of unitary, coherent markers of community and tradition. While exposing the ways in which language, history, historiography, poetry, and other forms of literature can be used to challenge artificial separations between cultural and religious realms of activity, and sources of received tradition, it also suggests ways in which political and sectarian uses of language and literature (especially those that seek to evoke visions of the "nation" as a unitary bloc) can reveal persistent tensions—or ongoing re-imaginings—within communities often conceived as homogeneous, coherent entities with a common orientation and worldview. Finally, our individual and collaborative modes of investigation seek to contribute to the pool of current debates about the emergence of strategies of cultural reproduction during periods of rapid or significant social and political change while also suggesting an alternative order of knowledge and thought that calls into question the characterization of "tradition," or "traditional knowledge," as a field of unchanging (or, alternatively, finite) topoi.

NOTES

1. New contributions in the area of South Asian studies include Bidyut Chakraborty, ed., *Communal Identity in India: Its Construction and Articulation in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, [2003] 2005); Laura Dudley Jenkins, *Identity and Identification in India: Defining the Disadvantaged* (London: Routledge/Curzon, 2002); David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000). On the notion of identity in social theory, see Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage, 1996), and Peter Wagner, *A Sociology of Modernity: Liberty and Discipline* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
2. See, for example, Leela Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Carol A. Breckenridge, ed., *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Bernard S. Cohn "The Census, Social Structure, and Objectification in South Asia," in *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays, ed.* Bernard S. Cohn (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987): 224–254.
3. The difficulty, if not impossibility, of defining "postmodern" is one we acknowledge. We signal, by our use of the term, a set of critical analyses that employ concepts such as difference, articulation, strategic, contingency, and agency in order to to call into question ideas such as identity, homogeneity, essential, and (unequivocal) meaning.
4. See, for instance, Paul Brass, *The Politics of India Since Independence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), and *The Production of Hindu–Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003); Bankey Bihari Misra, *The Indian Middle Classes: Their Growth in Modern Times* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961); Pranab Bardhan, *Scarcity, Conflicts, and Cooperation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); Thomas Blom Hansen, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identitiy in Postcolonial Bombay* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).
5. See, in particular, Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), as well as Roma Chatterji and Deepak Mehta, *Living with Violence: An Anthropology of Events and Everyday Life* (London/New York: Routledge, 2007).
6. A number of works have enumerated the problems with these concepts. See, for instance, Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins

Press, 1993); Charles Stewart, "Syncretism and Its Synonyms: Reflections on Cultural Mixture," *Diacritics* 29, no. 3 (1999): 40–62; and Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw, *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994). Other works have suggested ways in which the syncretism/hybridity hermeneutic might be useful for theorizing about socio-cultural admixtures. See, for instance, Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994); Vassilis Lambropoulos, "Syncretism as Mixture and Method," *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 19, no. 2 (2001): 221–235; and Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood, ed., *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism* (London: Zed Books, 1997).

7. Tony Stewart, "In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Hindu–Muslim Encounter Through Translation Theory," *History of Religions* 40, no. 3 (Feb 2001): 260–287.
8. Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond Identity," *Theory and Society* 29 (2000): 1.
9. Ibid., 6
10. For this point, see Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, and his *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); and Chandra Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Naomi Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On "Japan" and Cultural Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1997); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translating into English," in *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation,* ed. Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 93–110.
11. Maria C. Lugones and Elizabeth V. Spelman, "Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism, and the Demand for 'The Woman's Voice'," *Women's Studies International Forum* 6, no. 2 (1983): 573–581.
12. See Arjun Appadurai, "Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalization," *Public Culture* 10, no. 2 (1998): 225–247.
13. Stuart Hall, "The Future of Identity," in *Modernity and Its Futures*, ed. Tony McGrew and Stuart Hall (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 274–316.
14. Gilmartin and Lawrence, *Beyond Turk and Hindu Identities in Islamicate*, 2.
15. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1977] 2004), 72.
16. For this critique of the habitus and the notion of self-cultivation, see Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
17. Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).
18. In Giddens' view, people do not simply self-reflexively draw on multiple discourses or registers already extant within social structures when speaking about themselves or others. Rather, there are a limited variety of processes of identification and naming available to the social actor that may evolve or be modified with time and circumstance (as experiences, values, and the influences that shape them shift), that are sometimes accessible outside of any particular set of conditions or forces that gave rise to them, and that shape, as well as refract, those forces. In Giddens' framework this is not to deny a role to unconscious, or "unreflected" action, but rather to call attention to the reflexive "monitoring" of action in everyday life: the ability to anticipate

the arrival of new (whether unexpected or expected) "information" while simultaneously relating it to older ingrained, innate, or otherwise internalized "information."

19. A discussion of the newer and intriguing developments in ritual theory is beyond the scope of this edited volume. We can tentatively define ritual as a performative act framed by social convention and consisting of various forms of symbolic communication that are to different degrees formalized, iterable, and/or dramatic (as they are embedded in a field of power relations in which the potentials and risks of social transformation materialize). Nonetheless, the precise question of how ritual informs processes of identity formation largely depends on the particular school of ritual theory to which one subscribes. Thus, in a neo-Durkheimian perspective, rituals are explained in their mimetic function in relation to the social collective as a whole; Batesonians instead consider the relational aspects of ritual form, defining "identity" (of ritual participants) as a result of the differential effects of ritual processes. Anthropologists in the tradition of the Manchester school point to the fundamental social conflicts that underlie the performance of ritual and thus imagine identity and its contestation as being the result of ritual drama, while in performance theory, ritual acts constitute social identities through their illocutionary force, that is, their capability to create and transform social relations and reassert social entities in repeated practical (linguistic and symbolic) enactments. For further discussion, see in particular Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) and Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual: A Theory of Ritual Illustrated by the Jain Rite of Worship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).