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Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. 703 pp. ISBN 9780520260030.

Reviewed by Ashley Thompson, University of Leeds

The Language of the Gods in the World of Men is the culmination of decades of work by one of the most important Indologists of our times. In it, Sheldon Pollock mobilizes knowledge of an immense and multifarious field that is humbling in both its breadth and depth. Pollock offers his fullest description yet of the interpretive paradigm with which his name is associated: that of the rise and fall of the “Sanskrit cosmopolis.” The book tells the arresting story of an extraordinary language, Sanskrit, and its remarkable destiny over nearly two millennia. Sanskrit is the undisputed protagonist in this book: because Pollock’s main thesis is that Sanskrit conquered a vast domain—geographical and cultural—without armies, invasions or coercion. The Sanskrit cosmopolis came into being around the beginning of the Common Era, yet, unlike the Roman, Arabic or Chinese Empires, it spread its influence in the absence of any material threat to existent power structures. Stretching in its heyday from present-day Afghanistan in the west to Bali in the east, the “uniform” cosmopolis progressively gave way, over the course of the second millennium, to an array of regional politico-cultural orders defined, nonetheless, in relation to the cosmopolitan Sanskritic heritage.

Pollock’s work has accompanied me through much of my own trajectory as a specialist in Cambodian cultural history. I could not be more deeply indebted insofar as *The Language of the Gods* has served as a frame of reference for understanding the ancient Khmer empire known as Angkor (ninth-thirteenth c.) and the post-Angkorian (fourteenth-eighteenth c.) emergence of Khmer vernacular cultural production at the heart of a forthcoming monograph. [1] Nonetheless, as a Southeast Asianist, I have to wonder about the topography or the cosmography in which I find myself when writing on Pollock. In a word, I am not sure if I am to find myself on the inside or the outside, if I belong or if I am coming from the inside or the outside. It is as if I were caught on one of those impossible topological figures, some sort of giant klein bottle, perhaps.

For its arguably marginal place in the cosmopolis as in scholarship on the larger region, Southeast Asia can be seen as a paradigm for Pollock’s paradigm. At least at first glance, Southeast Asianists will see in the “Sanskrit cosmopolis” the latest iteration of the old colonial “Indianization” model by which Southeast Asian civilization was seen to have come into being through the importation of South Asian politico-cultural forms. From this perspective, Pollock’s innovation would be limited to refining or extending the Indianization model. In analyzing the mechanics of the spread of Sanskrit, however, Pollock replaces the notion of *importation* with a far subtler description of transregional emergence of Sanskritic politico-cultural constructs. I would argue, however, that *The Language of the Gods* does much more than this. In order to develop an understanding of the rise and fall of the Sanskrit cosmopolis, the book undertakes a virtually encyclopaedic investigation of regional identity during and after the cosmopolis. In this endeavor, *The Language of the Gods* undermines the colonial model as well as its postcolonial riposte. Indeed, it undermines the hermeneutic binary that largely structures scholarship on ancient Southeast Asia, in which postcolonial celebration of indigenous cultural material is pitted against colonial focus on the civilizing role of Indian politico-cultural forms imported into the

region. In this sense Pollock's book is an admirable example of scholarly rigor and even-handedness, beyond pseudo-political academic fads.

At the same time, Pollock is intent on identifying and rejecting elements of the Western intellectual heritage which have dominated and skewed interpretation of the Asian history at hand. Through an unparalleled attentiveness to language and literature in its relations with evolving political structures and traditions, he aims to develop theoretical paradigms out of the South and Southeast Asian empirical matrix. This in itself is an admirable intellectual-ethical position to take. Even Pollock's attention to language, like his theory—including that on relations between the theoretical and the empirical—mirrors, in his mind, what he sees as a distinctive South Asian concern with language. Admittedly this position is not unproblematic, and in a sense it is the problems it raises that intrigue me most.

For this review I had planned to consider, from the point of view of my own area of specialization, a number of more explicitly important themes in *The Language of the Gods*. My role, as I first saw it, was foreseen by the book itself. Like other area specialists to whom the book genuinely and generously offers a standing invitation to critique, I was to draw from my knowledge of the Southeast Asian case or cases to put Pollock's model to the test. I was to follow Pollock's example in attentively examining the evidence from Southeast Asia in order to evaluate the model's pertinence, perhaps proposing some adjustments to bring it into closer alignment with reality on the Southeast Asian ground. Questions raised by examination of the Southeast Asian material in this light included Pollock's characterization of the Sanskrit *praśasti* [epigraphic panegyric] genre as ahistorical; his minimal differentiation of relations between Sanskrit and vernaculars linguistically related to Sanskrit on the one hand, and, on the other hand, between Sanskrit and vernaculars linguistically unrelated to it; his unequivocal denial of the role of religion in the formation of the cosmopolis and subsequent vernacularization processes. A preliminary hypothesis was that the Southeast Asian case, if we can speak in such general terms, troubles, to some extent, the notion of a uniform Sanskrit cosmopolis, even while Pollock's schema provides a compelling framework for understanding the history of literature in Southeast Asia, and further, relations between history and literature in the region.

This hypothesis was reinforced and complicated by consideration of an explicit indicator of the region's uneasy place in the cosmopolis: the fact that, in cosmopolitan Sanskrit texts, Southeast Asia is *excluded* from the discursive delimitation of "Bhāratavarṣa." Bhāratavarṣa is a supraregional concept which, as Pollock demonstrates, defined, and was defined by, the Sanskrit cosmopolis. As Pollock writes, ". . . the conceptual order of Sanskrit geography in its mature form, focusing on Bhāratavarṣa, was uniform, stable, and, most significant of all, *subcontinental* [my emphasis], and this limit, once achieved, marked the boundary of geographical concern." This is not to say that "Bhāratavarṣa" was not of import to ancient Southeast Asians, that is, to peoples under the sway of Sanskrit but situated geographically beyond the subcontinent. Pollock continues: "But this was a boundary unlike any other. If in some important respects it excluded many spaces . . . the excluded [peoples] often claimed inclusion by the very act of naming wherever they lived with the names of India. 'India' was moveable and multiple" (193). Through the cosmopolis, Bhāratavarṣa, this representation of space which *excludes* Southeast Asia in geographical terms, is metaphorically transposed to Southeast Asian topographies. This leads me to believe that, unlike the subcontinent which becomes effectively coterminous with

Bhāratavarṣa, Southeast Asia is at once inside and outside the cosmopolis. To claim inclusion, we might say, was something only an outsider would do, and is, from an historical point of view at the very least, of a different order to the relatively straightforward belonging of the insider. In creating this impossible topological trope, “Bhāratavarṣa” may well have contributed, be it in a somewhat negative manner, to the constitution of “Southeast Asia” as an entity of which we can speak in general terms. (The existential question—[What] is Southeast Asia?—has been constitutive of and essentially coterminous with the field of Southeast Asian Studies since its emergence after World War II.) Yet it is significant that something similar happens in the post-cosmopolis *vernacularization* process on the subcontinent as described by Pollock. When the Sanskritic order is appropriated by vernacular literatures in the production of new politico-cultural spaces with geographical limits reduced to regional scales, conceptual operations similar to those underpinning Southeast Asia-Bhāratavarṣa relations are at work.

In itself, this situation calls for more than an area-based adjustment of Pollock’s model. It suggests a point of focus for further analysis of power relations, the task now being to track ways in which the hierarchized binary between inside and outside works even as it is deconstructed through processes of metaphorical transposition, and to gauge the socio-political effects of these complex operations. Let me be clear: Pollock’s vision of a purely cultural conquest by Sanskrit of a world no army or administration could dominate, together with the notion of free will that is central to his model (“the excluded often *claimed* inclusion,” etc.), is striking. However, the Southeast Asia case, in its difficult-to-define marginality, might suggest ways in which, thanks to Pollock’s initiative, we could understand coercion and free will as not necessarily, in every case, diametrically opposed.

Engendering the Sanskrit Cosmopolis and Its Aftermath

My readerly route has been circuitous. In attempting to think through Pollock’s book from a Southeast Asianist perspective, I became drawn to what was originally only a secondary concern: the discursive gendering of the Sanskrit cosmopolis and its vernacular aftermath. To put it schematically, from the popular *praśasti* trope of the king embracing the land to the *Kāmasūtra*’s “regionalisation of female sexual characteristics” (197) . . . , an abundance of material deployed by Pollock suggests that the two poles of the cultural complex at hand are consistently figured in terms of sexual difference, with the feminine on the side of the local, the earth, the place, the vernacular, and the masculine on the side of the universal, the transcendental, the cosmopolitan. [2] This paradigm, which recurs throughout Pollock’s account of cosmopolitan-vernacular relations, is never addressed directly or formulated as such by him. Pollock does repeatedly point out the phallogocentric “perspective typical of Sanskrit knowledge forms” (197). Yet this appears to constitute for Pollock an exceptional illustration of the way in which literature reflects, or even legitimates, social structure.

Pollock is the first to demonstrate the impossibility of extracting reality from literature/language, and to point out the limitations of reading (South Asian) literature as a simple representation of reality—or of fantasy, for that matter. Reality and literature are “mutually constitutive,” Pollock repeats, like a mantra, throughout the book. In Chapter Four, to take just one pertinent example to which I will return, he aims to demonstrate the inapplicability to the Sanskrit case of what amounts to a specific form of legitimation theory used to explain the historical development of

philology in the West—where codification of language use is understood to be a simple instrument of political power.

My response to this by all means important, even necessary, insight is double. On the one hand, it seems to me that Pollock's reference to Western discourses and models at times reifies and instrumentalizes what is after all a complex, heterogeneous and internally divided tradition. Here, too, Pollock is the first to acknowledge this risk, and the breadth and depth of his engagement with what can seem to be all of Western culture—quite aside from his position as an encyclopaedic Indologist—is truly extraordinary. Yet there is a way in which he uses the West as a foil to highlight the radical otherness of the Sanskrit world. I do not mean to say that he does not have a convincing point: he has put his finger on a profound difference. As is always the case with paradigm-changing scholarship, his insistence on this difference—and the meticulous support he offers for his hypothesis—obliges all of us to look with newly unshingled eyes at the very things we always thought we were already looking at. But it is precisely this new set of questions that Pollock asks us to ask, this new perspective on the power-culture relation, that might now allow us to look anew at the case of the West in and of itself. Pollock's challenge to the assumption that the power-culture relation always takes a certain form allows us to see that what we had assumed was simply seeing was in fact a very particular *way of seeing*, and so to see the West also in a more complex way than Pollock seems to himself.

Pollock's reading of Heidegger is exemplary in this regard. Coming toward the end of the book, this reading functions as a hermeneutic apotheosis, where the preceding analyses of South Asian evidence back up an incisive challenge to “the conceptual categories into which cosmopolitan and vernacular orders of culture-power are typically (if tacitly) slotted in the contemporary thought world” (526). “[B]oth for the arguments it offers and for their political payout” (526) Heidegger's work is, in Pollock's eyes, a cornerstone of this dominant contemporary thought world. In order to make his point, however, Pollock explicitly puts the “specific difficulties of [Heidegger's] analysis aside” (528). Heidegger is for Pollock a sort of *ur*-philosopher of the rootedness of human-being, perceiving, through analysis of word roots, an unequivocal ontological conjunction of “dwelling” (i.e., place) and “being” at the heart of the human. This interpretation cannot be *simply* contested, quite to the contrary. But when Pollock uses this distilled essence of European philosophy and political order to contrast an always-already vernacularized West, so to speak, with an essentially unrooted, always already universalist Sanskrit East, one has to wonder. In Pollock's words, “the vernacular aboriginality that seems to be woven into [Heidegger's] most basic ontology” illuminates “the fundamental ways in which the materials of Indian premodernity contradict it” (526). To make his point, Pollock goes to the linguistic roots shared by East and West: “. . . the etymon on which Heidegger bases this small but by no means trivial part of his argument [on the ontological linkage between dwelling and being] is found in Sanskrit, too, where it does not bear out his logic” (527-8). Pollock contrasts the etymological association of “building,” “dwelling” and “being” in Old English and High German cited by Heidegger, with that of “being” and “the world” in Sanskrit, and this, he notes, despite their common root. With different modes of cultivation, Pollock is saying, the same root will give different flowers. This is a powerful argument and Pollock does make Heidegger look guilty of “defensive indigenism.” [3] This is a mill, it has to be said, for which Heidegger himself offered quite a lot of grist. Yet, in this very demonstration of the historical contingency of any transcendental formulation, Pollock himself risks mirroring the essentialism he attributes to

Heidegger, and by extension to the West. The conservative political dimensions and outcomes of Heideggerian thought are for Pollock inseparable from the Heideggerian conviction that meanings “inhabit language primevally and eternally” (527). The same critical eye should in my view be brought to any like Sanskrit claim, notwithstanding any real geographical delimitation of the cosmopolis.

There is furthermore a *certain* Heidegger who might be seen as just the kind of paradoxical thinker Pollock seems to be looking for in the book’s final send-off, with the epilogue entitled “From Cosmopolitan-or-Vernacular to Cosmopolitan-and-Vernacular”: a thinker of the impossible yet somehow inevitable *relation* between the irreducibly, untranslatably local, idiomatic, vernacular on the one hand and the universal or cosmopolitan on the other. This is not to deny the existence of the narrowly Nazi Heidegger who provokes Pollock’s energetic challenge to the dominant interpretive model. But if Heidegger is of any lasting import at all, and indeed if he deserves mention in Pollock’s work, it is because there might also, and paradoxically, be another Heidegger—or rather the same Heidegger who proposes a truly, and literally *radical rootedness*, one that burrows down into the most chauvinistic affirmation of singularity precisely as it unveils something like the possibility of a newly transcendent universality. A Heidegger who pushes the West way beyond the West, so to speak. What I am suggesting here is nothing new. Jacques Derrida has proposed this kind of a critique, which is in no way that of a “value-neutral centrist” (438), and it is no coincidence if I feel, in the end, that Pollock’s project would be served in a deep way by a certain reading of Derrida—the Derrida who tries with all his might to make of the West its own most strange, most inappropriable other. The consequences of casting the “specific difficulties of [Heidegger’s] analysis aside” are not negligible. Reducing Heidegger to a Western essence requires silencing Derrida on Heidegger and the abyssal heterogeneity of Western metaphysics Derrida’s extensive work on Heidegger unveils. [4] If Derrida critiques Heidegger’s complicity with the metaphysics of presence, challenging Heideggerian *rootedness* with deconstructive *dissemination*, for example, the Derridean critique is led by the Heideggerian corpus as it is shown to embody breakthroughs of the very limitations it constructs. A key aspect of the Derridean reading is to disallow any distillation of Heideggerian essence. Paradoxically, essentialist readings risk complicity with the politically conservative dimensions of Heideggerian thought they seek to expose.

On the other hand, it is precisely Pollock’s critique of the instrumentalization of culture by power that provides the means to highlight and begin to analyze what I see as the instrumentalization, in the South/Southeast Asian literature and in its contemporary scholarly commentary, of the gender(ed) metaphor. Analysis of questions of sexual difference, taken at a deep enough level, can tell us something new about the mysterious local-universal relations with which Pollock is trying to come to grips, and can strengthen understandings of the power structures at work in and after the Sanskrit cosmopolis.

What I was drawn to in Pollock’s book, anecdotally and almost in spite of myself, is a scholarly wise-crack, a pithy expression in the form of a particularly suggestive and thus effective subtitle in Chapter Four: “Grammar Envy.” In the first place this title is an amusing hook, and a means of rapidly transmitting Pollock’s general thesis here: that the Sanskrit cosmopolis imposed its dominion not by the force of arms or unanswerable coercion, but by the impotent power of cultural persuasion. The peoples who came under the Sanskrit sway did so not as a result of

political, military or even economic conquest, but by what Pollock describes as the exercise of their own “free will.” This is the core of Pollock’s larger argument about the relations between power and culture. Whereas the West has generally conceived of culture as serving power on a Weberian model—the much-vaunted legitimation theory, whereby culture establishes, reinforces, buttresses or grounds power and sees itself in power’s mirror—in the Sanskrit cosmopolis the relations are radically different. Culture need not be beholden to power in the sub-continental paradigm; culture is not power’s lapdog, and may even constitute a power in its own right.

But like an overdetermined dream-signifier, this subtitle, “Grammar Envy,” says something more. It packs a psychoanalytic charge that is fundamental to the book, but not pursued therein. An appeal to something like psychoanalysis is in my view inevitable in pursuing Pollock’s attempt to come to grips with the as yet unexplained process by which the cosmopolis came into being. Pollock himself seems to appeal to a psychoanalytic dynamic at a key moment in his argument, when he evokes “impulse” and “desire” in an attempt to account for a causative relation that remains inexplicable within his model. As he puts it:

What transpired seems to have happened according to some cultural process of imitation and borrowing less familiar to us as causative than conquest or conversion, some *impulse* toward transculturation that made it sensible, even *desirable* [my emphasis], to adopt the new Sanskrit cultural-political style as an act of pure free will. (133)

I am running the risk—the terrible risk in Pollock’s eyes—of introducing an element foreign to our empirical matrix. Freud does make a few minor appearances in *Language of the Gods*, though he is never properly named. I will briefly comment on two of these appearances—an implicit one in the subtitle “Grammar Envy,” to which I will return shortly, and then as a source of frustration for Pollock, who sees Freud to exemplify (Western) theory obstructing genuine understanding of non-Western cultural structures. The Oedipus complex is footnoted as an example of “conceptions . . . —generalizations extrapolated from what always and of necessity are highly limited sets of particulars—[that] can often inhibit rather than enable thought” (32). I suspect the *mise en abyme* is not accidental, if not intentional in this marginalized, semi-manifest formulation: psychoanalysis, a science or analytic practice which aims to help people think and thus work through their inhibitions, is itself taken to be exemplary of “generalizations” which inhibit thought; a practice aiming to free people of the psychic chains they wear against their will is taken, *au contraire*, to tighten the chains of and on thought. More generally, I would argue that psychoanalysis, and in particular the Oedipus complex, cannot be so easily dispensed with—in trying to think from the West to the East, or vice versa. Not that Freudian theory simply applies, for example in the Southeast Asian case—far from it. But this remains an open, and most importantly, a very fruitful question. All the more so in that the question of whether it can be said to apply even and above all in the West is itself the source of a fascinating and interminable debate. [5]

Secondly, and more specifically, the psychoanalytic charge of the subtitle “Grammar Envy” raises a highly pertinent theoretical question. Penis envy is the unsatisfactory solution Freud alights upon in his lifelong, and arguably failed attempt to account for female sexuality. It is unsatisfactory in the first place as a theoretical solution to the “problem” that femininity

constitutes for Freud's theory of sexuality: it is all he can propose (which he does not do very convincingly, even by his own assessment) as a substitute, in the case of the girl, for the threat of castration. This is because castration has no purchase on the "already castrated" girl, and so Freud looks to penis envy in order to convince her, precisely, to abandon her primal love object, the mother. When the little boy's masturbation is curtailed under the threat of castration, Freud argues, he abandons the object of his desire, his mother. The girl, on the other hand, develops contempt for her mother upon recognition of the latter's lack of a penis, blames her mother for her own lack, and transfers her desire to her father. The implausible hypothesis of penis envy is in many ways the key to Freud's entire theoretical edifice. Penis envy is an unsatisfactory theoretical solution, but what is *irresistible* about it is the typically Freudian *mise en abyme* whereby this unsatisfactory theory is precisely a theory of un-satisfaction: penis envy is a structurally unsatisfiable desire. By this token, incidentally, it can be taken as the very model of desire.

Whatever else it may be, penis envy can be understood as part of a damning analysis of a certain structure of phallogocratic oppression: if girls envy boys their prized "possession," it is because they learn early on that in such a society, power and its avatars (not the least of which is culture, as Pollock points out repeatedly) accrue to the boys' account alone. From this perspective, penis envy is simply a powerful description or metaphor of the subjugation of women in misogynistic society. [6]

Pollock's expression "Grammar Envy" suggests a similar subjection and indeed a sexualized representation of the cosmopolis, and so of the cosmopolitan-vernacular relationship. An indigenous culture, like a young girl, would be torn from its mother(-tongue) only by means of an insidious phallic power-play. The "Grammar Envy" section of *Language of the Gods* examines a particular incidence of a broader phenomenon. Here Pollock describes vying cosmopoli, with each king/kingdom writing his/its own Sanskrit grammar. A manifestation of prowess meant to outdo others, the systematic codification of Sanskrit, along with the archivization thereof, constructs and maintains social order within a (thus-) defined polity. [7]

Put differently, Pollock's hypothesis about the difference between the Sanskrit cosmopolis and Western power-culture models can help us look anew at psychoanalytic theories of sexual difference. Because the subordination of women, according to orthodox Freudian psychoanalysis in any case, does not happen, to use Pollock's terms, through "conquest or conversion." In a very particular sense, and this is perhaps the most contentious aspect of Freud's theory, penis envy serves to obviate the necessity of conquest: it is the symptom of an always already colonized state. Women are not forced kicking and screaming, against their will, to worship the phallus. It might even seem that they do so of their own accord.

If penis envy names the subjection of women, if it accounts for what Freud describes as their improbable (and for the theorist problematic) renunciation, substitution, transformation of themselves on the painful road to a normative sexual position, it is difficult to describe it as being the result of anything like "free will." Indeed, it is tempting to see the very lack of military force, so to speak, as the sign of an even more elevated violence, an even more pernicious and devastating violence precisely because it is sublimated: such is the brutality of phallogocentrism that women are forced in some sense to become their own executioners. That, in a word, is what

penis envy describes. Quite aside from the psychoanalytic problematization of free will (the fact that free will is an enlightenment concept predicated on a pre-psychoanalytic notion of the conscious, intentional, self-present subject . . .) to which I will return in a moment, penis envy deconstructs the easy opposition between conquest and free choice. The lack of explicit, effective, overpowering physical coercion does not mean the absence of violence or constraint.

Pollock intuits a problematization of his nonetheless oft-repeated over-arching theory of free will; he even detects its gendered aspects. In Chapter Eight, following a discussion of the inapplicability of the terms “mother” and “father tongues” to the South Asian context, he highlights the question of gender in the general engendering of writing. This apparently contradictory rhetorical move, whereby Pollock rejects the gendered terminology for having been imported from the West, only to suggest a deeper formulation of gender relations shared by East and West, is a nice display of Pollock’s inclination to deconstruct rather than re-erect binary oppositions, despite frequent appearances to the contrary. He deploys a Western example of generalization as an interpretive framework for the South Asian case:

To write, Thoreau implies, especially to write literarily, in no matter which language, is to enter a new context of power—even, perhaps, patriarchal power—beyond that of speech. And in this new context of literacy, especially in its highest form, literary literacy, every language comes to be invested with unfamiliar and ever more stridently articulated rules of usage. The very capacity to write literarily is a sign not only of privilege and authority but also of disciplined subordination to norms and constraints. Asserting this capacity is a theme powerfully present in Tukaram and others. And what made the assertion in those cases an actual defiance was the enactment in the vernacular of the very norms and constraints of literary Sanskrit that centuries of denial had seemed to render impossible. (319)

Coming to writing is one of the great feminist questions of our times. [8] What does it mean for women to seize the patriarchal power of the pen? If assertion of the capacity to write entails subordination to the patriarchal order, how do we negotiate the double bind? Pollock’s characterization of the solution proposed by the (feminine) vernaculars reads a bit like Freud’s, supposedly proposed by women. Here is how Pollock describes the challenge made to and by the vernacular:

It is this asymmetry, and the cosmopolitan culture that long constituted the higher pole in the relationship, that vernacularisation challenged by the act of literary writing. And it did so by localizing features of the cosmopolitan literary culture whose very lack in the languages of Place had constituted their inferiority in the first instance. (317)

The female/vernacular is understood to be always already lacking; she responds to this perceived lack by identification with the male order of and in writing. There will always be a question of the extent to which breaking out of subordination requires, and indeed effects, another, higher form of subordination. As Pollock writes of the post-cosmopolitan vernacularization process, “the *deśī* [place, locale] not only could be but had to be subjected to the discipline of cultural theorization in the new vernacular world” (407). Coming to (literary) writing went part and parcel with propagating patriarchy. It is in this context that I would propose to pursue Pollock’s

own suggestion that “the story of South Asian literary culture in part concerns the ongoing confrontation with and contestation of this internal colonization of the field of the literary” (321). I would reformulate this in broader terms, to suggest that the story of South and Southeast Asian culture concerns the ongoing confrontation with and contestation of colonization. This is to embrace Pollock’s portrait of language and literature as constitutive, rather than reflective, of society, and to point up the impossibility of establishing any absolute distinction between “internal” and “external” colonization. And this is not to deny the historic nature of different forms of colonization.

Pollock refers on several occasions to the supposedly non-phallocratic nature of pre- or sub-Sanskritic Southeast Asian cultures. For him the Cambodian epigraphic corpus attests to the validity of a widely accepted scholarly paradigm positing a distinctive Southeast Asian social system. In this paradigm, the relative equality of the sexes is seen as one of a few traits which together give regional coherence to the Southeast Asian region in counter-distinction to the irrevocably phallocratic cultures of their neighbors. Of Cambodia, Pollock writes:

Even more conspicuously divergent [from the *praśasti* record of the sub-continent] is the prominence of women, from the first verse of the first record of the time of Jayavarman (c. fifth century) to the very last, of 1293, which consists of a grand *praśasti* on the king’s chief queen of a sort not found in India . . . Such foregrounding is without obvious parallel in South Asia and can presumably be attributed to specific kinship structures in the region. (126)

The kinship structures evoked here to underpin evidence of cultural specificity, and more precisely, of cultural specificity as grounded in gender relations, are systems of reckoning descent which are cognatic (i.e., descent from an ancestor or ancestress through a series of links that can be male or female or any combination of the two) but which nonetheless favor the maternal line. It is not that women reigned over men, but the principle of male primogeniture did not simply hold in ancient Cambodia. Polygamy was one of the central causes for succession disputes, insofar as it produced numerous candidates for the role of primogenus. The epigraphic record repeatedly shows princes vying for the throne, like Brahmans vying for that special place at court, and establishing their claims through maternal connections.

The equality suggested by this model of kinship reckoning for rule is indeed relative. Another principal form of evidence evoked in support of the prominence-of-women model invites similar qualification regarding the sort of equality it describes. Women, it has long been noted, hold the purse-strings in Southeast Asia. Historical documentation of the active role of Southeast Asian women in the marketplace in the pre-modern era has contributed significantly to the widespread embrace of the “relative equality of the sexes” paradigm. Notwithstanding Barbara Andaya’s work on the subject, insufficient attention has been paid to the cultural value endowed to those who thus hold some degree of economic power in the region. [9]

Similarly, inadequate attention has been given to the ways in which this postcolonial reading of Southeast Asian specificity is embedded in old phallocratic tropes. Matrilineal systems are understood to rely on the senses, on directly perceptible fact, while patrilineal reckoning can only be based on the intelligible, i.e., on a certain conjecture. The hypothesis of a linear historical

progression from the sensible to the intelligible is embedded in broader understandings of civilizational advance. A certain discourse on Southeast Asian indigenous identity, on the region's pre-history as it were, fits all too easily into the grand historical narrative we have inherited.

A last caveat in this regard derives directly from the Cambodian material referred to by Pollock in the citation above. The late Angkorian text known as the "Phimeanakas" inscription and consisting "of a grand *praśasti* on the king's chief queen of a sort not found in India" (126) was also exceptional in the Cambodian context. [10] The Phimeanakas inscription is the only sustained eulogy of a woman, and the only one of more than one thousand ancient Sanskrit inscriptions in Cambodia said to have been written by a woman. The author, a sister of the eulogized chief queen, had succeeded the deceased in the king's favors. The queen's Sanskrit talents caught the attention of colonial translators. The text's last great translator, G. Coedès, provides a telling characterization of the queen's Sanskrit usage:

The fact is that this text is remarkably correct, while nonetheless written in a language much more simple than the productions of the prince authors of the Ta Prohm and Preah Khan inscriptions, and especially of the pundits who composed the inscriptions of the Prasat Chrung. [11]

"Remarkably correct" though "simple," this characterization is strikingly reminiscent of ways in which Sanskrit epigraphy in Cambodia was generally compared to that of the sub-continent by colonial commentators. The tone is one of surprise, not without an element of disdain. The imperial-colonial schema should be familiar to us by now: Cambodia is to India as Woman is to Man. One can only be struck by the uncanny communication between Pollock and his Sanskritic forebearers in their common association of women with specific place—in this instance, the fact that for Pollock it is the perceived epigraphic prominence of women that constitutes the local specificity of Cambodia. This is a case of Grammar Envy if ever there was one. I mean: How are we to interpret the socio-historical fact of a woman writing a Sanskrit *praśasti*? Can we be certain this reflects local (i.e., non-Sanskritic) prominence of women? How are we to interpret the distinction of a woman made through her masterly appropriation of the male attribute *par excellence*? Can local inflection be formulated or interpreted outside the confines of the larger hermeneutic schema by which woman is the quintessential embodiment of the local? Is the Phimeanakas text an example of the Sanskritization of local culture, where we detect the trace of local cultural traits in both content (a text about a female spiritual leader provoking the return of the departed through magical embodiment thereof) and form (a text written in remarkably "simple" Sanskrit by a woman)? Or is it an example of the vernacularization of Sanskrit culture, with the gestalt shift in perspective enabling us to foresee the future "literarization" of the Khmer language to formulate locally inflected cosmopolitan conceptions of the territory? [12] And how are we to interpret the colonial characterization of her style, by which the challenge that her writerly prowess might pose to the established order is effectively contained?

If psychoanalytic theory is "extrapolated from what always and of necessity are highly limited sets of particulars," so is, I believe, the very general conception of "free will" as it figures recurrently in Pollock's work. Both psychoanalysis and the notion of free will are firmly embedded in Western metaphysical formulations of the subject—and this is true even though the

one (psychoanalysis) might be said to pose a radical challenge to the theoretical purity of the other (free will). For, even in the absence of a psychoanalytic theory of the drives, is not an “impulse” precisely what challenges, limits, undermines, escapes “free will”? The enigmatic nature of Pollock’s quasi-explanation of the mysterious process by which the cosmopolis came into being lies not only in his evocation of “impulse” and “desire,” but more precisely, in the coupling of this drive, which by definition operates on a level beyond or short of self-control, with an affirmation of “pure free will.” Pollock has clearly made a decision to affirm the agency of the South and Southeast Asian subject. Whenever subjugation is acknowledged in his model, it is itself subordinated to an affirmation of agency. “Emulation,” “competition,” “antagonism,” “defiance”: these terms convey varying degrees of agency in reactions against subjugation, reactions nonetheless founded on some acceptance of subjugation. Still, it is the unqualified affirmation of the adoption, by free will, of Sanskrit and then of vernacular cultural-political style which recurs throughout the book with the most striking insistence, despite such signs of hesitation—or perhaps because of them. Particularly when associated with the very principle the notion of free will manifestly rejects (impulse, desire), this affirmation reads less like a conscious author’s exercise of free will than an internal as much as external compulsion. And it signals, I believe, an investment transcending scholarly objectivity—perhaps the feminist-vernacularist over-investment of today’s always already guilty Sanskritist.

The theoretical adjustment to Pollock’s model that I am proposing may appear radical insofar as it makes use of a psychoanalytic insight that Pollock explicitly rejects. In this case, however, the emphatic rejection supports my argument. This psychoanalytic insight comes as much from Pollock as it does from the Khmer cultural context, where the repeated affirmation of free will is itself always conditioned by some exhibition of a complex process problematizing any notion of the purity of the very “free will” affirmed. It is notable that Pollock appeals to the same model (“some *impulse* toward transculturation that made it sensible, even *desirable*, to adopt the new Sanskrit cultural-political style as an act of pure free will”) to explain what would appear to be diametrically opposed phenomena: the spread of the Sanskrit cosmopolis on the one hand, and its demise on the other. Of course both represented the adoption of the Sanskrit cultural-political style. The adoption of Sanskrit and the nonetheless reactive adoption of the vernaculars came down in some fundamental way to the same thing: the erection of phallogocentric power, even as this power is constituted through a challenge to established linguistic hierarchies, if not their veritable inversion.

The instrumentalization of psychoanalysis for its metaphors risks reducing the political productivity of literary operations to a vision of literature as simply reflective of society. Not unlike a *certain* Pollock, psychoanalysis sees the power of metaphor to exceed the rhetorical limits to which it is frequently thought to be confined. My appeal to psychoanalysis here amounts in the first instance to rehabilitating the status of metaphorical power Pollock establishes elsewhere in *The Language of the Gods*. On this basis we might further understandings of the rise and fall of politico-cultural entities so firmly anchored in the gendered metaphorical conjugation of the local and the cosmopolitan. Not everyone literally envies the penis, but the power it represents has proven historically nearly irresistible. Once we take this power seriously, psychoanalysis provides an interpretive morphology by which coercion and free will can be thought together to refine Pollock’s explanatory model.

Notes

[1] A. Thompson, *Engendering the Buddhist State: Reconstructions of Cambodian History*, Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism, to appear 2014.

[2] The following list is indicative, but far from exhaustive:

- The first Kannada “cosmopolitan vernacular” *praśasti* creatively straddles any vernacular/cosmopolitan thematic divide as it “references the king’s magnanimity in allowing his defeated enemies to keep their wives and, by implication, their power of governance (a variation on the long-lived topos of uprooting enemy kings and restoring them to tributary status . . .)” (334).

- From the *Kavirājamārgam*: “[Using archaic Kannada] is like wanting to make love to an old woman” (340). In other words, the language of *place* is a woman.

- In the Sri Lankan cosmopolitan vernacular the king is figured as the forehead ornament on the island personified as a beautiful woman (387).

- In the Javanese cosmopolitan vernacular Sanskrit is used to constitute the domain of the kshatriya code and “a transcendent ethic, while Javanese was used for the domain of the family, the sexual, the affective—and the actively political” (390).

- On Hindavi literarization: “more recently . . . scholars have convincingly emphasized the suitability of the vernacular to the Sufi aesthetic—mystical-ecstatic, extra-Quranic, even domestic and feminine” (393).

- From thirteenth-century dance theory (the *Nṛttaratnāvalī*): “Like an experienced courtesan pampered by kings, *deśī* [place, locale, country] seduces sophisticated men . . . ” (407).

- In a twelfth-century *praśasti* “Narasimha could still be described—according to an ancient patriarchal trope figuring political domination as sexual domination . . . [follows an excerpt from the text in question describing the king sporting with women of various regions]” (419).

- The complex figures of Poetry Man and Poetics Woman (Chapter 5.2 and Appendix A.5) developed in the tenth-century *Kāvyaśāstram* are an intriguing formulation of the standard sexual/linguistic hierarchy. Poetics Woman (born of the goddess Umā) is created to assuage the anger of Poetry Man (born of the Goddess of the Word, Sarasvatī through the intervention of Brahmā), the incarnation of poetry as the world. Chasing him, she adopts the dress of each region transversed; seduced, he does the same. Regional literary styles emerge. She is an embodiment of theory, adopting local inflection, and conditioning the possibility of the emergence of the transcendent comprehensive Poetry, itself an embodiment of the world.

[3] To borrow a phrase Pollock uses to characterize O.W. Wolters’ contestation of the Indianization paradigm.

[4] See in particular “Différance” and “The Ends of Man” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, 1982; and *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, University of Chicago Press, 1991.

[5] Cf. also the title of Chapter Thirteen, “Actually Existing Theory and its Discontents,” which reiterates in a similar manner Pollock’s notable dismissal of Freud. Cf. Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty’s work, which is something of an antidote to Pollock on points I am raising regarding psychoanalysis, gender and South Asian cultural histories. In particular: “When a Lingam Is Just a Good Cigar: Psychoanalysis and Hindu Sexual Fantasies,” in L. Bryce Boyer, Ruth M. Boyer and Stephen M. Sonnenberg, eds., *The Psychoanalytic Study of Society, Volume 18: Essays in Honor of Alan Dundes*, The Analytic Press: 1993; *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, Penguin: 2009.

[6] I am indebted to Eric Prenowitz for helping me think through these questions of psychoanalysis and sexual difference.

[7] See p. 177 in particular.

[8] This is the English title of a 1977 essay by Hélène Cixous. The original essay gave its name to a volume by Cixous, A. Leclerc and M. Gagnon, *La venue à l’écriture*, U.G.E., 10/18. See H. Cixous, “*Coming to Writing*” and *Other Essays* (ed. Deborah Jensen, trans. Sarah Cornell, Deborah Jensen, Ann Liddle, and Susan Sellers), Harvard University Press, 1991.

[9] Barbara Watson Andaya, *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia*, University of Hawaii Press, 2006.

[10] Pollock seems to have confused details of the Cambodian textual references. The famous *praśasti* on the king’s chief queen dates to the late twelfth century. The pages cited by Pollock (*Bulletin de l’Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient* 25: 393 ff.) follow a translation and commentary of the inscription in question, but themselves contain a translation and commentary of the last Sanskrit epigraph known in ancient Cambodia, composed more than one hundred years later.

[11] G. Coedès, “Grande stèle de Phīmānākās,” *Inscriptions du Cambodge*, vol. 2 (Paris: EFEO, 1942), p. 163.

[12] “Literarization” is the term Pollock uses to denote the process by which South Asian vernacular literatures arose in achieving conformity with the Sanskritic literary paradigm.