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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SANSKRIT COSMOPOLIS, 300 - 1300:
TRANSCULTURATION, VERNACULARIZATION,
AND THE QUESTION OF IDEOLOGY

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I.

The 'Sanskrit Cosmopolis' is the name I want to suggest for what may be the most complicated—and as a totality least studied—transregional cultural formation in the premodern world. While 'cosmopolis' might imply a number of things to different readers, it is on the 'polis' or political dimension that I want to concentrate. For one defining feature of the Sanskrit cosmopolis is that Sanskrit became the premiere instrument of political expression in the polities that comprised it, those of most of South and much of Southeast Asia. In part because of its geographical and temporal magnitude, in part because it constitutes something of a historical anomaly, this cultural formation has never been historicized or theorized as a whole, and any attempt to do so is likely to disappoint specialists of the particular formations among which its study has always been parceled out; even the dates I have given for framing the limits of its origin and dissolution may be disputed. But disagreement is inevitable in trying to make sense of this complex, and perplexing, chapter in the history of language and political-cultural power.

A number of factors, discussed in what follows, make Sanskrit's cosmopolitan career remarkable. First, the historical career of Sanskrit: Only slowly and reluctantly, it appears, did Sanskrit emerge as a public political language—such as we can characterize this from inscriptions—from the sacerdotal environment in which it was most at home. It emerges dramatically as such a language in the politics of the subcontinent after the beginning of the common era, something that happens almost simultaneously in Southeast Asia, and in very similar ways,

especially with reference to Sanskrit's complicated contests with regional languages. In the end, for the most part by the fourteenth century, Sanskrit lost these contests, and lost them everywhere, but before that happened it was to be found as the paramount linguistic medium by which ruling elites expressed their power from Purusapura (Peshawar) in Gandhāra in the northwest of the subcontinent to as far east as Pāṇḍurāṅga in Annam (south Vietnam) and Prambanan in central Java. There are important holes in the cosmopolis—in Sri Lanka, for example, for all of its history, and in Burma for much, Sanskrit is not used to articulate political will—that are almost as hard to explain as the presence of the cosmopolis itself.

Second, the conditions of possibility for Sanskrit's diffusion as a language of politics: No organized political power such as the Roman imperium, or coherent, scripture-based religious idea-system such as Islam, was at work here. Sanskrit's spread was effected by traditional intellectuals and religious professionals, often following in the train of scattered groups of traders and adventurers, and carrying with them disparate and decidedly uncanonized texts of a wide variety of competing religious orders, Śaiva, Buddhist, Vaiṣṇava, and others. Third, its social domain: There is little to suggest—the very fact that we have to ask the question is counterevidence—that Sanskrit was an everyday medium of communication in South let alone Southeast Asia, or that ever functioned as a language-of-trade, a bridge-, link-, or koine language or lingua franca (except among those traditional intellectuals) like other imperial or cosmopolitan languages such as Greek, Latin, Arabic, Persian, Chinese. Fourth, and related to this, its political work: We have little direct evidence that Sanskrit actually functioned as a language of practical imperium—the medium of chancellery communication or revenue accounting, for example—certainly not in Southeast Asia, almost certainly not in peninsular India or the Deccan (even for north India hard evidence is suspiciously scanty). What work then did Sanskrit do in much of the Sanskrit cosmopolis? One hypothesis I want to explore is that Sanskrit articulated politics not as material power—the power embodied in languages-of-state for purposes of boundary regulation or taxation, for example, for which so-called vernacular idioms typically remained the vehicle—but politics as aesthetic power. To some degree the Sanskrit 'cosmopolis' I shall describe con-

sists precisely in this common aesthetics of political culture, a kind of poetry of politics.

The spread of Sanskrit in the first millennium as a strikingly homogeneous expressive mode of political power, helped create a new kind of vast zone of cultural interaction, what some might name an ecumene. Constituted by no imperial power or church but in large part by a communicative system and its political aesthetic, the Sanskrit ecumene is characterized by a transregionally shared set of assumptions about the basics of power, or at least about the ways in which power is reproduced at the level of representation in language, and Sanskrit's unique suitability for this task. For the thousand-year period between roughly 300 - 1300 C.E., in the repertory of cultural forms in the package of empire, Sanskrit becomes the key item.

What I want to do here, first, is to chart in concrete detail the historical route whereby Sanskrit achieved this status. For this I will look rather briefly at Sanskrit's emergence as a public language of politics around the beginning of the common era; then in greater detail at its diffusion in southern India; and, again briefly, at what happens in two specific domains in Southeast Asia, Khmer country up to the end of Angkor, and early Java. All this is only a preliminary sketch for a reconstruction of the internal political-cultural histories of the politics that make up the Sanskrit cosmopolis—the shared traits that are developed, the nature of its local inflections, and the very variable conditions for its dissolution—which I will not have the space to provide here. I want instead to think aloud about what is important in the Sanskrit cosmopolis for both cultural and political theory. These are the themes, all closely related, of my subtitle: transculturation, vernacularization, and ideology.

Let me characterize briefly what concerns me here, by formulating some research questions: (a) How did the transculturation process at work in the Sanskrit cosmopolis function, that is, what induced people to abandon local cultures, and eventually to re-assert them? Can comparative analysis with other processes of transculturation in antiquity (Romanization, for example) or modernity (American globalization) reveal anything about the specificities of the Sanskrit case? (b) Can we make any valid generalization about the relationships between Sanskrit and vernacular culture especially in terms of political language? What