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Language and prestige in South and Southeast Asia*

(published in: *Ansehenssache: Formen von Prestige in Kulturen des Altertums*. Ed. Birgit Christiansen & Ulrich Thaler. München: Herbert Utz. 2012. (Münchner Studien zur Alten Welt, 9.) Pp. 187-193.)

The success of Sanskrit as a language has been phenomenal in South and Southeast Asia. Originally it was the language of a relatively limited group of people, the Brahmins, who belonged to certain parts of northern India. It was not, to the extent we can tell, used outside this group. Inscriptions do not use Sanskrit in India for the first five centuries or so counting from their initial appearance. Then everything suddenly changes. The first major Sanskrit inscription appears around the year 150 of the Common Era. More or less at the same time the Buddhists of northwestern India start using Sanskrit, abandoning the Middle Indic languages they had used so far. And this is only the beginning. Within a few centuries Sanskrit finds its way into inscriptions not only all over the South Asian subcontinent, but also in Southeast Asia. This goes on for about a millennium, so much so that the American researcher Sheldon Pollock speaks of a “Sanskrit cosmopolis”, which he dates approximately between 300 and 1300 CE.

How is this fulgurant success of the Sanskrit language to be explained? Pollock emphasizes the political dimension, which is the reason why he speaks of a “Sanskrit cosmopolis”. One defining feature of the Sanskrit cosmopolis, he states (1996: 197), “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.” Sanskrit, he points out, was not an ordinary lingua franca used for trade and international business, it played a different role:¹ “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. [...] There is little to

* For a fuller presentation of the thesis here presented and references to the relevant literature, see Bronkhorst, 2010.

¹ Pollock, 1996: 198.

suggest [...] that Sanskrit was an everyday medium of communication in South let alone Southeast Asia, or that [it] ever functioned as a language-of-trade, a bridge-, link-, or koiné language or lingua franca (except among those traditional intellectuals) [...]" Pollock continues: "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 [188] Southeast Asia, almost certainly not in peninsular India or the Deccan [...]" What, then, was the role of Sanskrit? Pollock proposes the following hypothesis (pp. 198-99): "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 (i.e., Pollock, JB) shall describe consists precisely in this common aesthetics of political culture, a kind of poetry of politics."² Further explanation follows:³ "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." Having discussed the epigraphical and related evidence from a number of regions, Pollock then depicts the situation around 1000 CE in the following passage:⁴

A traveler around the year 1000 [...] would have seen, from the plain of Kedu in central Java to the basin of Tonlé Sap in Cambodia, from Gaṅgaikoṇḍacoḷapuram in Tamil Nadu to Patan in Gujarat and beyond, imperial formations that had many features in common. The material and social ones I have ignored here: their largely hierarchized societies, administered by a corps of functionaries, scribes, tax collectors, living in grand agrarian cities geometrically planned in orientation to the cardinal points and set within imaginary geographies that with their local mountains, rivers, and springs recapitulated the geography of India, urban structures "freighted with cosmic symbolism, helping one to visualize the order of things" [...] It is their common political-cultural, especially literary-cultural, features I have emphasized: the existence of cultural and political élites assiduously mastering the intricate codes and protocols of Sanskrit poetry, and the publication of their works throughout these cities, in varying degrees of density

² Similarly Pollock, 2006: 14.

³ Pollock, 1996: 199.

⁴ Pollock, 1996: 229-30.

and grandeur — stately public poems in Sanskrit engraved on the ubiquitous copper-plates recording gifts and donations, or on stone pillars looming up from gigantic architectural wonders.

There was thus, I think, a certain concrete reality to the ‘Sanskrit cosmopolis’, one that does not exist only in the retrospective gaze of the historian. For a millennium, and across half the world, élites participated in a peculiar supralocal ecumene. This was a form of shared life very different from that produced by common subjecthood or fealty to a central power, even by shared religious liturgy or credo. It was instead a symbolic network created in the first instance [189] by the presence of a similar kind of discourse in a similar language deploying a similar idiom and style to make similar kinds of claims about the nature and aesthetics of polity — about kingly virtue and learning; the *dharma* of rule; the universality of dominion. A network, accordingly, wherein the élite shared “a broadly based communality of outlook”, and could perceive “ubiquitous signs of its beliefs”.

Sanskrit, then, was according to Pollock the language of a cultural and political élite. He does not say, no doubt on purpose, that it was the language of a *religious* élite. Indeed, much of his argumentation depends on the fact that Sanskrit had crossed the boundaries of one specific religion. Sanskrit, Pollock maintains, is no longer the exclusive property of Brahmanism. The most obvious confirmation of this claim is the Buddhist adoption of Sanskrit in the early centuries of the Common Era.

Pollock’s hypothesis is interesting. It is yet based on an oversimplification. I will argue in this lecture that Sanskrit was, and remained, primarily the language of Brahmanism. In order to do so, it will be necessary to put some matters straight. Most importantly, it will be necessary to rectify the notion according to which Brahmanism is a religion among others.

The expression Brahmanism can be used, to be sure, to designate the religion and culture of the Veda, but it is only in a very limited sense that these can be said to have spread over South and Southeast Asia in subsequent centuries. No, the spread of Brahmanism was primarily the spread of Brahmins *as Brahmins*. That is to say, a region is brahmanized when its population, or its rulers, accept Brahmins as the by right most eminent members of society. This population, or these rulers, are not converted to a different religion: no converts are made to Vedic religion, or to any other specific religion promulgated by Brahmins. No, these populations or rulers are made to accept a vision of society in which Brahmins are highest because they have access to the supernatural. An important instrument in the hands of the Brahmins is their knowledge of

the Veda, a collection of texts which the vast majority of the population is not even allowed to hear recited, much less study. It is their often secret knowledge that gives Brahmins the power to work for the good of a kingdom, its ruler and its population. It also allows them to do the opposite, and this is an important reason to humor them.

Brahmanism also had another side. It presents a socio-political vision, with clear ideas about society and about the role which the king is to play in it. This political side of Brahmanism was given expression in an extensive literature. Direct political advice can be found in the Artha-śāstra, attributed to Kauṭilya or Cāṇakya. Other texts, most notably the relevant portions of the Manu-smṛti, do much the same. [190] As important as these texts are the ancient Sanskrit epics, the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa, which contain much direct and, more often, indirect advice for rulers. And let us not forget the literature on *nīti*, correct behaviour, part of which addresses itself directly to the rulers of countries (*rājanīti*).

Brahmins succeeded in the course of time to convince many rulers that it was a good thing to provide them with what they needed to carry out their rites and do whatever else would benefit the kingdom. The growing presence of Brahmins all over South Asia is well documented, but they also became a presence in Southeast Asia, even in countries that turned to Buddhism: “even in states where Hinayana Buddhism prevailed, Brahmins played an important ceremonial part, especially at Court, and still do so in Burma, Siam and Cambodia, though themselves strikingly different from their counterparts in India.”⁵

This is not the occasion to enter into details. The general conclusion is that Brahmanism, essentially a socio-political vision, can easily be combined with a variety of religious beliefs and practices. Normally the condition is that Brahmins be recognized as the priests *par excellence*. As important, if not more so, is the condition that Brahmins be recognized as the most competent political counsellors. These two conditions often go hand in hand: the person in charge of courtly ritual can at the same time be a king’s closest adviser. This is the way in which the role of the Brahmanical *purohita* was envisaged. This double role does not necessarily interfere with the religious inclinations of the king’s subjects, nor indeed with those of the king himself.

There are two main objections one might raise against the picture I have just presented. The first one is: If Sanskrit is inseparable from Brahmanism, why was its

⁵ Hall, 1968: 12.

political use in inscriptions (and perhaps elsewhere) initiated by foreign rulers in Northwest India, viz. Scythians and Kuṣāṇas? And the second one: If Sanskrit is and remained the language of Brahmins, why did the Buddhists of Northwest India, who were not all Brahmins, adopt Sanskrit for their own use? Let us consider these objections separately.

The first objection is: Why was the political use of Sanskrit initiated by foreign rulers? The answer that our reflections so far suggest is: Because the rulers concerned had adopted the socio-political vision of Brahmanism. This suggested answer is confirmed in a most striking manner by an analysis of the first important surviving inscription in Sanskrit, the one by the Kṣatrapa king Rudradāman, which dates from shortly after 150 CE. This inscription is not only the first political inscription in Sanskrit, it is also among the first to use Brahmanical categories to refer to people's position in society. It refers to a person who is a Vaiśya, and mentions "all the varṇas", i.e. all the four classes in which Brahmanism divided society: Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas, and Śūdras. It also reveals a certain partiality toward Brahmins where it [191] states that Rudradāman had carried out certain works "in order to [benefit]⁶ cows and Brahmins for a thousand of years". It follows that Rudradāman knew, and honoured, Brahmins, and that he knew, and respected, their vision of society as consisting of a number of varṇas, one of them being that of the Vaiśyas. His choice of Sanskrit for this inscription cannot be seen independently of this.

Let us turn to the second objection: If Sanskrit is and remained the language of Brahmins, why did the Buddhists of Northwest India, who were not all Brahmins, adopt Sanskrit for their own use? The answer to this second question is more complicated than that to the first one, but is not unrelated. In its simplest form it takes the following shape: The Buddhists of Northwest India were confronted with Sanskrit as the official court language. Since they needed support from the court, since moreover they might be called upon to defend their views at the court, they could not but adjust to the new situation.

However, this is not the whole answer. Why, one could ask, did the Buddhists not contest the Brahmanical influence at the court, and along with it, the use of Sanskrit, the language of the Brahmins? Why did they not try to compete with the Brahmins also on a

⁶ This is the interpretation suggested by Kielhorn (1906: 49 n. 2).

linguistic level, for example by composing political treatises in one of the Middle Indic languages they used?

The answer to these questions is *not that* Sanskrit was somehow more suitable for the task. It lies rather with the *task* itself. Buddhism could not compete with Brahmanism in the two areas in which the latter excelled: (i) offering ritual (or magical) protection, and (ii) providing useful political advice.

The first of these two areas hardly needs comments. Whatever the exact ways in which Buddhists of the period practised their religion, major rituals were not part of it. Let us therefore concentrate on the second area.

Unlike Brahmanism, Buddhism did not start out with a clear and explicit idea about what society and political entities should be like. Originally a renouncers' movement, it was supposed to have left such concerns behind. When circumstances obliged Buddhists to take position with regard to societal and political issues, they were ill prepared, and had not much to offer. The rejection of violence in particular stood in the way of most practical advice one could give to kings. The jobs of kings depended essentially on the use of violence, whether within the kingdom to render justice or preserve his power, or without it in the constant wars that opposed rulers to their neighbours. For Brahmanism this situation was essentially unproblematic: A king, by virtue of his position in society, i.e. because of being a Kṣatriya, *had* to use violence. Not using violence in his position amounted to committing a sin. Buddhists could not agree to this. Since they did not accept the fundamentally different nature of the different classes in society, what is sin for one is sin for another. Kings are not absolved from the sin of using violence. Buddhist advice for kings was therefore often [192] extremely impractical, if not totally useless. One text that tries to give such advice, Nāgārjuna's *Precious Garland (Ratnāvali)*, ends with the following verse (p. 148): "However, if from the unrighteousness of the world it is difficult to rule religiously, then it is right for you to become a monastic for the sake of practice and grandeur." In other world, trying to be a good and virtuous king may turn out to be impossible. In that case the Buddhists have no further advice to offer, except that it is time to turn one's back to the world and become a monk.

Buddhists, then, could not compete with Brahmins at the royal court, not at any rate where practical matters of society and politics were concerned. How did they react to

this situation? In a most surprising manner. They left the occupation of giving political advice to Brahmins. They adopted an essentially Brahmanical vision of society and of the way it should be ruled (with the occasional critical remarks here and there). They started depicting their own founder, the Buddha, as having been born into a Brahmanical world, and his father, King Śuddhodana, as having been a perfect Brahmanical ruler. All this happens most notably in Buddhist texts that were composed in Sanskrit, most clearly perhaps in the works of Aśvaghōṣa. In other words, the Buddhist adoption of Sanskrit went hand in hand with the adoption of a Brahmanical vision of society and of the place and task of kingdoms. The Buddhist adoption of Sanskrit also implied the adoption of a Brahmanical terminology to speak about these matters.

Let us return to the question, Why did the Buddhists of Northwest India adopt Sanskrit? The answer I propose is that they did so because Sanskrit had become the language of the court, and because these Buddhists depended upon the goodwill and generosity of the court. They had to plead their cause at the court, and this now had to be done in Sanskrit. Why had Sanskrit become the language of the court? Because the Brahmins, whose language it was, had much to offer to the court in terms of ritual protection and political advice, quite independently of the religious inclinations or preferences of the ruler. Here, however, I wish to add that the Buddhists were at least in part responsible for the success of the Brahmins, by having ceded to the latter the competences which made them valuable at the royal court.

What does all this tell us about the question we set out to explore, that of language and prestige? I would propose the following. The spread of Sanskrit in South and Southeast Asia during the first millennium is due to the prestige that Sanskrit had acquired. Why did prestige come to be associated with Sanskrit rather than with any of the numerous other languages in this vast geographical area? Because Sanskrit had succeeded in becoming the language of politics, and therefore of the courts. Why Sanskrit and not another language? Because Sanskrit was the language of the Brahmins, who were more sophisticated than others in all domains related to societal and political issues, including supernatural means to protect the ruler. How [193] had the Brahmins acquired those skills? They had inherited them from an old tradition that had linked them to the royal court, a tradition which they had subsequently expanded and enriched when they had to

try their luck in different kingdoms. Their competitors, most notably the Buddhists, had no such tradition, and had great difficulties elaborating a useful political philosophy of their own. But even though the Buddhist could not give much useful advice *to* the royal court, they needed support and protection *from* the royal court. This led to the situation in which Buddhists were obliged to adopt the language of their arch-rivals, at the expense of the languages they had used so far.

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