
Introduction

Authority, Aesthetics, and the Wisdom of Foolishness

With characteristic playfulness, the subject of this volume's portrait, Gananath Obeyesekere, calls his contribution a celebration of 'foolishness'. But this is indeed a fertile foolishness. It implies not only an admission that the ethnographer lacks omniscience, but also a positive freedom to engage passionately in comparison, to avoid disciplinary overspecialization, to understand that the "non-rational is not necessarily irrational," and to acknowledge the power of art and literature as potential inspirations for our work. Of course, as Obeyesekere admits, the ludic and the ironic also entail risks, as they can provoke anger in others. Nonetheless, his words have many echoes in this volume, particularly in their invocation of the power of the aesthetic combined with the ironic, exemplified by reference to the fool in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. They also provoke thoughtful reflections from our three commentators on Obeyesekere's work, Douglas Hollan, Luís Quintais, and Unni Wikan.

Fools, as we know, often stand at the side of authority, poking fun at hierarchy without quite fomenting revolution. This stance suggests resonances with Andreas Bandak and Tom Boylston's exploration titled "The 'Orthodoxy' of Orthodoxy." Their contribution is more than a summary of the anthropology of this branch of Christianity; it is also an argument about how to think in theoretical terms *through* the study of Orthodoxy. Bandak and Boylston consider the ways in which deferral to religious authority can be significant but decidedly non-definitive in suggesting modes of engagement with the sacred. In doing so, they also take us back to aesthetics, as the religious practices they examine often operate in multi-sensory and non-linguistic ways. And, in a wonderfully resonant phrase, they explain how, in "an orthodox religious world, one talks not about the *invention* of tradition but about the *intention* of tradition."

We come back to the ambivalences that surround—and may constitute—authority in Thomas Kirsch's discussion of religious leadership among African Christians. Kirsch pursues Weberian themes in addressing how leaders are both subjects and objects of power, exerting influence while remaining deeply reliant on acts of empowerment that are granted through followers. Thus, the leader must somehow mediate between distancing self from others through raising unusually high expectations, on the one hand, and embedding the self in socio-religious networks that bolster but also frequently destabilize authority, on the other. The people whom Kirsch focuses on, Pentecostal-charismatic leaders in rural Zambia, are "precarious centers," and as we know the center may not always hold. Note again a further dimension to Kirsch's argument: the fact that leaders' supposed centrality in ritual interactions is enacted through "assemblages of paraphernalia"—human and non-human actants that include material and immaterial technologies. Spatial forms, songs, hands that clap and touch, all these may complement the Bible. Aesthetics and the articulation of authority come together once more.

José Mapril moves us towards the study of Islam in his contribution. The forms of authority that he addresses involve the creation of citizenship in the context of the Portuguese state



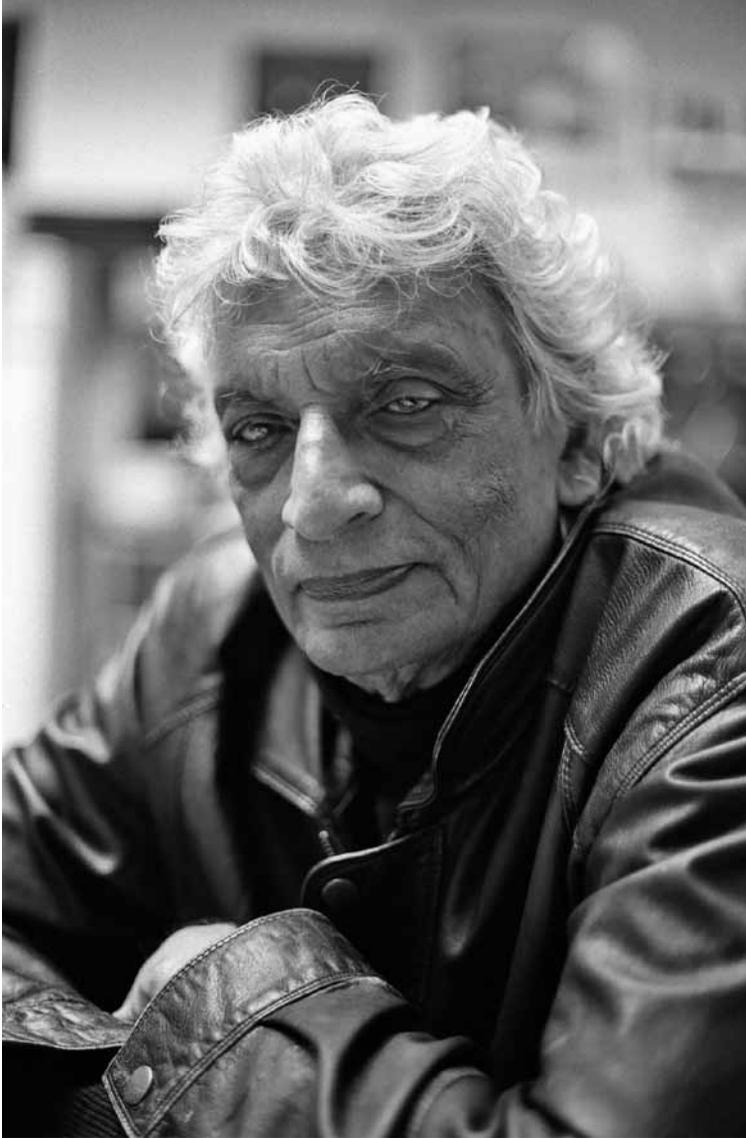
alongside the cultivation of religious subjecthood through religious education. Mapril shows how “embodied dispositions” developed in relation to Islam must co-exist with the ability “to explain to others, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, what Islam is.” At the same time, citing Tariq Mahmood, he notes that his informants address a narrow Western, secular normativity whose assumptions are that the “material expressions of a particular religion—its rituals, observances, laws, and scriptures—are linked only contingently to religious truth itself.” Mapril’s piece thus continues a debate about secularity that we introduced in volume 4 of this journal (2013), with contributions by Steve Bruce and Emerson Giumbelli.

David Morgan, a scholar of both religious studies and art, continues his long-standing examination of ways of religious seeing in “The Ecology of Images.” The broader theoretical project of Morgan’s article is to bring phenomenology into the same intellectual ground as network theory. The religious ‘ecology’ he explores is made up of images located within networks that endow them with agency. In this sense, what he calls “focal objects” have a distinct resemblance to Kirsch’s Pentecostal leaders. Like Kirsch, Morgan invokes the ideas of centrality and assemblage, although for him: “A network is not, in fact, a single shape with a directing center; it is a shifting form of relationality that results as human and non-human actors interact in the transient shape of an assemblage.” Once again, Morgan’s piece sets up a useful dialogue, not only with other pieces in this volume but also with a contribution to volume 4, Sonia Hazard’s discussion of the material turn in the study of religion.

Birgit Meyer, one of Morgan’s intellectual interlocutors, shares with Kirsch an abiding interest in the anthropology of African Christianity. We are delighted to include Meyer’s inaugural professorial lecture at Utrecht University, titled “Mediation and the Genesis of Presence.” We have also gathered together a number of constructive responses to her plea for a material approach to religion, commissioned from well-known scholars who represent art history, anthropology, and religious studies, and who have often cross-cut these disciplines in their own work. Meyer and her conversation partners continue this volume’s examination of the aesthetic, doing so in ways that reflect the aims of our journal as a whole as well as the ‘foolish’ suggestions of Gananath Obeyesekere: to think about anthropology in relation to other scholarly disciplines, to work comparatively, and to question constantly both the category of religion and the assumptions behind the anthropology of religion.

Our special section on pilgrimage to Holy Land sites represents a departure for this journal. As Jackie Feldman points out in his introductory discussion, contributors examine sacred space, place, and narrative as expressions of knowledge and power (see also Kim Knott’s piece on religion and space in volume 1 of this journal, in 2010). Thus, we come back once more to the varied materiality of Holy Land pilgrimages and even perhaps to the idea of its sites as precarious centers. As will become evident, if taken together, these special section pieces also raise an issue mentioned by Kirsch—that of the ethical self-positioning of the ethnographer. The analytical stances of the contributors range from relatively distanced to politically and/or emotionally engaged. A variation on this theme of engagement and intellectual positioning is also presented by Rebekka King in our teaching section, where her exploration of what happens when the Anthropology of Christianity is taught in a seminary provides some revealing reflections on the discipline in complex dialogue with students who are also believers.

In conclusion, we use this editorial to thank Ramon Sarró, friend and colleague, for his vital work in helping to found and edit this journal in its early years. Ramon has moved from day-to-day editing duties to joining our editorial board. We are grateful for all his work thus far and also for the advice that we know he will continue to give us in the future.



Gananath Obeyesekere