The Limits of Cultural Hybridity: On Ritual Monsters, Poetic Licence and Contested Postcolonial Purifications

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There are many parallels between hybridity theory, especially as it has been developed in the work of Bhabha, and theories of liminality in anthropology, particularly in the work of Turner and Douglas. These share a stress on sited performance and the specific positioning of actors. However, the stress in hybridity theory on the colonial encounter as the source of reflexivity and double consciousness does not engage, I argue, with the fact that cultures produce their own indigenous forms of transgression and hence also of critical reflexivity and satire: ritual clowns, carnivals, poetry, and the like. Moreover, while transgression is a potential tool of resistance which upturns taken-for-granted hierarchies, it plays dangerously on the boundary and, taken out of context, can become a source of offence, especially for postcolonial diasporas struggling for recognition. This raises the question: what are the creative limits of cultural hybridity?

In order to be institutionally effective as a discipline, the knowledge of cultural difference must be made to foreclose on the Other; … The Other loses its power to signify, to negate, to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse. However impeccably the content of an ‘other’ culture can be known, however anti-ethnocentrically it is represented, it is its location as the closure of grand theories, the demand that, in analytic terms, it be always the good object of knowledge, the docile body of difference, that reproduces a relation of domination and is the most serious indictment of the institutional powers of critical theory (Bhabha 1994: 31).

We are by now all too familiar with critiques of ‘colonial anthropology’, from Asad’s (1973) early deconstructivist exposure of British anthropology’s apparent collusion with the colonial project, to the denunciation by the authors of Writing culture of modernist anthropology’s false claims to ethnographic authority (Clifford 1988; Clifford & Marcus 1986; Marcus & Fischer 1988).1 The most recent assault has come from postcolonial studies; as in the quotation above, colonial anthropologists, among others (Bhabha lists Montesquieu, Barthes, Kristeva, Derrida, and Lyotard), are accused of denying oppositional agency to the ‘other’, the power to signify, negate, and initiate historic desire. Yet while these critiques urge us to recognize the historicity of culture, they appear to construct their own historical narrative through an act of amnesia, an erasure from memory and history of a particular strand of British social anthropology that moved away from descriptions of enclosed cultures to an open and explicit focus, from 1940 onwards, on colonial
administration, race relations, urbanization, labour migration, ‘tribalism’, political ethnicity, and social movements. Dominant in this trend were anthropologists associated with the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Central Africa (on ‘the Manchester School’, as it came to be known, see Hannerz 1980; R. Werbner 1990).

The erasure is significant. However, here I want to go beyond that act of forgetfulness in order to argue that the infinitesimal details of a local culture with its seemingly arcane rituals and mythologies, as studied by key modernist anthropologists, were also ways of reflecting upon oppositional agency, transgression, and cultural reflexivity. Far from denying the very possibility of critical consciousness, modernist anthropology afforded insight into how, in apparently closed societies, ritual performances and myths enacted ambivalences of power and paradoxes of sociality.

Cultural hybridity, liminality, and transgression, key tropes animating my argument, have dominated recent writings in cultural and postcolonial studies. In many senses this has revitalized the focus on topics of enduring interest to anthropology and illuminated them in new ways. As in some of my earlier work (e.g. P. Werbner 1997a), I attempt here to recover these metaphors for anthropology. One key criticism often levelled against the notion of cultural hybridity is that it assumes the prior existence of whole cultures, a vision of culture much discredited in contemporary anthropology. Against that I pose the possibility that cultures may be grasped as porous, constantly changing and borrowing, while nevertheless being able to retain at any particular historical moment the capacity to shock through deliberate conflations and subversions of sanctified orderings. My argument rests on a key distinction made by Bakhtin between ‘organic’ and ‘intentional’ hybridity. To illustrate this distinction, let me turn first to a ceremony in 1938, the opening of a bridge in modern Zululand, as it was described by Gluckman (1958 [1940]).

In his fine-grained description, Gluckman (1958: 11) reveals that the ceremony was a cultural mishmash. It was organized by the Chief Native Commissioner (CNC), who added exotic touches to a basically technocrat-modernist European ceremony. The key moment of the ceremony was the cutting, by the CNC’s car, of a tape stretched across the bridge. The car was preceded by Zulu warriors singing the \textit{ihubo}. Most of the important Zulu were dressed in European riding clothes, while the Zulu king wore a lounge suit (1958: 5). The guard at the bridge was dressed in full Zulu war regalia, while most of the other Zulu men who were pagans were dressed in ‘motley combinations of European and Zulu dress’ (1958: 5). There were royal Zulu salutes and blessings and European hand-clapping and hymns, speeches in a mixture of languages, English and Zulu, and, after the ceremony was over, the whites retired to drink tea, the Zulus to drink traditional beer and eat the sacrificial meat, one beast being donated by the CNC to the people, the other three by the people to their king. The CNC was sent traditional beer across the bridge, the king a cup of tea in the opposite direction. A group of Christians from a Zionist separatist sect, dressed in European clothes, sang Christian hymns from the river bank. Some of these acts were clearly spontaneous and unplanned. Gluckman describes in detail the intricate spatial mixings and separations of whites and blacks before going on to discuss their
broader sociological significance for an understanding of power and race relations in South Africa in 1938.

Several key issues concern us here, emanating from Gluckman’s (1958: 25) point that the event was a harmonious one, with structural conflicts between black and white kept in abeyance. There was a shared interest in the bridge that cut across the dominant cleavage of black and white. The project was successfully initiated by the CNC and built by Zulu men with voluntary labour to provide access to a local maternity hospital during the rainy season. The bridge was generally felt to be a good thing. The common celebration was a moment of ‘co-operation and communication’ and, even though inter-dependency was founded in the final analysis on the ‘superior force of the White group’, participants formed ‘a single community of two co-operating’ groups (1958: 25). Invoking Fortes, Gluckman proposes, against ‘culture-contact’ theorists, that in studying social change the anthropologist ‘must work with communities rather than customs … [with] a unit of life … of common participation in the everyday political, economic and social life’ (1958: 51). Such conflictual communities form a single, organized culture, he argues, rather than a social aggregation of heterogeneous cultural groups, as Malinowski would have it. Importantly, then, for Gluckman, as indeed for Fortes and Schapera, social relations, even those marked by hierarchy and domination, nevertheless are constitutive of culture: not as a unified, homogeneous set of beliefs, but as a fragmentary, contradictory, and conflict-ridden social formation.

Analysing the opening of the bridge from this perspective allows us to grasp the *naturalness* of the events making up the ceremony for participants, despite its apparently incongruous juxtaposition of disparate cultural elements and customs. The whites took it for granted that they should be drinking tea on the banks of the Black Umfolosi River, just as the blacks took for granted the vehicular cutting of the tape and the sacrificial beast offered them by the CNC. This naturalness of what Hobsbawm and Ranger (1963) have aptly called an ‘invented tradition’ is one that Bakhtin (1981: 358) refers to as ‘organic hybridity’: ‘unintentional, unconscious hybridization is one of the most important modes in the historical life and evolution of languages. We may even say that language and languages change historically primarily by means of hybridization, by means of mixing of various “languages”’. In such situations of mixing, Bakhtin (1981: 360) goes on to say, ‘the mixture remains mute and opaque, never making use of conscious contrasts and oppositions … [Yet] such unconscious hybrids have been at the same time profoundly productive historically: they are pregnant with potential for new world views, with new “internal forms” for perceiving the world.’

In his analysis, Gluckman (1958: 61) recognizes that as conflicts between black and white sharpened, new configurations of existing cultures tended to surface as means of social and political mobilization which stressed cultural difference, an argument that later came to be known through the work of Cohen (1969) as ‘political ethnicity’. Yet, as I argue below, such social movements, even when they announce their cultural purity and sharp distinction, are necessarily hybrid culturally, since they arise from within the new social and cultural configurations of the historically transformed, organically hybridized community.
The harmony of the ceremony was necessarily an ambivalent one, given the pervasive inequalities and separations between white and black. This ambivalence, the unstable meanings, the hybridity of the bridge ceremony, did not simply derive from the fusing of disparate cultural elements, each bearing its own fixed cultural meaning. As Bhabha (1994: 119) insightfully recognizes, hybridity may be produced by a ‘doubling up of the sign’, a ‘splitting’ which is ‘less than one and double’. The same object or custom placed in a different context acquires quite new meanings, while echoing old ones. The Zulu warrior standing guard as policeman at the bridge is not a Zulu warrior. Drinking tea in the middle of the veld is quite unlike tea in Surrey on a Sunday afternoon. In this sense, hybridity is unconscious, yet disturbing and interruptive. It renders colonial authority, Bhabha proposes, ambivalent, uncertain.

This reminds us that the bridge ceremony is not just a ‘unit of life’ but a ceremony, a staged and framed aesthetic production. According to Bakhtin (1981: 359), ‘an intentional hybrid is first of all a conscious hybrid’, that is, ‘an encounter, within the area of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor’ (1981: 358).

Hence, the intentional, novelistic hybrid is not only an individualized mixing of two socio-linguistic consciousnesses, but ‘the collision between differing points of view on the world that are embedded in these forms’ (1981: 360). Intentional hybrids are thus ‘inevitably dialogical’ (1981: 360). Bakhtin (1981: 361) argues, moreover, that such intentional hybrids are ‘double voiced’, encapsulated within the framework of a single utterance. Similarly Bhabha (1994: 36), drawing on Derrida, also stresses the performative dimensions of cultural enunciation: ‘the place of utterance – is crossed by the différance of writing … [which ensures] that meaning is never simply mimetic and transparent’.

The ceremonial opening of the bridge defines a liminal space in which both intentional and organic hybridities, conscious and unconscious, are played out. The policeman in warrior clothes, like the warrior dance before the car, are intentional hybrids. But much else in the ceremony is unreflexive and spontaneous. Seen from Bhabha’s perspective, both types of hybridity (he does not distinguish them) frame a ‘third space’ in which the ambivalences of the colonial encounter are enacted. Bhabha (pers. comm.) uses liminality, like hybridity, to refer to the moment or place of untranslatability, the limit where a thing becomes its alterity. He draws on Benjamin’s argument that accurate translation is impossible, since the intentionality of words is lost in translation; no translation can exhaust the meanings of the original, especially because those meanings themselves are subject to future historical revision. Yet translations can, according to Benjamin (1992: 70-82), extend the translating language and create new meanings in it. In the colonial encounter, then, it is not just the colonized who are subjected to Western ways; the colonizers too are transformed, while the colonized deploy borrowed forms to tell their own, distinct narratives which ‘unsettle’ and ‘subvert’ the cultural authority of the colonizers (Bhabha 1994: 102-22; see also Nandy 1983).
In anthropology, too, the liminal has been described as transformative and transgressive through the conjoining incommensurables: human and god, boy and man, male and female, and so forth. In Turner’s (1967: 97) words,

the neophytes are neither living nor dead from one aspect, and both living and dead from another. Their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all customary categories … Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise.

Turner’s theory of liminality, while drawing on van Gennep, has to be read in the broader theoretical context of the Manchester School, which stressed that social relations in tribal societies were characterized by endemic structural conflicts: between groups, between different principles of social organization, between rules and norms, and between classificatory categories. ‘Every social system is a field of tension, full of ambivalence, of co-operation and contrasting struggle’ (Gluckman 1963: 127). Normally, such contradictions are left unmarked in everyday life through a process of ‘situational selection’, a term derived from the work of Evans-Pritchard. But such conflicts and struggles surface symbolically and are ‘dramatized’ in ritual. They are often marked by obscenities and the breaking of taboos. Paradoxically, however, the outcome and explicit aim of such transgressive performances is to achieve the blessing, fertility, and social unity of the community (Gluckman 1963: 126). Bakhtin (1984) uses a similar argument in his analysis of grotesque realism in European medieval carnivals.

Gluckman called these symbolic ritualizations of underlying conflicts ‘rituals of rebellion’. In relation to such rituals, he raises a question relevant to my argument. Why are such transgressive performances vis-à-vis figures of authority licensed in tribal societies for the sake of communal blessing, whereas in urban civilizations, as in Europe today, national ceremonies are ‘marked by adulation only’? (Gluckman 1965: 258; for his full analysis, see 250-64) His answer is that in small-scale, face-to-face societies, the nature of authority is very often not in doubt, even if the incumbency of specific rulers is; whereas in our societies, with their large complex structures, the very constitution of authority is a matter of intense struggle. In this article I raise a similar question in relation to Islamic societies. Why were rituals of transgressive hybridity licensed in intimate, face-to-face Muslim societies, whereas once exposed to processes of globalization, such hybridities came to be regarded as sinful and dangerous?

As we have seen, intentional hybridity as an aesthetic is inherently political, a clash of languages which questions an existing social order. In anthropological theory, intentional hybridity, I propose, refers to the conflation or transgression of culturally constructed categories in ritual and myth, as much as to the aesthetic encounter between cultures. Culture itself is, of course, a constructed category, subject to continuous processes of organic hybridization. Nevertheless, at any given moment social and cultural categories are naturalized as givens of the social order, and it is these naturalized categories that form the basis for aesthetic, intentional hybrids, often transgressive and oppositional.
I begin my discussion of Muslim societies with an example of intentional hybridity in the ritual masquerade following the Eid sacrifice among Berbers in Morocco. The ritual, I suggest, reveals that cultures produce their own indigenous forms of critical reflexivity and satire. Yet in a globalizing society, I argue, hybridity and transgression, while being potential tools of resistance which upturn taken-for-granted hierarchies, play dangerously on the boundary and can thus become a source of offence. In postcolonial diasporas, minorities often draw on culture strategically to fight for recognition and against discrimination and oppression. But this raises the question, what are the creative limits of cultural hybridity? When, in what situations, does the use of intentional hybrid aesthetic forms overstep the boundaries of acceptability, to be experienced by vulnerable minorities as painful mockery? In relation to this, the final part of the paper considers the critique by anthropologists of postcolonial hybridity theory that arose especially after the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, and which raised also the more general question of the limits and possibilities of communication across cultures.

**Order and hybridity**

Although a fully fledged field of comparative postcolonial literary studies has only emerged recently, there are important parallels to be drawn between its themes and some of the central ideas about ritual of modernist anthropology. Modernist anthropology was concerned above all with social ordering and social reproduction. But in thinking about order it discovered disorder: betwixt-and-between moments and liminal spaces, mythical hybrid monsters and ritual clowns, matter out of place, joking relations that attacked hierarchies. As early scholars, from Durkheim and Mauss to Lévi-Strauss, recognized, even the most rudimentary hunter-gatherer and neolithic societies were classifiers: they ordered the world in terms of broad categories – of above and below, male and female, carnivores and herbivores, domestic and wild, young and old, hot and cold, us and them. Whatever did not fit neatly into these arbitrary but compelling classificatory schemes was experienced as problematic. It was matter out of place (Douglas 1966) and, as such, extremely dangerous, hedged with taboos, *haram*, both sacred and yet often defiling. Ambivalent, cross-over figures and moments were perceived to be extremely powerful, both for good and evil (Douglas 1975). Gods and sorcerers were equally hybrid, their classificatory categories mixed: but whereas the gods brought life and fertility, the sorcerers brought death and barrenness.

There were several strands to the way the argument developed about order and disorder, liminality and hybridity. Turner, as we have seen, analysed the liminal period of rites of passage as transformative moments in which incongruous elements were juxtaposed, often ‘doubled up’, plucked – with all their physiological and emotional connotations – out of the everyday world. The liminal phase was also, according to Turner, a time of reflexivity. The neophytes were confronted with sacred, often esoteric, figurines and masks that mixed elements from disparate domains, often magnified and exaggerated.
These monstrous images enabled them, Turner speculated, to reflect critically on the very constitution of their societies.

Douglas’s work drew on Lévi-Strauss’s (1966; 1969) theory of totemic classifications. In his study of myth, Lévi-Strauss (1963) argued that myths were cultural attempts to resolve the fundamental contradictions or dilemmas that classificatory schemes threw up, since each society had a multiplicity of such schema for ordering the world. These were ordered in homologous systems of contrast and similarity, for example male:female as above:below. But given the complexity of the homologies across the different classificatory schemes, and given the constant need to override the reality of our cultural grounding in nature, cultural schema generated their own classificatory aporias. Myths were ways of transcending these aporias, and hence often focused on monstrous creatures or clowns that embodied the contradictions and dilemmas that culture itself had invented.

In addition to her work on anomaly, Douglas also extended earlier theories on customary joking relations in tribal societies. Joking partners were licensed to behave outrageously, throw excrement, make overt sexual gestures and advances, swear and abuse, steal food and create havoc, all without causing offence. Yet the very same joking partners also helped with funeral arrangements. As first formulated by Radcliffe-Brown (1940; 1949), joking managed ambivalences and ambiguities in relations between affines or joking clans. Douglas (1968; 1975) went further. Joking, she proposed, attacks hierarchy and exposes the taken-for-granted authority structures of a society for what they are: cultural constructions. Hence joking releases human spontaneity from the shackles of customary norms and constraints and heightens consciousness of the relativity of all culture and morality.

More recent work has built on these early modernist insights to develop further a theoretical understanding of the place of ritual monsters and clowns in the ritual process. Highlighting the betwixt-and-between qualities of ritual clowns, Handelman stresses their continuous oscillation between opposites (1990: 242), so that they embody flux, process, uncertainty, a ‘deep instability’, the very boundary itself (1990: 243 passim). The reification of these opposed qualities in a single figure means, Handelman (1990: 245) suggests, that ritual clowns have the capacity to ‘mould context to the logic of [their] own composition’.

But ritual monsters are not only objects of intellectual reflection and consciousness. As later theories recognize, they actively mediate sacred exchange and symbolic transactions across boundaries. Hybrid figures effect a movement of ritual qualities between spaces, subjects, and communities. In doing so, they bring the tangible boons of fertility, life, baraka, power, into a community, and remove dirt, pollution, decay away from it. As R. Werbner (1989: 61) has argued:

In ritual for purification and healing, the movement from disorder to order requires boundary crossing. This is often achieved by figures beyond the community’s moral universe who are tricksters or clown like. They may be wild, obscene, and sexually licentious; they are often transvestite, and often the epitome of an authority alternative to that paramount within the community. Nevertheless, the figures do not merely dramatise disorder. In ritual performance, as go-betweens come from afar, they are agents of change, of purification and healing. They serve as means for directing sacred exchange across the community’s moral universe.
Such ritual hybrid figures are found very widely. I turn first to an example from rural Morocco.

**Ritual licence in Morocco**

Every year after the Great Eid sacrifice, young Berber men in remote communities of the High Atlas mountains celebrate the ritual of Bilmawn (this is the name given by Hammoudi 1993). In this ritual masquerade, one (or sometimes two) men dress up in sacrificial goat- and sheepskins, their head inserted in a goat’s head, horns and all. Bilmawn is an androgynous figure. On his back hang a phallus and testicles, on his chest a large, single breast. Westermarck reported that he is also called ‘the lion with sheepskins’ (from R. Werbner 1989: 62). He is accompanied by several ritual masqueraders representing Jews, with their leader being the rabbi. The Jews’ masks are smeared with flour and egg, and decorated with hairs from the sacrificial hides. A third figure is that of a slave. Known as Ismakh, he wears a black goat burnous, while all the other ritual masqueraders wear grey goatskins (Hammoudi 1993: 58).

The masqueraders are allowed almost unlimited licence. They swear and attack onlookers, enact sexual copulation in public in front of women, enter the women’s homes while the men of the house are absent, demand or steal food. According to Hammoudi, who studied the ritual in 1981, these sacrificial goat clowns even satirize Qur’anic verses. As part of their routine they enact ploughing, harvesting, and a mock wedding. During the whole time in which they take over the village, senior men are banished and it becomes the domain of young men, women, and children. The masqueraders scatter great sacks of ash over the people and their houses. They themselves roll in the soot of the great cooking-pots which heat the ablution waters at the mosque. The ash from the fires of the ablution is an accumulation of a whole year of burnt firewood. One may speculate that these remains of the burning in the mosque are powerfully imbued with *baraka*. Hence, despite their licentious and transgressive behaviour, as they scatter the ash and flail the people with their hooves and skins, the sacrificial clowns bring desired blessing to each and every household.

The sacrificial clowns are clearly hybrid figures; they combine the attributes of human and animal, male and female, Muslim and Jew, free man and slave, young and old. They turn the world topsy-turvy and back to front. The ritual itself has been reported by a long line of ethnologists and travellers who visited Morocco. Early scholars mostly attempted to interpret it as a pre-Muslim fertility rite. Hammoudi, the most recent to study the ritual, rightly objects to this view, arguing that the sacrifice and the masquerade are linked together and cannot be understood apart from each other. Yet he too fails, in my view, to grasp fully the symbolic and structural transformations effected by the clowns as metonymic carriers of powerful purity and impurity while being, at the same time, inversions of the official Islamic sacrificial rite.

Let us recall that when the clowns appear, the sacrifice has already taken place in all its sober formality. The Eid sacrifice is an occasion of purification and expiation in which the sacrificer and the community reaffirm their bond with Allah. Why, then, the need to incorporate this otherness beyond the boundary?
Reflecting on Westermarck’s (1968 [1926]) account of the ritual at the turn of the century, R. Werbner (1989: 61-2) argues that boundary-crossing, while powerful, is dangerous, and [hence] these trickster figures are sometimes violent or out of control, and physically attack people around them … they demand symbolic gifts which are lavished upon them with generosity … Through their performance, ordeals are created, the passing of which gives members of the community around the wild or alien figures a sense of having moved towards a higher plane of existence. Here, the unclean is the purifier; the transgressor of moral norms, the agent of moral renewal; the victim, the victimiser; the predator, the agent of sacrifice.

Moreover, we cannot understand the hybrid sacrificial goat and lion clowns of the ritual without noting that they are the bearers of a powerful sexuality, dangerous but fertilizing. Wrapped in the sacred skin of the sacrificial animal and smeared with the sacred soot and ashes of the ablution waters, they embody the gross sexuality necessary for human and natural reproduction, as sanctified and divinely sanctioned. They inseminate and impregnate through mock battles, mock copulations, and sacred exchanges of nurture and substance. They then depart, carrying the dirt and pollution of the old year with them. In this sense they are both ordeals to be transcended and purifiers. As Bakhtin (1984) too has argued in his study of carnival, sexuality and the lower body, excluded from the realm of formal religion, are reincorporated through the enactment of lower-status figures, animals or strangers. But importantly in this case, these transgressive figures are first imbued (via the soot) with the power of the sacrificial act itself, and the connection to God it has effected.

Hammoudi (1993: 65) tells us that people were reluctant to speak of the masquerade at other times, because ‘that is when people do and say obscene things’. This is, of course, the way such liminal, taboo-breaking moments are usually treated. In the 1980s, however, the ritual was under a very different sort of threat, this time from Muslim reformists who wanted to eliminate it entirely. They argued, much like the old ethnologists, that the ritual was un-Islamic, bida, unlawful innovation. One man told Hammoudi (1993: 66): ‘these are customs from before … these are the jahiliya … The people are Muslim, and all of a sudden they call themselves Jews and rabbis! It is not possible. And then, someone who imitates a people afterwards belongs to that people!’ The battle is pitched between the purist reformers and the traditionalists, those who want to continue the ritual, each with their own vision of what constitutes authentic cultural and religious authority (1993: 167).³

**Impure and pure: intentional and organic hybridities**

Ritual clowns and monsters are very much like avant-garde works of art or novels: they are meant to shock, to inseminate, to impregnate, to bring otherness from beyond the boundaries into established routines of daily life. They are intentional hybridities; they work to transform, to revitalize, to create new ordeals to be transcended. They generate, as Bhabha has rightly proposed, liminal spaces, betwixt-and-between tropes that render authority structures ambivalent. But what are the limits of such hybridities? When are they part
of the revitalizing process of social renewal, as they appear to be in rural Morocco, and when are they experienced as an unacceptable attack on all that is sacred, as they seemed to be by the Islamist reformists? Secondly, is there something about the postcolonial condition that makes such intentional hybrids especially threatening to some, whereas before they were accepted as a bit of fun, a good laugh, a moment of hedonistic liberation that did not really threaten to undermine the social order?

New religious fundamentalist movements of purification, whether Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, or Muslim are, somewhat paradoxically, themselves hybrids of modernity. They are regimented and bureaucratized, scripturalist and procedural. They take to a new modernist extreme the inherent tendency of all religions to classify right and wrong, good and evil, the acceptable and the unacceptable, the normal and the transgressive. They allow for no exceptions, no anomalies, no betwixt-and-betweens. They seek to own the instruments of governance and the state in order to exploit its technologies of power.

Some have argued that nationalism too, the archetypal institution of modernity, seeks purity and homogeneity. The boundaries of the nation-state, unlike those of the old dynastic or religious empires, are clearly demarcated. An inherent tendency of nationalism is thus to turn racist, to expunge, marginalize, or subordinate internal strangers as malignant and impure matter out of place (see Bauman 1989). But this simplifies the complex and highly dynamic relation between national belonging and citizenship. Citizenship often allows room for cultural heterogeneity, for religious pluralism, cultural hybridity, or multiculturalism. Moreover, the nation is itself a negotiated and highly contested social order, marked by intense conflicts between classes, lifestyles, political ideologies, religious affiliations, regional loyalties, town and country, men and women. There is a good deal of critical debate within democratic nation-states even before migrants, ethnics, or religious minorities enter the picture. The past itself is a contested terrain for different national fractions. This is true even of European nationalisms, the only ones which posit a ‘natural’ cultural or linguistic homogeneity as the raison d’être for the very existence of the nation. Postcolonial nationalisms are almost always, by contrast, linguistically and ethnically plural. Or, as in the postcolonial Middle East, neither language, religion, nor culture divide the Arab nations, yet they remain, and perceive themselves to be, discrete political entities.

Leaving aside for the moment, then, the important question of nationalism, let us consider the two contrasting hybrids presented here so far: the sacrificial goat clowns of the Eid masquerade and the Muslim reformists who want to abolish them as polluting the purity of Islam. These represent the two contrasting types of hybridization posited by Bakhtin: the one intentional, the other organic.4

As we have seen, we may say that despite the illusion of boundedness, cultures evolve historically through unreflective borrowings, mimetic appropriations, exchanges, and inventions. There is no culture in and of itself. As Ahmad (1995: 18) puts it, the ‘cross-fertilisation of cultures has been endemic to all movements of people … and all such movements in history have involved the travel, contact, transmutation, hybridisation of ideas, values and behavioural norms’ (see also Sahlins 1999). At the same time, and this amplifies Bakhtin’s
point, organic hybridization does not disrupt the sense of order and continuity: new images, words, objects, are integrated into language or culture unconsciously. But organic hybrids do begin to render prior structures of authority ambivalent; in this sense, they are ‘pregnant with potential for new world views’ (Bakhtin 1981: 360).

Islamist and reform movements, I propose, are unconscious hybrids of modernity. Self-consciously they reject any kind of syncretic amalgamation as *bida*, and they particularly reject the ethical norms of a perceived Western modernity. Instead, they turn back to the past, to the glorious period of Islam at its foundation. But their very bureaucratic structure and modes of operation and dissemination are modernist.

As organic hybrids of modernity which seek purity, the Islamists are particularly hostile to any intentional aesthetic or religious hybrids that are meant to shock, change, challenge, revitalize, or disrupt order through deliberate, intended fusions of unlike social languages and images. They reject the ironic double consciousness created by intentional hybrids.

Bakhtin’s distinction is useful for theorizing the simultaneous coexistence of both cultural change and resistance to change in religious, ethnic, or migrant groups and in postcolonial nation-states. What is felt to be most threatening is the deliberate, provocative aesthetic challenge to an implicit social order and identity. Yet the same aesthetic may also be experienced, from a different social position, as revitalizing and ‘fun’. Such aesthetic interventions are thus critically different from the routine cultural borrowings and appropriations by national or diasporic groups that unconsciously create the grounds for future social change. Demotic discourses deny boundaries, while the dominant discourses of the very same actors demand that they be respected, as Baumann (1997) has argued.

The danger that the aesthetic poses for any closed social universe with a single monological, authoritative, unitary language is that of a heteroglossia ‘that rages beyond the boundaries’ (Bakhtin 1981: 368). Intentional heteroglossias relativize singular ideologies, cultures, and languages. By contrast, the notion of organic hybridization casts doubts on the viability of simplistic scholarly models of cultural holism, the idea that we should study a ‘unit of custom’ rather than a ‘unit of life’.

*The limits of cultural hybridity*

The objection of Islamists to fun and hybridity is comprehensible in terms of the very narrow yardsticks of religious authenticity that they have set themselves. But what are the limits of cultural hybridity for ordinary people? When do ritual masquerades cease to be revitalizing and enjoyable and become unacceptable? When and why do hybrid postcolonial novels cease to be funny and entertaining and become deeply offensive? After all, poetry, including satirical and agonistic poetry, has long been an integral institution in many Muslim societies.

Writing about Moroccan poetry, Geertz (1983: 117) describes it as ‘morally ambiguous because it is not sacred enough to justify the power it actually has and not secular enough for that power to be equated to ordinary eloquence’.
The Moroccan oral poet, speaking in Arabic, a sacred language, ‘inhabits a region between speech types which is at the same time a region between worlds, between the discourse of God and the wrangle of men’.

In other words, Moroccan oral poetry is a hybrid of social discourses in the Bakhtinian sense, and as such disturbing and interruptive. Hence poets must tread a fine line between delightful transgression and real offence. To judge the response of their audience, they must share a whole number of implicit understandings, experiences, and emotional sensitivities to art, poetry, religion, and life. Geertz (1983: 99 \textit{passim}) calls this aesthetic complex a local ‘sensibility’. Extending his insight, we may argue that only someone who fully has such a local sensibility can play upon and transgress a local aesthetic without causing offence. However outrageous the Eid ritual sacrificial goat clowns are, they still observe limits; beyond those limits their actions may arouse hostility or even violence.

But postcolonial societies are no longer intimate societies with ‘local’ aesthetic sensibilities and, as Gluckman would have it, relatively stable notions of legitimate authority. Aesthetic communities are formed in them through and around mass-produced class and sub-cultural consumer goods and ‘neo-tribal’ lifestyles (Maffesoli 1995). Moreover, as Bourdieu (1984; especially 1993) in particular has argued, the field of high art has been reconstituted as a discrete field of taste and distinction for a discerning and knowledgeable elite of expert critics. It is a field in which competitive innovation and creativity are accorded high value, and in which novelty and avant-garde transgression are highly rewarded. There is thus, he proposes, a constant attempt to create disjunctions between elite tastes and those of the \textit{petit bourgeois} masses. At the same time, even avant-garde novelists would like to reach a mass readership.

Postcolonial diasporic literature in English is produced partly within this rarefied postmodern atmosphere, in which novelists such as Salman Rushdie or Hanif Qureshi are part of a wider cosmopolitan literary cohort of writers, novelists, and poets (see Fowler 2000). Like novelists, postcolonial critics too are included within this enchanted circle of refined tasters. The special contribution that South Asian diasporic writers and critics have made to hybridity theory has been, in their own words, to elaborate the hybrid figure of the postcolonial migrant and, alongside that, to create and invent a hybrid literary style that draws on Indian subcontinental words, images, and tropes and weaves them into the English language in delightfully funny, provocative, or disturbing ways. The originality, in particular, of Rushdie’s contribution to the world of English literature, measured by elite canons of high taste, has been breathtaking.

Postcolonial novels, Bhabha has argued, serve to ‘interrupt’ pure narratives of nation. For Bhabha (1994: 142, 158), nationalism is never homogeneous and unitary, it is the liminal space created by the permanent \textit{performatice} transgression of national grand narratives, eternal and ‘pedagogic’, by the ‘shreds and patches’ of the quotidian ‘daily plebiscite’ of many national voices, by cultural discourses from the margins. Drawing on Derrida, Bhabha locates agency in the act of interruptive enunciation, as we have seen. As Gilroy (1993: 126, 161–2) also argues, what this does is to create a ‘double consciousness’, a split subject, a fractured reality—doubly framed (Bhabha 1994: 214). To an anthropologist this echoes familiar tropes. Liminal masks, possessed ‘lions’ or sacrificial goats, ritual
clowns as anomalous creatures from beyond the boundaries, all create such
double consciousnesses, except that here the discursive setting is the nation and
the marginal, hybrid, anomalous, betwixt-and-between, highly potent creatures
are postcolonial migrants; or their creative works of high culture.

One might even suggest that the transgressive and reflexive nature of
the modern novel is equivalent to the kinds of ‘rituals of rebellion’ I have
described here, an institutionalized, symbolic form of opposition to the estab-
lished order. In the case of the novel, this sanctified symbolic interruption is
one enshrined by ‘enlightened’ modern bourgeois society. As such, the novel
creates dialogical hybridity and reflexiveness without necessarily being seen
to pose a serious threat to a liberal social order. One has only to think of the
elaborate ceremonials of publicity accompanying the launch of a new novel,
its aesthetic design and set-aside spaces (it must not, of course, either be
destroyed or taken too seriously) to unmask its hidden ontology: a ritualized
object, hedged with taboos, a modern-day equivalent of liminal sacra, of
boundary-crossing pangolins or humanized sacrificial goats.

Artistic creativity is not, however, only the prerogative of cosmopolitan post-
colonial elites. In Britain there is also a local diasporic poetry in the vernacu-
lar, Urdu. Mushairas, poetry readings, are extremely popular among Pakistani
settlers. Although not written in Arabic and hence not quite as sanctified
linguistically as their Arabic counterparts, Urdu poetry combines high art and
satire in an unstable, critical, and potentially transgressive mixture. The bigger
mushairas include Urdu poets renowned both locally and internationally. Much
of the poetry is love poems, ghazals, which often deploy stock, formulaic phrases,
but now and then poets produce commentaries on the diasporic condition
itself. Especially good poems are greeted with loud shouts of appreciation. I
use two poems recorded at one such event in Manchester, both by local poets,
as an example. The first is clearly written from the perspective of a politically
conscious proletarian (words in inverted commas were spoken in English):

Migrant Seasons

Friends, in a ‘hotel’ I have worked and toiled
For my belly, I carried a bucketful of soil
Consumed by summer heat in the deep cold of winter

restaurant worked extremely hard
suffering the heat of the cooking in cold winters

A second poem reveals the sense of loss and nostalgia which first genera-
tion Pakistani migrant settlers experience:

‘Why is it that only I cannot sleep?’
The bed is warm and the room is cosy
No fear of tomorrow, no work worry
‘Ruby’ is sleeping, so is ‘Rosy’
‘Cheeky’ is asleep, so is ‘Nosy’
It is only I who cannot sleep
Why is it that only I cannot sleep?

nicknames of his children, born and brought up in Britain
The fifth and sixth lines are famous, written by the poet Mirza Ghalib, the nineteenth-century Urdu poet who witnessed the decline of Muslim power and the rise of British colonialism. In the original version the previous line was ‘I know death will come one day’. Stunned by the scale of the loss, Ahmed (1997: 45) tells us, ‘in an often quoted verse, perhaps one of the first political poems in Urdu, Ghalib vividly reveals the darkness of the Muslim mind confronting the disintegration: “There is no hope in the future / Once I could laugh at the human condition / Now there is no laughter”, and elsewhere (1997: 172), “There is no solution in sight / Once there was mirth in the heart / Now nothing makes me smile”.

The poet implicitly evokes the despair of the colonial experience in lamenting his exile:

They all are happy, speaking English
With sweet ‘Lancashire’ ‘accents’.
They do not understand us, nor we them
Even ‘communication’ is broken
‘Ti, tu, ta, tatar’—I do not understand
Why is it that only I cannot sleep?

We cry not just about speaking –
Eating, drinking, washing, sleeping,
How easy to be without God,
How can one be with God?

We cannot see our way through this
Why is it that only I cannot sleep?

I went to the ‘GP’ to tell my woes
They all sleep, but I cannot
So what have you been thinking of?
Only of what has been gained and lost
But even thinking helps me not
Why is it, Oh healer, that only I cannot sleep?

I took a ‘valium’ last night
I even put ‘baan’ on my eyes
I’ve done all I can to find a remedy
Talking about Rumi, Sanai, and Razig
Now no talk helps
Why is it that only I cannot sleep?

I even watched ‘television’
And all the ‘season’ ‘Christmas’ ‘films’
What is the cause of my dead heart?
Having performed the ‘recitation’
Still, the heart’s voice fails
Why is it that only I cannot sleep?

We like to display our piety
While doing deeds that should not be done
Having done them, we repent
And we repent our repentances
Nor do we feel ashamed
Why is it that only I cannot sleep?

\(b\) terms of address in Urdu
\(c\) All these are different in England.
\(d\) The poet implies that his children have lost their faith, and living with them he himself has difficulty retaining his Islamic faith in Britain.
\(e\) by coming to England
\(f\) an ointment
\(g\) names of famous Muslim poets
Both of these hybrid poems mix English and Urdu words and phrases satirically, while commenting ironically on the predicaments of a poet’s exile, in which dreams of success have been displaced by a reality of sweating in restaurant kitchens or failing to communicate with one’s children. At the same time, the second poem also expresses a sense of pain and nostalgic yearning for a less hybrid culture and faith. The question is: is this yearning in some sense wrong? Theories that celebrate hybridity as an attack on cultural essentialism and criminalize culture as a source of evil fail to recognize that the matrices of culture are also, for subjects themselves, the matrices of ethical value, responsibility, and shared sociality (see also Lévi-Strauss 1994: 422-3). In the present deconstructive moment, any unitary conception of a bounded culture is perversely labelled naturalistic and essentialist. But the alternatives seem equally unconvincing: if ‘culture’ is merely a false intellectual construction, an inauthentic nostalgic imaginary, or a bricolage of artificially designed capitalist consumer objects, this leaves most postmodern subjects stripped of an ethical life world. One might even argue that cultural hybridity is powerful because it originates from that life world and the orders and separations it prescribes. Moreover, ethnic and religious minorities use culture strategically as a rallying banner to demand equal rights and symbolic citizenship in the public domain. Culture thus becomes a tool in an emancipatory battle.

The Satanic Verses

The question of culture versus hybridity came to the fore in debates about the Muslim response to the publication of *The Satanic Verses* and the offence it evidently caused Muslim feelings. *The Satanic Verses* was a book about hybridity written in a hybrid mode that challenged both pure theories of religion (Islamic fundamentalism) and pure theories of the nation (racism or cultural racism). But it seemed to spill over beyond the ritualized, sacred domain of high art and to become a political intervention which generated intolerance rather than tolerance. Partly as a result, a critical anthropological literature has evolved that reflects on the limitations of the postcolonial celebration of cultural hybridity and religious syncretism, as though these were panaceas for religious communalism, ethnic racism, and cultural intolerance.

Criticizing a tendency of elite Indian intellectuals such as Nandy (1983; 1990) to see a prior religious syncretism (Hindu, Muslim, or Buddhist) as more tolerant than current fundamentalist Hindu religious revivalist movements, van der Veer (1994) has argued that syncretism disguises inequalities under a veneer of openness and universal eclecticism. There is always, he maintains, a dominant or hegemonic element in syncretic cults, for example, Sufi saints’ cults in South Asia or Gandhian universalism, and in practice also unequal participation and inclusion of different groups in such discourses. In relation to *The Satanic Verses*, van der Veer (1997: 102) criticizes Bhabha’s (1994: chap. 11) celebration of the book as a great text of migration and self-renewal, and argues that its provocative insulting of the Prophet and the Qur’an simply intensified the marginalization of a Muslim underclass in Britain and Europe, already suffering racism and economic subordination. The image of fanatical Muslims, which their collective response to the novel

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provoked, set back the course of race relations in Britain and Europe, he says, by many years.

Echoes of van der Veer’s position are found in other work by anthropologists, all of whom stress the vulnerability, backwardness, and deprivation of a Muslim diasporic underclass in Britain. It was the sense of alienation and marginalization of this underclass, the argument goes, that pushed them to defend their culture and sacred icons against what was perceived to be a deliberate insult (Asad 1993; Fischer & Abedi 1990; Friedman 1997). Fischer and Abedi (1990) see this response as part of an ongoing class war in Muslim society itself, in which satirical poetry has always been used as a dissenting tool by intellectual elites, while being rejected by petit bourgeois conservatives. Friedman (1997) focuses on postcolonial intellectuals in the West whom, he argues, are a small, self-congratulatory elite having little notion of the problems faced by proletarian migrants living in urban poverty. The same point is echoed by Ahmed (1992: 164–6) in his critique of the snobbery and cronyism of this relatively secularized, South Asian Muslim elite. The disjunction and lack of communication between elites and masses is also one stressed by Fowler (2000), who suggests that Rushdie as a novelist was primarily responsive to the demands of the art field for avant-garde innovation. In his ivory tower, he failed entirely to anticipate the wholly negative response to the novel by fellow Pakistanis in Britain, even though the novel was supposedly about them and even though it narrates almost prophetically the reaction to it.

My own response to the book has been somewhat different. First, I have seen no grounds for describing local Pakistanis as merely an underprivileged, deeply religious underclass. In my observation, Pakistanis in the diaspora form an aesthetic community which celebrates ‘fun’ in the forms of music, dance, satire, and masquerade, much to the disapproval of a relatively small group of religious reformists. Pre-wedding mehndi (henna) celebrations by women include ritual masquerading and clowning, in which the women often dress up as disgusting old men and in which arranged marriage, sexuality, and men in general are spoofed and satirized, while romantic love is celebrated in singing and sensual dancing (P. Werbner 1986; 1990: chap. 9; see also Raheja & Gold 1994). The satirical spoofing of Pakistani inter-generational relations in British Pakistani movies such as ‘East is East’ exemplifies Asian celebration of self-critical, transgressive laughter. Cricket and, as we have seen, poetry readings, are extremely popular pursuits (on cricket and hybridity, see P. Werbner 1996b; 1997b). In addition, Pakistanis in the diaspora consume an unadulterated diet of Bombay films and of audio-cassettes of film music, bhangra, or jazzed-up qawwali Sufi devotional singing, which are all extremely popular.

My reading of The Satanic Verses also differs from the usual run of interpretations. I have argued (P. Werbner 1996a) that the figure of the Prophet depicted in the novel is one of tolerance and almost-perfection, set against a host of counter-selves who are all deeply flawed. The confrontation with, and ultimate execution of, the poet Baal, a figure who is, for most of the novel, entirely devoid of moral fibre despite his artistic talents, highlights the ambiguous authority of amoral poetry vis-à-vis religious morality, without resolving this dilemma fully. It also raises the question of the limits of tolerance.

The Satanic Verses is not, then, simply a novel that celebrates hybridity, epitomized by that familiar trope of diasporic writing, the figure of the post-
colonial migrant. If this were all the novel was, it would not be worth defending. For Rushdie, migration, hijra, is a more profound experience of conversion and ethical search for a new reality. But even if we take the novel as a serious critique of religious intolerance and not just a postmodern spoof, this does not do away with the question of whether it should have been written, and written in such an obscure way that its serious meanings are completely lost to all but a tiny minority of readers. The fact that it appears to be a sacrilegious attack on Islam and the Prophet makes this the truth of the novel for the majority. Given the clash of emotional aesthetics that the novel has created, and the deep offence it generated even among elite and relatively liberal, fun-loving Muslims (at least in Britain), the question that needs to be asked is not whether it challenges a puritanical religious fundamentalism. The real question is this: in a global context, when does transgressive hybridity facilitate, and when does it destroy, communication across cultures for the sake of social renewal?

Conclusion

How does one tread the line of acceptable interruptive hybridity in the post-colonial world? This is a world in which all identities are ‘palimpsest’, overlaid and reinscribed (Bauman 1997). Given these historical inscriptions and reinscriptions of different subjective identities, differentially positioned, the analysis of postcolonial struggles for authority in public life presents a daunting challenge (see R. Werbner 1996: 4). Debates about cultural hybridity necessarily rest on notions of right and wrong. But in reality, hybridity is not essentially good, just as cultural essentialism is not intrinsically evil. When women or minorities struggle to gain recognition for ‘their’ culture in the public domain, they are making legitimate claims to symbolic citizenship in the nation-state.

More than just celebrating hybridity, we need to ask whether cultural movements are critical and emancipatory or conservative and exclusive, whether they recognize difference and allow cultural creativity, or deny the right to be different. But poetic licence is not unlimited; to be effective, it must walk the fine line between social languages so that humour is not read as painful mockery. It must retain a local sensibility in a globalizing world. Otherwise, rather than leading to a double consciousness, a global cultural ecumene (Hannerz 1996) which some scholars optimistically evoke, such hybrid transgressions can lead only to a polarization of discourses.

One of the important points arising from the anthropological study of ritual hybrids is that critical consciousness does not necessarily emerge solely from the encounter between discrete cultures or from a position of strangerhood on the margins of the nation. A key issue is that of reflexivity within, as well as in the encounter between, cultures. Ewing (1997: 20) has argued against the assumption by some anthropologists and sociologists of ‘a prior [pre-colonial] existence of an unreflective plenitude in which tradition is hegemonic and simply reproduced’. So, too, there have been many instances in the history of the English novel, for example, in which transgressive critiques of the social order have come from within, from English novelists, just as
indigenous Moroccan poetry and ritual serve to heighten consciousness of a local moral order beyond the West.

This is where an anthropological theory of hybridity is crucial. It makes clear that the encounter of order with disorder, however culturally constructed, is always contextual and sited, no matter if this be in the micro-political gendered and generational divisions of village life or in the meeting of a local culture and Western colonialism, as in the ceremony by the bridge in modern Zululand. Whether cultural hybridity is generative and fertilizing depends on how its varied audiences interpret it. For some, multiculturalism, cultural borrowings and mixings, constitute an attack on their felt subjectivity. In a world in which local people feel their culture to be under threat from globalizing Western cultural forces or from incoming stranger migrants, interruptive hybridity may be experienced not as revitalizing and fun, but as threatening a prior social order and morality. The line between respect and transgression, as anthropologists studying joking relations have long recognized, is an easy one to cross. This is ever more so in postcolonial nations and the ambivalent encounters they generate.

NOTES

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1 By ‘modernist anthropology’ I refer to anthropological theories based on systematic empirical research, encompassing a variety of approaches, including the interpretivist.

2 Hence Stallybrass and White (1986: 193), drawing explicit connections between Bakhtin’s theory of carnivals and modernist anthropological theorists like Lévi-Strauss, Gluckman, Leach, Turner, and Douglas, comment: ‘It was not by accident … that an anthropology which began by exploring the ordering mechanisms of social classification was led onto the question of pollution rites and filth’.

3 Post-Renaissance bourgeois attempts to suppress the grotesque realism of popular culture are discussed by Stallybrass and White (1986: 9 passim, 193-4).

4 For a discussion of this distinction as critical to hybridity theory, see also Young (1995: 21-5).

5 Interestingly, Bakhtin (1981) denies that poetry can be hybrid, a characteristic he attributes to the novel.

6 Ironically, it was Rudyard Kipling, an English colonial writer, who initiated this exuberant linguistic hybridization, for instance in Kim.

7 Thus Lévi-Strauss (1994: 422) says: ‘one has to agree to pay the price: to know that cultures, each of which is attached to a lifestyle and value system of its own, foster their own peculiarities, and that this tendency is healthy and not – as people would like to have us think – pathological’.

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Les limites de l’hybridisme culturel: des monstres rituels, de la licence poétique et des purifications postcoloniales contestées

Résumé

Il y a de nombreux parallèles entre la théorie de l’hybridisme, particulièrement telle qu’elle a été développée dans les travaux de Bhabha, et les théories de la ‘liminalité’ en anthropologie, particulièrement dans les travaux de Turner et Douglas. Ces théories placent un accent commun sur la notion de performance située dans l’espace et sur les positions spécifiques des acteurs. Dans la théorie de l’hybridisme, cet accent est placé sur la rencontre coloniale comme source de réflexivité et de duplicité de conscience; je soutiens toutefois que cet argument ne tient pas compte du fait que les cultures produisent leurs propres formes indigènes de transgression et donc aussi de réflectivité et de satire: clowns rituels, carnavals, poésie et autres. De plus, tandis que la transgression est un outil potentiel de résistance qui renverse les hiérarchies considérées comme allant-de-soi, elle joue dangereusement à la limite; hors de contexte, elle peut devenir une source d’infraction, spécialement pour les diasporas postcoloniales qui luttent pour être reconnues. Ceci amène à poser la question suivante: quelles sont les limites créatives de l’hybridisme culturel?

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