THE (MAL)FUNCTIONALITY OF *VERNACULAR*

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The maturity of science in any field can be rather accurately gauged by its vocabulary: as "a science" matures it develops its own terminology.

Leslie A. White (1949: 21)

(We must avoid value-laden terms) like "native," "vernacular," and "primitive," (which antagonize non-Europeans). We have to watch at every turn that we do not compromise our capacity to work in the international sense in which each people makes a contribution to the science of anthropology.

Margaret Mead (1953: 351)

ABSTRACT
Continuing a dialogue with Ülo Valk on the value of the etic term *vernacular* in folkloristic scholarship, this essay responds to his claim that despite the stigma of the word's past usage and its rejection by other fields it holds promise for folkloristics because of its conceptual flexibility, which he finds is especially conducive to the study of belief and religious practices. Pointing out that flexibility – or "fuzziness" to quote other critics – suggests imprecision, residualism, hierarchy, and lack of analytical instrumentality, this essay contends that use of *vernacular* reveals more about its users than the groups and practices it purports to describe. Recounting the intellectual history of the term and its adoption in folkloristic circles as well as the author's own scholarship, this essay maintains that the term has limited, if any, use in folkloristics and ethnology because of its negative assumptions and "fuzzy" logic. It can be reflexively analyzed, however, to understand scholars' perceptions of cultural phenomena and their conflicts with cognitive categories of practice and belief enacted by cultural participants.

KEYWORDS: vernacular • tradition • religion • dialect • cultural practice • architecture • belief • rhetoric

It was not my intention with the writing of "The Problematic Vernacular" (Bronner 2022b) to debate eminent folklorist Ülo Valk but rather to follow his lead of promot-

ing critical analysis of emerging, and to me troubling, folkloristic and ethnological discourse in historical and cultural context (see also Bowman and Valk 2014; Valk 2021; 2023; Valk and Bowman 2022). As Valk accomplished for "belief", I wanted to "maintain the discussion", as Valk (2003: 139) wrote, the manner in which vocabulary such as *vernacular* connoted a scientific enterprise arising out of intellectual history and ultimately distinguished or corrupted what folklorists and ethnologists do. In our common cause of shaping method and theory for folkloristics and ethnology in response to changing conditions of the 21st century, we are both concerned for the ways that our disciplinary lexicon directs thinking in ways that might be productively different from the perspectives of other scholars in allied fields. My model for discussion is not the agonistic speech competition of forensics with its eliminative, or possibly Western, idea of victory culture (see Fine 2001; Bronner 2022a: 101–141), but instead, the collaborative learning process of *chavrusa* in the religious study of my youth (Pace 1992; Fitzgerald 2008). Taken from an Aramaic term for fellowship (the root of *chav* is used to signify a friendly social bond in various word forms), it suggests gaining new insights through dialogue with a study partner after consideration of different interpretations of sacred texts (Helmreich 2000 [1982]: 110–125; Chung and Lee 2019).

As the epigraphs that open the present essay indicate, the ethical as well as epistemological reconsideration of terminology that characterizes scholarly enterprises setting out to humanely as well as scientifically understand peoples and their practices, particularly for emergent social scientific fields, is hardly a new discourse. While acknowledging that the residual term *vernacular* has a checkered past, which as anthropologist Margaret Mead, an advocate for cultural equity and relativism, argued is disturbingly associated with primitivism and Euro-centered elitism, Valk (2023) maintains that it is nonetheless useful because of its "conceptual flexibility". Although falling out of use because of these associations among anthropologists, geographers, literary scholars, and linguists, *vernacular* according to Valk in folkloristic and ethnological hands can shed its past stigma and evolve positively into a distinguishable, productive approach, particularly in reference to the study of religion.

In response to Valk's promotion of vernacularity as a guiding concept, I suggest that pursuing imprecision of an ambiguous or even demeaning etic term that detracts from the central analytical need to analyze tradition, transmission, and practice does not help the still maturing discipline, if not science, of folkloristic and ethnological studies. That is not to say that the questions raised in studies of lived, and often stratified, non-institutionalized religion, are not valid. I applaud the relativistic perspective of reflecting on the perception of what is termed "religion" in relation to traditional belief and spiritual practices and consideration of the effect of colonialist experience, particularly in the complex sociocultural environment of South Asia, on faith and its manifestation, in addition to symbolism, in cultural life. This line of inquiry tells me that the functionality of *vernacular* is perceptual, indeed imaginary, rather than empirical, and ultimately, use of *vernacular* probably reveals more about its users than it does about the peoples and practices it purports to describe. Asking why the questions of vernacularity have risen in the last decade in folkloristic discourse whereas it has fallen elsewhere, folklorists and ethnologists can use this moment to reflect toward the maturation of their discipline on the relation of observer to subject – as well as the connection of participants to the larger, globalizing society – rather than applying it to groups and their practices

and imagining a method and theory that was flawed at the outset. The characteristics of what Valk calls a "vernacular approach" are at best unclear or at worst misguided (Howard 2011; Valk 2023). More to the point in my mind is the question of what is to be gained analytically and socially from use of *vernacular* for both scholars and the studied groups who either do not use it or are offended by it.

Valk (2023: 5) claims that I want to "jettison" or banish "vernacular". That is not quite the case. I doubt I could, first of all, and second, that would not help to gain insights to its reflexivity as well as functionality in intellectual history. I do want to avoid it, as Mead suggests (1953: 351), for describing folkloric behavior and cultural groups, and certainly as a residual slice of society and culture. Further, I want to know in a meta-analysis, the psychological and philosophical appeal of the term to its users as a community of practice, often in contrast to self-identifications of subjects who typically possess a documentary record of their own with different ways of characterizing their traditions. Along the lines of documentary conflict, I am taken with Valk's raising the issue of the Euro-centered "Westernness" tying the adjectival use of "folk", "vernacular", and "religious" together and considering that distinction along with the exemplary situation in South Asia that he cites in the pursuit of insights on vernacular's functionality. It is revealing that in his argument, he omits "traditional", which drives much of the query about the cultural struggles of minority and subordinated communities, religious and otherwise, in relation to dominant identities (Valk 2023; on the relation of nationalism to *vernacular* in India, see Mishra 2020: 31–75). I also offer some personal context that can serve as a cautionary narrative about the problematics of *vernacular* relative to uses of "folk" and "traditional" in different languages as both an etic and emic term.

Valk suggests that his sensitivity to terminology is a result of his not being a native speaker of English, which has displaced German as the lingua franca of international folkloristics and ethnology. I share that sensitivity as my household and early education were in languages other than English or German. In Hebrew and Yiddish in which I was raised, one did not encounter an equivalent of "vernacular", although Yiddish did use the adjective of folk in various combinations. Yet this folk, underscored by the Yiddish term *amkha*, represented the idea of the common people and everyday life rather that a stratum of society, as it did in German. The prefix *am-* derived from Hebrew emphasized the double meaning of "we-ness" of the group and its common bonds in small size in situ and broad collective identity with other members of the faith and culture in other locations. In Hebrew, reflecting biblical teaching, the unstratified cultural identity derived from the unstratified rubric of *kol ha-am*, or "all the people", that spread the identity beyond the locality (Ben-Amos 2014). It was in Polish spoken in my household that what one might call a *vernacular* could be expressed, pejoratively, with reference to *prost* for something that was crude and simple or associated with an ignorant peasantry. Jews were aware of the way that *prost* was stereotypically applied to them as supposedly uncouth and "dirty" (see Dundes 1984; 1997), associated with in the evolutionist English sense of the *vernacular* as close to the earth (and feces) in the imaginary of the East European *shtetl* (idiomatically, a poor regressive village). Looking at quantitative survey data for European attitudes, psychologist Steven K. Baum (2008: 5) generalized on the cognition of "vernacular" beyond this particular group after noticing that respondents reported that "The least evolved people were the ones who were

most likely to adhere to social standards and *tradition*" (emphasis added. See also my analysis in Bronner 2011 of the outsider perceptions of agrarian Pennsylvania Germans, another faith-based linguistic group, as associated with manure and their responses through folklore).

Yiddish as a synecdoche for a cultural form of ethnic-religious identity was probably threatening to judgmental non-Jews because it transcended space and demarcated a shared ethos as we used it to communicate with guests who were speakers of Russian, Lithuanian, Latvian, Romanian, Hungarian, Czech, and Slovak. It also marked cultural resistance that went against supposedly progressive predictions of obsolescence and assimilation. Folklorists such as S. Ansky and Y. L. Cahan who wrote in Yiddish and celebrated traditional East European culture were avidly read to counter the critiques (Cahan 1952; Gottesman 2003; Bronner 2021b: 146–170; Bar-Itzhak 2024). While we did not think of Yiddish as *vernacular*, many linguists refused to categorize it as a national language and derided it instead in an antisemitic trope as a primitive, unattractive Jewish *jargon* (Ger.) of an ignorant, obstinate people (Wallet 2006; Trachtenberg 2008: 46–81; Katz 2015). Opponents of Yiddish derisively depicted the "vernacular" language and those who spoke it in some sort of "anti-Christian plot" as a mongrelization of German, Polish, Slovak, and Hebrew rather than part of a rich expressive culture steeped in learning and documentation of distinctive traditions (Katz 1995: 82). For my community, however, Yiddish was affectionately termed *mame loshn*, or mother tongue, which signaled a distinct ethnic identity tying a range of continuous customs and practices the vibrancy of a modern, evolving language and lived tradition. Indeed, its folkness in the sense of being given to the function of continuity provided by the transmittive quality of tradition was a source of strength to the community in the face of persecution that included characterization of Judaism as obsolete (for example, in the non-Jewish rhetoric of "Old Testament") and unenlightened (for example, in the non-Jewish perception of Jews' recalcitrant resistance to conversion). Baum (2008: 5) finds that this "vernacular" characterization is comparable to biases that fueled violence against Roma in Europe and Tutsis in Africa.

I first encountered the English term *folklore* in the secular American elementary classroom as orally transmitted fantasy narratives, games, and rhymes that are playfully associated with simplicity and childishness while complex subjects requiring sober study such as mathematics, science, and history were markings of adult rationality and progress. Upon reflection, this notion of folklore vernacularized, or trivialized, traditional images and activities – and the knowledge it represented. Yet a folkloristic concept of tradition as profound learning leading to the acquisition of metaphysical wisdom was introduced to all Jewish children even before elementary school in their religious education with the teaching of *folklor* or *folksshafung* (Yid. 'folklore') and *minhag* (Heb. 'custom'), or cultural practice in different communities. Indeed, instead of thinking of folklore tied to the legacy of the peasant literature and comparative approach of the Grimms in the 19th century, Jews learn the Talmudic foundation starting before the 11th century of midrashic interpretation – an exegetical method involving fieldwork by seeing for themselves in practice "the usage of the people" (*Complete Babylonian Talmud*: 1034, Eruvin 14b) and using oral tradition to analyze text and custom (Weiss 2013; Veidlinger 2016).

As folklorists pore over the comparative annotations of the Grimms' collections of *Märchen* (for example, Grimm and Grimm 1856; Bolte and Polivka 1963; Tatar 2004), so too did Jews look to the earlier 16th-century glosses and commentaries of Moses Isserles on the *Shulchan Arukh* (literally "set table" and referred to as the code of Jewish law; see Karo and Isserles 1995) that respectfully and analytically document the diverse traditional practices of the Jewish diaspora. As a diasporic linguistic-religious-ethnic group, Jews in their study of *minhag* absorbed the lesson that a standard form of their religion did not exist. For them, all religious practice was cultural at the grass roots, typically domestically situated, and legitimate, in the sense of being localized expressions of peoplehood (Bronner 2016). Indeed, a ritual at three years old initiates religious study with the cutting of hair at home to indicate that human-domestic rather than natural or rabbinical control over the mind and a celebration of text by consuming sweets in the form of Hebrew letters (Milligan 2017).

The tie of language to religion and resistance to the disparaging label of *vernacular* was especially evident in my fieldwork with Amish Pennsylvania-German speakers who were decentralized into districts, each of which had distinctive community patterns of dress, cookery, and transportation, and yet the believers wherever they were had a sense of peoplehood and shared spirituality (Hostetler 1993; Kraybill 2001; Bronner 2017; Johnson-Weiner and Brown 2017). They resented labels that displayed them as "vernacular", or "anachronistic", that is, stubbornly backward and locked into the past; instead, they viewed themselves as a tradition-based, redemptive society whose faith is a formula for contemporary living (Hostetler 1993; Kraybill 2001; Bronner 2005; Weaver-Zercher 2005). This is a far different model and way of thinking for folklore, or the vernacular for that matter, that Leonard Primiano (2001) based on institutionalized Catholic educational experience (Bronner 2022b).

I learned and adopted the terminology of "vernacular" in the 1970s as a university student apart from the study of folklore or religion. To be sure, linguistically oriented mentors including Bill Nicolaisen and Felix Oinas, both who were not native speakers of English either, referred briefly to vernacular speech as following local and regional lines, and pointed to the work of "folk atlases" that incorporated sociolinguistic work on dialects as analytical tools to address issues more broadly of cultural diffusion and historical development of traditions (Nicolaisen 2006). But even they turned to usage of "local", "community", and "regional" to describe colloquial speech practices that tended to be localized or indigenous (Nicolaisen 1980a; 1980b). As comparative folklorists, they viewed these linguistic phenomena as tied to geography and history; *vernacular* for them meant "regional" and "non-standard", but the evidence under that rubric did not lead to an approach that considered transmission and situational use (Nicolaisen 1980a; Oinas 1957; 1974).

In the throes of the 1960s–1970s civil rights era in the United States, sociolinguists using vernacular turned attention to speech practices of non-modernised, isolated, and often impoverished populations inspired a major ethnographic development that energized me and other activist students of the period to identify a racialized "Black Vernacular English" in urban African American communities apart from rural white regional patterns (Labov 1972). This work departed from previous assumptions of the functionality of *vernacular* as a term restricted to cultures of land-bound, uneducated people. The field of American culture studies arose in large part to defend the rough speech

and arts that grew out of the unrefined western frontier. I heard a relativistic, indeed colonialist reference that all Americans as a result of their colonized experience were perceived by European literati to be vernacular, as evidenced by emerging literature in North America using dialect speech setting them apart from Europe and urban centers in the new nations that were set in rural, hardscrabble surroundings (Lemke 2009).

The enterprise that embraced *vernacular* the most in my experience was the upstart academic study of supposedly non-designed architecture geographically and historically. The apparently bold act of calling these buildings "architecture" with their location in the rural countryside was diminished by relegating them to a category associated with the lowbred speech of an underclass. English architect Ronald William Brunskill (1971: 15), who worked in London and taught at the University of Manchester, in his *Illustrated Handbook of Vernacular Architecture* defined the scope of this previously dismissed type of architecture historically in what he called pre-industrial "surviving" buildings in the countryside. He admired them because they had an apparent, if deceiving, harmonious relation to the land by pragmatically utilizing local resources rather than for the stylistic purposes of art. From the anthropological side, English colleague Paul Oliver registered questions about categorization of these buildings internationally as vernacular by placing the modifier in quotation marks and using "indigenous" in his fieldwork in Africa. While acknowledging the need to recognize these forms because they are in danger of disappearing in the modern world, he cautioned that the use of *vernacular* was "primarily academic and has seldom been related to the social and environmental circumstances which inspired the habitations" (Oliver 1969: 1; he used the vocabulary of functionality in describing the forms as "shelter" and "dwellings" rather than "architecture"). Nonetheless, Oliver became influential globally and canonized the term "vernacular architecture" with his *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World* (1997), to which I contributed (including a request to feature "folkloristic" in the approaches section; Oliver cited "vernacular" as a category and not an approach), subscribed to the notion that the buildings were non-designed or institutionalized (Oliver 1969: 11; see also Özkan et al. 1979). Without reference to "social and environmental circumstances" as traditional practices, Brunskill relied on an aesthetic of, and post-industrial nostalgia for, earthy-looking structures blending into the rural landscape. His perspective was clearly academic and etic; the people who lived in those buildings did not refer to their housing as *vernacular* or *architecture*.

A portion of the upstart field used *folk* as a more equitable adjective to suggest analysis of culturally situated buildings that manifest the transmission of traditional knowledge and provide a context for customs and lifeways (Glassie 1975; Marshall 1981). The questions that users of *folk* during the 1970s asked were less aesthetic and more analytical than the architecturally based surveyors using *vernacular*, although still recognizing that they drew a distinction between forms that were academically valued and those that were not because they were old, rural, and ordinary (Glassie 1968; 1975; Roberts 1972; Montell and Morse 1976; Jordan 1978; Bronner 2006b). Taken together, proponents for the study of *folk* and *vernacular* architecture were often young outliers in anthropology, history, geography – and folklife studies with the *folk* contingent tending to contextualize their work within cultural studies and the "vernacular" camp in architectural studies. They assembled under the big multidisciplinary tent of "material culture" (Bronner 1979; 1983; 2018; Schlereth 1985). Viewing traditional buildings as

material evidence of dialect or cultural areas because they stood stable over time and variable over space, much of the analysis during this period was of cultural origin, diffusion, and regionalism (Kniffen 1965; Glassie 1968). Arguably, use of *vernacular* became dominant probably because its surface qualities could be observed and patterned more readily than the folkloristic approaches that demanded more situated, and often longitudinal contextual studies involving human subjects (Glassie 1984; 2000; Bronner 1998; Carter and Cromley 2005). Inspired by the formation of the Vernacular Architecture Group in 1952 in England for "those interested in *lesser* traditional buildings" (emphasis added) new organizations formed in the United States with the mission of studying rural, rough-hewn buildings, including the Vernacular Architecture Forum (VAF) in 1979 and the Pioneer America Society (later changed in 2014 to the International Society for Landscape, Place, and Material Culture) in 1967.

In these organizational changes, the criteria, negative at that, of *vernacular* representing non-designed, non-monumental, and non-institutionalized structures fell by the wayside. Yet the absence of institutionalization and lack of concern for process of tradition and transmission became central in conceptualizations of *vernacular* for folkloristics and ethnology, such as Robert Glenn Howard's definition of "vernacular" for a major folkloristic encyclopedia that the term represents "cultural forms or behaviors that are alternate to or held separate from those practices exhibited, regulated, or controlled by *institutions*" (Howard 2011: 1240; emphasis added). Comparing the meaning of *vernacular* to *folk*, Howard asserts that *vernacular* "more properly refers to cultural expression that is rooted in a specific community *without necessarily suggesting any traditional features in the expression*" (ibid.; emphasis added). This is the point at which *vernacular* undermines the objectives represented by my definition of folklore as "traditional knowledge put into, and drawing from practice" (Bronner 2019b: 76–78), despite Valk's (2023: 9) assurance that *vernacular* still fits that concept and constitutes an applicable method toward folkloristic goals.

Implicit in the use of *vernacular* in geographic architectural studies was a comparison of regional architectural patterns to dialectical isoglosses, which two folklorists – Howard Wight Marshall and John Michael Vlach (1973) – made explicit in "Toward a Folklife Approach to American Dialects". The "folklife approach" to architecture in their perspective was to consider cultural contexts of transmission with attention to testimonies of dialect speakers about their traditions in addition to quantitative surveys of word usage. Both dialect and buildings in their view were tied to space and localized natural environments. However, over time the structures included as vernacular architecture under the elastic rubric grew and consequently questions arose as to what was *not* "vernacular". VAF's journal changed its masthead from *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* begun in 1982 to the more neutral and inclusive *Buildings and Landscapes* in 2007. Partly in response, a global organization focused on processual issues of transmission and tradition with its naming in 1988 of the "International Association for the Study of *Traditional* Environments" (emphasis added). It suggested the study of normative, contemporary lifeways rather than the obsolescence of "surviving", purportedly non-designed buildings with the organization's mission statement that "Traditional dwellings and settlements accommodate most of the world's population" (IASTE 2024).

Yet rather than apply a folklife approach to lived religion that was associated with the historical ethnological work of Don Yoder (1990), Primiano (1995) chose to use the

modifier *vernacular* that made its analytical meaning more nebulous, and as I have argued, actually exacerbated the problems he intended to resolve (Bronner 2022b). I told him so, but his defense was that its "fuzziness" – what Valk calls instrumentality – invited reflection on belief practices that were non-institutionalized without fixing a method, approach, or analytical outcome. This dispute led to Primiano's omission from my *Handbook of American Folklore and Folklife Studies* (2019a) which was designed to help students to understand folkloristic method and theory. Meanwhile *vernacular* increasingly fell out of favor in architectural studies because of its judgmental, classist emphasis on "lesser" construction rather than learnable "know-how" (McMenamin and Sheridan 2020; see also Oliver 1986). As the types of structures that academics called "vernacular" expanded to urban, contracted, and temporary buildings, concerns arose whether the classification became less meaningful by describing anything as vernacular because its space was social in function. Whereas inquiry into repetition and variation in ordinary buildings suggested deeper questions of cognition, *vernacular* "sticks like a label", in anthropologist Hans Harder's (2023: 15) words, "as an essential, unalienable qualifier" that perturbedly assigned an aesthetic of crudity in contrast to "polite" design (see also Tschacher 2023: 78–82). To Harder, *vernacular* constituted an "ambivalent concept" because it combined both praising and demeaning attitudes toward the characterizations of its subjects. In an effort to move away from non-vernacular judgments of vernacular subjects, scholars suggested alternative relational categories underscoring the features of normativity and repetitiveness such as "common", "ordinary", and "informal" (see Upton and Vlach 1986; Jakle et al. 1989; Carter and Cromley 2005). With reference to the problematic label of *vernacular*, architectural historian Thomas C. Hubka drew attention to the classificatory dilemma of "vernacular" housing by titling his book on the nomenclature of common buildings *Houses without Names* (2013).

Cultural geographers who maintained an interest in regionalism as evidenced by houses treated as comparative objective data also recast *vernacular* as a cultural insider's cognitive map. As cultural geographer Terry G. Jordan (1978: 293) who used "folk" to describe architecture wrote, "the vernacular region is the product of the spatial perception of average people. Rather than being based on carefully chosen, quantifiable criteria, such regions are composites of the mental maps of the population". He and other geographers used *vernacular* to identify what people call their region that often departs from the ways that governmental, academic, and administrative units demarcate regions. The surveying of individuals to find emic patterns in their perceptions of cultural landscape is informed by folkloristic method. There is an implication in fellow cultural geographer Wilbur Zelinsky's introduction in his article "North America's Vernacular Regions" (1980) that the appellation of *vernacular* owes to European precedent. He stated,

> While popular regions are granted more than a modicum of respect by scholars in those anciently, persistently settled portions of the Old World where folk culture is a potent social and psychological force frequently reflected in the ways boundaries are drawn and areas administered, we have known and cared about them much less in a younger, more volatile North America. (Ibid.: 2)

As someone who has advocated for folklorists to work toward a theory of mind rather than stop at describing manifest behaviors (Bronner 2021c), I find this use of *vernacular* compelling for its psychological perspective. Yet in subsequent publications other geographers abandoned "vernacular" and favored use of "perceptual", "cognitive", "folk", and "popular" to highlight ways of knowing by individuals in geographical spaces (Tuan 2003; Lowry et al. 2008). Zelinsky's (1980) application of *vernacular* to signify residents' perceptions of their surroundings bears further consideration as method, although he still judges those who have these perceptions as "untutored" rather than suggesting tearing down the walls between the academic observer and the subject with reference to "us", as Valk (2023) states. But then again, if we are all in this analytical enterprise together, would there be a need for a residual, divisive categorization such as *vernacular*? The answer, I contend, is to discern and analyze the social and psychological processes that distinguish the identities and practices of cultural participants.

Valk (2023: 6) endorses *vernacular* as "particularly useful in the explorations of the unruly and unsettled world of digital culture", but I find this communicative realm to be the least appropriate place for the concept, if *vernacular* indeed connotes the linguistic, geographic, anthropological, and architectural sense of place and social connection (Bronner 2009; 2019b: 70–76). To be sure, expressive communication in emails and the internet manifest folkloric processes but folklorists and ethnologists struggle to apply *vernacular* to the kinds of disembodied identities and placeless practices that could be considered cultural or traditional (Bronner 2009; 2021a). Analysis of tradition in this modality is based on notation of variable repetition and the gleaning context from left comments, but the process of transmission and the formation of social conduits associated with the analysis of *vernacular* are evasive (see Bronner 2019a; Hakamies and Heimo 2019). But maybe that is why folklorists are attracted to use of *vernacular* in such media: it avoids analysis of the complicating cognitive sources for tradition (Blank 2009; Howard 2011: 1240).

I appreciate Valk's reference to the study of belief practices, if not "religion", in South Asia that put in relief issues of vernacularity. That is not to say that the issues are not apparent in other global regions, but I agree that the South Asian domain highlights the problematics and urgency of studying Westernness in folkloristic and ethnological studies with the subcontinent's acute global Anglophony and certainly the lingering effects of colonialism and post liberalization there (Roy 1993; 1994; Korom and Lowthorp 2019). I invite a concerted effort to analyze the reflexive uses of *vernacular* in South Asia – historically, psychologically, and philosophically –to be instructive for moving forward with the internationalization of folkloristic method and theory (see Naithani 1997; Mishra 2020).

A recent contribution to spark discussion on the problematic use of *vernacular* and add study partners to our *chavrusa* is *The Vernacular: Three Essays on an Ambivalent Concept and Its Uses in South Asia* written by Hans Harder, Nishat Zaidi, and Torsten Tschacher (2023). Getting back to Valk's point about the significance of the globalization of English in the rise of use of *vernacular*, Harder (2023: 3) in his opening essay points out that "there is an irony that the English language, once (and still, in certain contexts) itself subsumed under the vernacular category elsewhere, now in South Asia carries the term vernacular to subsume other languages in contradistinction to itself". In South

Asia with its legacy of caste and British colonialism, multiple regional languages, acute regionality, and diversity of identified religions, one understands methodological and theoretical challenges for studying culture as an insider or outsider. Writing on "English and the Vernacular", India insider Zaidi (2023: 31) observes that

> the vernacular was the product of the same imperialist agenda that English is now sometimes deemed to symbolize. The production of the vernacular was situated within the vortex of the political economy of print capitalism and institutional rationalization, and it was intricately entangled with hierarchies of caste, class, religion, and region.

The complexities of the situation can appear overwhelming but folklorists and ethnologists need to meet the challenges to mature and globalize their discipline. I am glad that Valk is leading students and colleagues to this place and problem.

My lens on South Asia has been through intellectual and organizational history (Mitra and Bronner 2023), and I can briefly mention in light of our *chavrusa* regarding "vernacular" religion the discourse since 1858 in South Asia with the establishment of the Christian Vernacular Education Society in 1858. In rhetoric that judged belief practices in India relative to the presumed superiority of Western Christianity, the Society adopted *vernacular* "to spread the knowledge of Christ and Salvation among the youth of India by means of Christian Vernacular Education and the circulation of Christian Literature" (Christian Literature Society for India 1911: 1; see Diamond 2014). Here one can fathom Zaidi's reference to print capitalism that influenced a cultural as well as political imperialism through the medium of religion. The Society that promoted the idea of an inferior *vernacular* by elites as teaching Christianity in the "mother tongue" of natives to lead them to English literature boasted that

> during the fifty three years of its existence it has educated in Christian truth over 100,000 *Heathen* Children; trained as Teachers over 1,300 Native Converts; published 4,737 Christian Books, etc., in 23 languages of which it has circulated over 44,874,063 copies. (Christian Literature Society for India 1911: 2; emphasis added.)

This boastful document points to a psychology of *vernacular* as a paradoxical double-edged sword, weaponized to show superiority over "lesser" sorts, and simultaneously lauding, perhaps disingenuously, the cultural richness of locality and oral tradition. Observing practice and listening to the voices of traditional participants and those who would "convert" them should bring folklorists and ethnologists back ultimately to questions of mind and perception. *Vernacular* as an analytical category remains in usage a signification of "them" rather than "us" and in my view does not serve the purposes, functionality, or instrumentality of folkloristic and ethnological studies in the 21st century. I do not claim that the vocabulary of folkness is ideal (cf. the folkloristic reference works Bronner 2006a; Leach 1949; Hultkrantz 1960; Green 1997, and Clements 2006, in which *vernacular* is notably absent, and McCormick and White 2011, in which it is covered), but it does draw attention to still central analytical goals of explaining the social and psychological processes that give tradition meaning and illuminate why we are who we are and do what we do.

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