

A Review of "*Authenticity and Cultural Identity: Performing Arts in Southeast Asia*" Edited by **Yoshitaka Terada**,
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Imagine that someone were to ask you to close your eyes and describe what first comes to mind when you think of traditional Japanese culture. What might you imagine? You may picture painted white faces and ornately decorated kimonos. You may experience the sharp bite of wasabi on your tongue. You may feel the frenetic pounding of taiko drums pounding inside your chest. Such impressions are certainly reductionisms of what is indeed a complex and multivocal culture; but how have many non-Japanese tourists come to associate these images with what it means to be Japanese? How have these impressions come to represent Japanese tradition in our minds? The report of the 2003 symposium, *Questioning Authenticity: Southeast Asian Performing Arts and Issues of Cultural Identity*, critically examines the relationship between national and cultural identity and tradition, calling into question the notion of authenticity which lends authority to certain South Asian artistic practices. By situating different performances in their respective socio-political contexts, the authors make a successful cross-cultural comparison that problematizes the way in which we come to think of performance as traditional or authentic.

The report reinforces the importance of situating performing arts in the historical moment, where it can be examined in relation to cultural practices and institutions. Prior to reading this review, I had not appreciated just how invaluable this relationship was to understanding both the meaning and form of various performances throughout South Asia. The review of the symposium compiles a collection of diverse yet germane

studies which attest to the unique ways in which political change can influence cultural practices and the way we think about them. Moreover, by viewing performing arts with respect to their particular socio-political tableaux, the reader is encouraged to rethink her or his conception of cultural authenticity. The authors, with varying degrees of success, effectively critique "how the notion of authenticity (discourse) affects performing arts (practice)" (Terada, 1). To understand the conversation between authenticity and performance, the authors investigate how the concept is used, why it is used, and by whom. In complementation with each study presented in the symposium, the reader is able to gain a fuller understanding of the interplay between the practice of performance and the hegemonic discourses of state policies.

What makes a performance authentic or traditional? The authors meet this question by pursuing a more important query regarding the source of cultural standards. Exchanging the 'what' for 'who' in our question compels the reader to consider the social and political context by which the performance is understood as authentic and traditional. The South Asian countries that appear in the case studies utilize performance as a means of preserving pre-colonial identities and (re)constructing what it means to be Myanmar, Thai, or Vietnamese, for example. "A music is part of a nation's expressive culture and derives its identity from the nation-state to which it belongs. Nation (as culture) and state were isomorphic, and the boundaries of one were the boundaries of the other." (Reyes, 111) Government leaders use performance to (re)define national and cultural identity, as well as express this (re)constructed identity to both its citizens and tourists.

"Increasing funding of traditional culture also serves to manipulate and enforce particular definitions of 'Myanmarness' and the state sanctioned meanings of nation and nationhood. Traditional culture patronage serves to create one official and uncontested national history and national culture, at the expense of many other local histories, and aims to establish a courtly authority to a government whose legitimacy has been suspect" (Douglas, 28).

Here we find that the notion of authenticity is inextricably linked with national identity, as national governments utilize performance as a means of expressing a conception of nationhood. The author also echoes a concern shared by many in the review- how the institutionalization of the arts "kills diversity" (39). The (re)construction of a national identity demands conformity to a singular way of being a citizen. The problem with standardizing an identity is that very little room is left for minorities and, consequently, minority forms of performance. This "one size fits all" stipulation of national identity marginalizes the multitude of ways to be

a citizen and disables the transmission of alternative artistic expressions. What we are left with is a homogenized sense of nationhood in which a dominant form of performance is legitimized as “traditional” and “authentic” at the expense of minority forms of expression.

The authors identify many different ways in which South Asian governments “imagined and shaped national identity through performing arts” (Koanantakool, 11) and lend authority to particular kinds of performance. Through governmental efforts such as state sponsored competitions, educational programs, monitored radio broadcasts, westernization of musical notation, cultural tourism, involvement in international events, and governmental organizations such as LISTIBYA, national governments set the standards by which we judge performances as authentic and traditional. The distinction between nation and culture becomes blurred as government programs and policies attempt to establish a uniform national identity by means of artistic support. Performing arts are then used “as an instrument in the making of a modern nation.... Their identity was crafted to represent a modern and civilize nation” (Koanantakool, 24). Minority identities and performances are consequently swallowed by a sea of standardization in which homogenized forms of expression are privileged as pure and unchanged.

Our conception of a particular performance as traditional is neither the result of an inherent quality embedded within the practice nor the invention of our own minds; rather, it is produced by the subtle yet effective means of hegemonic discourse.

“If the approach toward local is still based on political and economic power on the one hand and ‘homogeneity’ on the other, then we may fall into an even more complicated problem of ethnocentrism. In other words, traditional arts have to negotiate with political and economic interests, on one hand, and with the ‘standardized’ or hegemonic values on the other” (Suanda, 144).

Authenticity is communicated through discourses such as the state sponsored initiatives mentioned above, which legitimize the performance as being quintessential to the nation it represents. “Authenticity”, Terada explains in his introduction, “often validates a certain tradition, genre, lineage, area, and/or individual/s with a rationale for receiving governmental funding or being included in textbooks” (Terada, 10). The consequences of this, as we have already seen, have proven detrimental to minority groups. “‘Minority’ is an inherently relational concept, involving center-periphery, major-minor, and dominant-subordinate relationships—a concept that invites comparisons and implies differences, discrimination, and oppression.” (Okazaki, 169) In the cases presented

in the report, we find that our notions of tradition and authenticity are determined by the majority voice - in these cases, the national government. The politics of representation are realized very keenly here as the voices of minority groups are shushed by the voice of power and authority. The majority group does not need to explicitly exclude the minority voice; rather, it has far more effectively marginalized minority performances by authenticating a homogenized, national standard of performing arts through hegemonic discourse. Tourists and citizens alike then internalize these discourses and begin to think of select forms of performance as authentic at the exclusion of a more diverse array of artistic expression.

Another way in which majorities engage in authoritative discourse is by rendering performance as timeless and unchanging. Artistic practices are conceived of as authentic "by the assumed insularity of cultures according to which the more untainted by outside influences a musical practice can be shown to be" (Reyes, 112). The idea that a performance has existed in its current form for innumerable years prior to colonialism and will continue for many generations to come belies the non-static nature of performance. "Change", however, "is a natural phenomenon; nothing remains constant except change itself." (Sam, 134) The authors advocate change and diversity as necessary for artistic transmission and social well-being; however, art is prevented from socially beneficial growth as majority groups attempt to preserve politically lucrative practices in an illusion of tradition. "Such support and patronage," Douglas states, "is directed primarily toward the reconstruction and preservation of pre-colonial heritage...Innovation, fusion and creation of original works of art are marginal if existent at all." (Douglas, 28) Thinking about a practice as traditional supports both this cultural illusion and the government that works to preserve it. "The value of this music tradition to its patrons appears to be ideological as opposed to aesthetic and geared to preservation of rule rather than preservation of culture." (Douglas, 39) In effect, national governments (re)create identity by (re)creating the past, a pre-westernized past which celebrates certain artistic practices as traditional and discredits others that do not fit into the normative scheme of nationhood. Art is frozen in time and place by the culprit of authenticity, "a successful rejection of outside influence" (Reyes, 112).

Toward the end of the report, Okazaki poses a compelling question in response to the issues the authors have been discussing. "How should the conflict between the desired expression of identity and other types of identity be negotiated? Similarly, how does one negotiate a perceived preference for acculturated or westernized versions of the performing arts to the 'authentic' or traditional version?" (Okazaki, 172) Okazaki reinforces the interminable relationship between identity

and performance and, while offering his own suggestions, compels the reader to rethink the social implications of this conflict with respect to the notion of authenticity. In examining "authenticity" in terms of a process, the authors successfully problematize "tradition" and the way we think about it. My hope is that in calling into question the way in which we conceptualize certain cultural practices, the report will accomplish two key and related achievements; to remind us to be cognizant of the relationship between cultural practice and discourse and, consequently, pave the way for more diverse artistic growth.

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