

**DeNapoli, Antoinette Elizabeth:** *Real Sadhus Sing to God. Gender, Asceticism, and Vernacular Religion in Rajasthan.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 369 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-994003-5. Price: £ 22.99

Antoinette DeNapoli's monograph "Real Sadhus Sing to God. Gender, Asceticism, and Vernacular Religion in Rajasthan" not only makes an original contribution to the flourishing body of recent scholarship on female asceticism in South Asia, but her argument for "vernacular asceticism" aims to shift broader academic conceptualizations of renunciation – and I hope it will. DeNapoli studies Hindu renunciation (*sannyās*) in the unlikely and understudied site of southern Rajasthan. In the former princely state of Mewar it is Rajput culture and the devotional *bhakti*-oriented *sant* traditions that predominate rather than Brahman orthodoxy. Scholars interested in *sannyās* have not typically focused on Rajasthan, and this regional focus is key to the development of DeNapoli's concept of "vernacular asceticism."

The sadhus described in this book are initiated into either Dashanami or Nath traditions of *sannyās*. Despite these being Shaiva forms of renunciation, Rajasthani sadhus' practice of *sannyās* is eclectic and draws from devotional traditions associated with *bhakti* poet-saints such as Mira Bai that are so salient in this region. DeNapoli aims to offer an "internal" view of asceticism as practiced, as lived – one that challenges mainstream perspectives found in sacred texts and popular representations. *Sannyās*, she shows, is carefully crafted as "devotional asceticism" that exists outside the dominant model of Brahmanical *sannyās* and within an alternative tradition of female renunciation as exemplified by Mira Bai. Academic discourse on *sannyās* tends to assume that, because female sadhus are marginalized in the text-based Brahmanical model, they are similarly marginal to the lived practice of *sannyās*. However, DeNapoli shows female sadhus to be central, creative, and dynamic figures in broader phenomenon of *sannyās*-as-lived in South Asia.

The author's extensive field research, totaling three years between 2001 and 2011, and her work with 39 sadhus (including males) of the Dashanami and Nath orders provides evidentiary basis for her claims and also rich detail that brings the pages to life. It also yields some interesting methodological insights about working among sadhus. For example, DeNapoli reflects on the sticky issue of the distinction between researcher and disciple and also notes that her own singing of the *bhajans* impacted her relationship to the data she was collecting.

Chapter 1 sets out the key analytical concepts at play in the book. DeNapoli's performance studies-centered model of religious expressive culture is offered as an alternative to the Brahmanical institution that is the focus of most academic literature on *sannyās*. Her view of *sannyās* as "performance" of songs, stories, and sacred texts seems to emerge organically from her encounters with sadhus who generally answered her questions by performing a song or a story. Performance is an emergent phenomenon and always strategic; its context is structured by various features: setting, sender and receiver, medium and code, text and message, cues foregrounded by participants. Most

importantly, the concept of performance distinguishes between discursive and expressive practices, for sadhus communicate in song and story what they might not (or cannot) say directly. DeNapoli is attentive to what sadhus do with their words, not just what they say with them, and finds that their songs and stories often articulate a counterpoint view to their discursive statements about *sannyās*.

*Satsang*, a gathering of people to sing *bhajans*, is the performance context at the heart of this study and a defining feature of *sannyās* in Mewar. While other scholars have written about sadhus' expressive traditions, DeNapoli argues that sadhus not only sing *bhajans* but that this activity creates their renunciation. She argues that singing *bhajans* is an orienting metaphor for *sannyās* because it highlights a way to envision renunciation by practitioners who are not educated and not literate. Vernacular asceticism equated singing and *sannyās* in order to emphasize a devotional and female approach to renunciation. In her use of the term "vernacular" DeNapoli rejects the notion that lived *sannyās* represents a "folk" or "popular" expression articulated against an "official" institutionalized version of *sannyās*. *Satsang* creates community, and sadhus' view *sannyās* as a social way of life rather than a solitary and hermetic path. The "vernacular asceticism" described here questions the idea that *sannyās* requires radical separation from family, home, community, and society. Historically, *satsang* is associated with Vaishnava Hinduism, but its heterodox and egalitarian *bhakti* attitude that an individual's caste, color, gender, class, and religion have no significance in eyes of divine makes it central to a Mewari vision of *sannyās*.

Chapters 2 and 3 foreground gender analysis. Chapter 2 analyzes personal stories of female sadhus as a constructive act for exercising female agency and validating female religious authority in vernacular asceticism. DeNapoli shows how female sadhus construct themselves as "real" renunciators through personal narrative. Interestingly, male sadhus of the same orders present their asceticism as a result of their own hard work and effort, while their female counterparts emphasize duty, destiny, and devotion, denying their own agency in order to validate their transgressive way of life. Chapter 3 describes how female sadhus place their renunciation within an ancient tradition of women's devotional singing, with hagiographical tales of Mira Bai and other women ascetics. Their "vernacular asceticism" is not one of the otherworldly ideals of denial and bodily self-mortification but rather one of love, compassion, and deep engagement with the world.

Chapters 4, 5, 6 explore ambivalence regarding caste. Chapter 4 explores exclusionary interpretations of renunciation based on *jātī* found among high-caste sadhus. Given the context of Mewar's Rajput culture, it is not Brahmanism that is celebrated so much as high-caste Rajput values of heroism, bravery, and protection. Chapter 5 highlights the life and work of a local tribal (Bhil) sadhu, while chapter 6 focuses on a sadhu from a (formerly) disadvantaged caste group. Chapters 5 and 6 present the most interesting and original material found in the book, and both explore whether these figures support or challenge the dominant Mewari ethos of caste ambivalence.

Chapter 7 examines sacred texts practices, with a focus on performance of the *Rāmcārīmānas* attributed to Tulsidas. DeNapoli describes how uneducated female sadhus who never learned to read and write perform literacy and thus construct themselves as “scriptural.” She also outlines several motifs through which female sadhus define renunciation as relational and emplaced in community. In chapter 8, the author returns to the metaphor of “singing *bhajans*” to perform a view of asceticism that models celebratory and interpersonal religiosity of *bhakti* saints and widens the domain of *sannyās* beyond classical, masculine Brahmanical formulations. Chapters 7 and 8 outline the practices by which these sadhus create a legitimate female space in vernacular asceticism.

A very short Conclusion reviews the main arguments, highlights some of the conceptual distinctions that are an obstacle to understanding religious expression, and outlines the differences between Brahmanical *sannyās* and female sadhus’ asceticism, which are sometimes competing and sometimes complementary. DeNapoli underlines her hope that the model of vernacular asceticism that she has proposed will open new directions for research on *sannyās*.

DeNapoli offers a fresh perspective on *sannyās* that will be of interest to researchers and students of Indian religions. The prose is accessible and lively, though the length (310 pages and 9 substantial chapters) and lack of glossary will be an obstacle for classroom use. The flip side of this issue is that the main arguments are supported by ample evidence based on substantial field research and the presence of women’s own voices.

Meena Khandelwal

**Diala, Isidore:** *Esiaba Irobi’s Drama and the Postcolony. Theory and Practice of Postcolonial Performance.* Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2014. 316 pp. ISBN 978-978-918-113-1. Price: £ 22.95

Isidore Diala’s “Esiaba Irobi’s Drama and the Postcolony. Theory and Practice of Postcolonial Performance” has come to blaze scholarly trail of what Diala himself described as “the Irobi canon”; a critical framing and exploration of Esiaba Irobi’s contribution to the drama and discourse of postcoloniality. Recounting Irobi’s embittered disappointment with the Western publishing establishment which denied and rejected his combative, anticolonial monograph, Michael J. C. Echeruo, in the “Foreword,” captures the necessity of the book as capable of drawing “serious attention to the plays and poems of this gifted man” (13). The book can further be seen to have come as a critical intervention to the increasingly polemical evaluations of postcolonial theory in which Irobi’s plays and cultural articulations are enmeshed. Thus, the book is a gratifying attempt at unraveling these aesthetic and theoretical entanglements through far-reaching arguments that locate Irobi’s work at the intersection of his Igbo worldview and the political trajectories of the Nigerian postcolony. In a truly canonical sense, the book provides an exegetic meeting point for the textualities of Irobi plays and performances.

In chapter one, appropriately titled “Esiaba Irobi. The Igbo Worldview and Performative Heritage,” Diala lays the foundation of Irobi’s oeuvre in the Igbo festival and masquerade culture and argues that his restless and audacious search for new artistic models are anchored “in the oral tradition of his Igbo ethnic group, its rituals of self-renewal, myths and legends of enigmatic and daring deity heroes” (32). Acknowledging the theoretical influence of Amankulor about whom it was said “after Amankulor, no more Aristotle” (30), Diala reinforces the source of Irobi’s fascination with indigenous, homegrown theoretical paradigm that marks his early drama. The remaining six chapters of the book take analytical perspectives, consolidated in the opening chapter in a manner that foregrounds the interconnectedness between Irobi’s Igbo cosmology, his restless life in Nigeria which drove him into exile, and the tensions of exilic experience in England and the United States. The strength of this study draws bountifully from the autochthonous performativity of Irobi’s life and career as performer, playwright, and poet represented in the interface of these tripartite experiences.

The subtitle enunciates the sense in which Irobi’s drama solicit self-conceived critical approaches within postcolonial performance theory, and suggests the tenacity with which the author navigates trajectories of the dramatist’s body of works and the poetics of his critical enterprises. Beginning with the first play “Froned Circle” through “Nwokedi,” “Cemetery Road,” “The Other Side of the Mask,” “Hangmen Also Die,” and the posthumously published “Sycorax,” the study locates a recurring motif of masquerade idiom, music, and dance as dominant trope in Irobi’s drama and poetry.

Negotiating the textualities of Irobi’s plays and performances with such penetrating insight of Igbo ethnic background, Diala historicizes the knowledge system of Igbo religious practices and ethnocultures as embodying vital materials for the tragic art. In soliciting the Igbo deities in support of this argument, Diala conceives of Irobi’s drama as a semiology of Igbo mythologies within the context of contemporary and transformative agency. The submission on Agwu, one of the many deities of the Igbo people, suffices creditably as Diala’s incisive exploration of Igbo deities as hermeneutics of counter-discourse: “The kinship between genius and madness is an ancient one in Igbo thought and both are in the domain of the same deity, Agwu ... As the repository of all arcane and esoteric knowledge, Agwu is associated with divinations and inspiration; but as Agwu is equally linked with lunacy and behavior, lunatics, deviants, heretics are considered to be under the influence of this deity. Regarded also as a primary cause of misfortunes, Agwu clearly is central in the Igbo conception of tragedy” (130).

Diala’s exploration of the counter-hegemonic function of music and song in Irobi’s drama in chapter six “Music, Dance and (Political) Transformation in Irobi’s Drama,” highlights the dramatic conceptualization of cultural resistance and ideology framed on the traditional rendering of masquerade conflicts. He draws attention to Irobi’s fascination with Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tomkins’s postcolonial imaginings of dance as a focal agent