



South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies

ISSN: 0085-6401 (Print) 1479-0270 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/csas20>

Doing Style: Youth and Mass Mediation in South India, by Constantine V. Nakassis

Sneha Annavarapu

To cite this article: Sneha Annavarapu (2017) Doing Style: Youth and Mass Mediation in South India, by Constantine V. Nakassis, South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, 40:1, 200-202, DOI: [10.1080/00856401.2017.1279711](https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2017.1279711)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2017.1279711>



Published online: 05 Mar 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

perspective on the varied dimensions of how middle-class and caste identities relate to one another in India today.

Mona G. Mehta
Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar, Gujarat, India
✉ monamehta@iitgn.ac.in

© 2017 Mona G. Mehta
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2017.1279710>

Doing Style: Youth and Mass Mediation in South India, by Constantine V. Nakassis, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 2016, 317 pp., US\$30.00 (paperback), ISBN 9780226327853

In this immensely engaging ethnographic study of youth practices in Tamil Nadu, India, Constantine Nakassis explores the meaning of the catchword ‘style’ in everyday discourse, its relationship to mass media, and the role of linguistic anthropology in illuminating how phenomena and processes emerge out of a dialectical entanglement between social actors and the projects they enable. Packed with historical, theoretical, and empirical insight, this book points to how the performative work of citation is deeply tied to the way college-going youth in Madurai and Chennai make sense of their aspirations and desires in globalising India, and how they think about the liminality of college life. Nakassis treats the use of the word ‘style’ as ethnographic datum—a term that is used by his respondents to refer to an array of aspirational objects and activities—and as an analytical entry point into the lifeworlds of college-going youth. In this book, he explores three sites of mediality where the experience of liminality inheres in semiotic forms and practices that are constructed, negotiated and experienced as the very linguistic category of ‘youth’: brand fashion; spoken English; and mass film ‘heroism’. The book is divided into three parts—Brand, Language, and Film—and each part is divided into two chapters. While one chapter in each part provides a deeply rich portrait of the ways in which college youth ‘do style’ in everyday life, the following chapter traces the corollary path of circulation in which media are ‘produced’. Why this matters is that Nakassis offers a useful way of seeing the *emergence* of media as a product of citational entanglements across these three medial sites which begins to account for pressing questions such as: why do some things count as ‘style’ while others do not? How does one know when one is doing style as opposed to overdoing it? How does one judge the appropriateness of the ‘style’ being done?

In Part I of the book, for instance, we see how ‘fake’ brands are implicated in the quest for stylish self-presentation. While it is important to note that perhaps few students can indeed afford the ‘real’ brands, it is the callous indifference to authenticity that is striking (p. 41). While the ethnographic vignettes reveal a deep sense of attachment to *brandedness*, there seems to be an indifference towards authentic *brands*; the youth are citing brandedness, but not specific brands. In some cases, the author notes how wearing an authentic brand could actually jeopardise one’s status amongst one’s peers. Instead of the general presumption of cultural models of consumerist aspiration that assume a proclivity to marking difference and distinction, Nakassis shows how, while there is a tangible effort to present oneself as being ‘different from the others’, there is also countervailing peer-group pressure to *not* show difference in a manner that reinscribes traditional modes of hierarchy. ‘Style’, not ‘overstyle’, is what matters. The very abundance of a ‘surfeit’ of brand goods in street markets is a crucial part of

the story. The fact that these *look* like brand garments but do not necessarily always cite an actual brand (for instance, T-shirts with images of skulls and words that do not denote anything in the English language) points to how the *idea of brands*, or ‘brandedness’, is important to doing style. The brand and the surfeit resist each other, but also need each other. The brand cannot exist without the excesses of quality, materiality, and ontology that emerge from the brand but cannot be traced back to it.¹

Similar logics of citationality undergird the practices of conversation amongst the youth, especially in the case of speaking Tamil with the ‘appropriate’ sprinkling of English words—almost as an ‘interactional accoutrement’ (p. 114)—as is citing the quality of Englishness. The author persuasively shows how the youths’ ‘enveloping of English within their Tamil keeps its excesses and dangers in check, attempting to mitigate the potential divisiveness of English (based on class and status) by bracketing its denotationality’ (p. 117), while simultaneously keeping in abeyance the anxieties associated with needing to speak English fluently upon finishing college and joining the workforce. The result is a kind of a need to speak both English and Tamil, the former tinged with explicit disavowal while the latter is stylised enough to mark it as different from ‘pure’ Tamil. Youth speech and fashion both accessorise English by putting it in quotes, reducing it to having the mere quality of being English-like (p. 119). The ‘switch’ in code-switching is precisely what is undergoing negotiation here since English(ness) is being *cited* as opposed to being ‘switched to’. In the corollary story of where stylish ways of speaking are produced, Nakassis explores how Tamil is used by fluent speakers of English who host TV call-in shows on a popular ‘stylish’ channel, SS Music. He finds here that the hosts of these shows cite Tamil, bracketing it even while reanimating it in the context of English. An inversion across media that binds the hosts to the audience he terms the ‘camera obscura’ effect. In both cases, it is precisely the ‘disfluent production and reception of media-tised language that is central to the practices and understandings of style’ (p. 151) rather than a determined aspiration to ‘fluency’. That this process can occur in the liminal time-space of college life is precisely why its playful interdiscursivity produces the very category of ‘youth’, one utterance at a time. In Part III, the author notes how in the case of films and the figure of the ‘mass hero’,² the act of citing and reflexively putting such hero-worship in quotes is an important step in ‘doing style’. Similarly, the fact that films themselves are inter-referential, cite a sense of style associated either specifically with one icon of the past, or with a more general understanding of heroism, and also cite an imagined ‘reception’ by a ‘mass audience’, is important. In the paths of circulation of images, too, we see citationality as being key to managing the project of ‘doing style’.

A cultural phenomenology of youth lifeworlds, this book does a great job of shedding light on the paths of circulation of the media that the youth engage with—from textile workshops to music-television studios. Without taking categories of youth and liminality for granted as static entities that define experience in colleges, the author demonstrates how these categories are reflexively produced and performative, interdiscursive processes, while also solidly delivering on the proposal that any study of mass media needs to be broader in scope and content in

-
1. Of course, when it comes to women, there is always the added element of narratives of morality and patriarchal censure that constrain how much ‘style’ they can do apart from the inherent logistics of trying to straddle peer-group pressure and the material conditions of production of surfeit.
 2. While the attempts of male actors to create a ‘stylish persona’ ring of playful flirtatiousness with citational practices, one wonders if the case of female actors might be different. While Nakassis’s book does not delve into the details of female actor-personas, one can imagine how straddling the need to be ‘proper’ and ‘respectable’ along with having ‘mass appeal’ and screen presence needs to be negotiated with care on a platform such as the cinema. Perhaps more empirical work on this issue would shed some light on this gendered experience of ‘doing style’ on screen.

order to reckon with reflexive material and semiotic entanglements that produce media on an ongoing basis.

Sneha Annavarapu
University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA
✉ snehaa@uchicago.edu

© 2017 Sneha Annavarapu
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2017.1279711>

Wrestlers, Pigeon Fanciers, and Kite Flyers: Traditional Sports and Pastimes in Lahore, by Jürgen Wasim Frembgen and Paul Rollier, Karachi, Oxford University Press, 2014, 172 pp., AU\$62.11 (hardback), ISBN 9780199069187

After 11 September 2001, many anthropological studies that focused on Pakistani society systematically explored the ‘key concepts’ of mysticism, fundamentalism, and nationalism. The understanding of the Pakistani cultural system, popular activities, and local values has either been done under the shadow of long-established Middle Eastern (Islamic) studies or an increasingly influential corpus of Indian (South Asian) scholarship. Yet, even today, the anthropology of Pakistan remains under-studied. The absence may be the result of the reluctance of international anthropologists to undertake fieldwork in Pakistan due to security concerns and the dearth of funding agencies willing to support studies in the area, all of which has created a lag in the exploration of Pakistani popular culture. In *Wrestlers, Pigeon Fanciers, and Kite Flyers: Traditional Sports and Pastimes in Lahore*, German anthropologist Jürgen Wasim Frembgen and British anthropologist Paul Rollier do an excellent job in filling this gap.

The book is concise and written with clarity of prose, keeping in mind the expectations of a general reader. It focuses on the ‘sports’ and ‘pastimes’ of the Walled City of Lahore, the capital of Punjab province in Pakistan. It explores how the body is experienced through a range of cultural practices in urban Punjabi society. With a very brief introduction, the book is divided into three chapters: men’s wrestling, pigeon flying, and kite fighting. In each chapter, the authors examine the relationship between master and protégé, the build-up to the activities, their performance, and the aftermath and its effect on the lives of the practitioners. The authors explore how a male Punjabi body is experienced in its relationship with mud and water (wrestling), with the non-human (pigeon flying), and in the delicate bond with the kite string (kite duelling). The evocative chapter titles and photographs, large local glossary, and meticulous quotations of archival and vernacular materials take the reader on a terrestrial and celestial tour of Lahore.

Other than animating the lives of the wrestlers, pigeon fanciers, and kite flyers, the book explicates three important aspects of contemporary Pakistani society. Firstly, it explores different types of masculinities associated with the three pastimes. The wrestler’s body is an embodiment of Punjabi masculinity, which in the past was associated with effectiveness, courage, and generosity. Similarly, the master pigeon flyers of Lahore possess a certain type of masculinity commonly revered among pigeon fanciers. Among kite flyers, masculinity is demonstrated in the ability to hold the razor-sharp kite string with bare fingers and wear cuts to the index finger with pride while duelling with other kite flyers for primacy in the sky. Kite flyers also express their masculinity by celebrating victory with jubilant dancing and by shooting bursts from Kalashnikovs and other automatic weapons.

Secondly, the book explores the concept of honour (*izzat*) among the enthusiasts of Lahore. Accumulation of more honour than others is the basic objective of these activities. Take the wrestler, for example, who feels pride in earning the title ‘Champion of Pakistan’. Among