

# Editorial Foreword

*Words of Authority.* Aware that a cultural current connects official words and social power, we would like to know its direction and to measure its field of force. The goal is to explain how some significant social practices developed, and the language of authority has proved a useful place to start—on the reasonable assumption that social values are encoded within it, social tensions revealed by the conflicts it denies, and social changes reflected in the shifting meanings of its terms. The three essays in this section illustrate the difficulties as well as the rewards of such analysis. For Janet Ewald, whose research in Taqali history encountered a notable absence of documents, the challenge was to recognize this not as a lack of evidence but as evidence itself. (Other Africanists have had to deal with related problems; see Rigby in *CSSH*, 25:3; Henige in 18:4; and Strickland, 18:3.) Perhaps, Ewald suggests, historians who stress the importance of official documents assume that power must be exercised in a certain way. Having thus joined the debate on the differences between written and oral cultures (picking up questions posed by Goody and Watt, 5:3), she offers a fresh interpretation of Taqali politics: Oral understandings fit better than written ones with face-to-face negotiations and fluidity. Change would come less from increased access to literacy than from altered political relations.

The problem C. J. Fuller addresses begins with written law and a constitution; but for him, too, the issue is one of social flexibility. Challenging Galanter (in 14:1), he questions the view that Western legal forms necessarily conflict with more traditional and indigenous aspects of Indian culture; and he does so by studying court cases involving religion. He shows that documents (much like oral negotiations) are subject to reinterpretation, however formally written. Forced to define Hinduism (see Flint, 6:3), establish what current religious practice really is, and consider religious texts, Indian courts find ways of softening contrasts between modern law and ancient tradition. Like others who have studied the role of law in India (compare Dirks, 28:2; Kumar, 27:2; Khare, 14:1, the Rudolchs, 8:1; Derrett, 5:4), Fuller finds practice more telling than form. Horace Dewey starts with a word, *poruka*, a Russian term for collective responsibility that raises issues about the nature of this practice and about Mongol contributions to Muscovite rule (on the Mongols see Lindner, 24:4). His careful delineation of the concept stresses its flexibility but uncovers signs of significant continuity, especially in Russian words taken from Chinese. Three essays, by probing the connection between words and power, reveal how adaptably cultures intersect.

*Catholicism and the Frontiers of Conflict.* Frontiers, as Robert I. Burns shows, are evocative of new worlds to conquer (note Beckman on the psychology of the frontier thesis in American history, 8:3). Through a carefully

elaborated comparison, he outlines a “missionary syndrome,” which developed in the Middle Ages and centuries later guided the cultural confrontation of Christianity with the native populations of the American Northwest (compare Rafael, 29:2, and the articles on missionaries in 23:1). In a closer comparison Erick D. Langer and Robert H. Jackson explore the role of missions in Alta California at the end of the eighteenth century and in Bolivia a century later (Rausch discussed the intervening period in 29:2). In both cases missions disciplined native labor for the benefit of European settlers; but, less tied to the state, the Bolivian missions were not so systematic in their disciplined exploitation nor so destructive of indigenous culture. In more limited circumstances, they adapted by building communities and helping others cross cultural frontiers.

And that is not unlike what happened in France and Belgium as the Catholic Church faced systematic opposition. The strident conflicts in nineteenth-century France over how the dead should be honored are generally understood to have been battles about clerical authority. In his sensitive study, however, Thomas Kselman finds a more complex process of changing communal values in which parish priests often mediated between theological rigor and local expectations (as Burns notes that missionaries did between cultures in the Pacific Northwest; compare Taylor on priests in Ireland, 27:4). Similarly, anticlericals tended to insist on familiar rites, so that even civil burial was a form of syncretism (compare Vovelle on American attitudes toward death, 22:4). Carl Strikwerda challenges the assumption that some formal barrier separated working-class interests (naturally socialist) and Catholic action (inherently conservative—Truant, 21:2, noted the workers’ use of Christian concepts in an earlier period). By systematic comparison of Catholic and socialist labor unions in Brussels and Ghent, he demonstrates the capacity of Catholic unions to mobilize feelings of community and family among commuters, women, and Flemish speakers whom the socialists failed to reach. Conflicts of culture, economic power, and class continued to be reinforced by relations between church and state, by political parties, and by competing ideologies; as a participant in all this, however, the Church contributed to the erosion of the very cultural frontiers it had helped define.

*CSSH Discussion.* Of all the forms of contact between European imperialism and the non-European world, those of the battlefield have attracted the least attention from current scholarship. Not that anyone doubts the decisive importance of these military engagements, however bloody or limited they may have been. Rather, their ultimate outcome is assumed to have been a foregone conclusion, primarily because of the Europeans’ supposed technological superiority. Before the end of the nineteenth century, John K. Thornton says in his study of warfare in Angola, that simply was not so. Military history, too, is a story of cultural adaptation (see Berg, 27:2; Issawi, 22:4; Ness and Stahl, 19:1).