



New Year's Day Performances as Nationalist Discourse in Bangladesh

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that public displays are performance events that carry a variety of meanings for the participants involved in such events. Given the multivocal nature of large-scale spectacles, such as street parades and national holidays, there is bound to be disagreement and therefore contestation over the correct interpretation of the events performed. When it comes to the political function of public display events, it becomes clear that they can be manipulated symbolically and semiotically to convey certain meanings intended by the orchestrators of the events being performed. In Bangladesh, a relatively new nation in the world order, the growing pains of defining what constitutes the essence of its citizenship becomes a priority. The public sphere thus becomes a nationalist arena for performing ethnolinguistic identity. Yet, due to the diversity of the population and its myriad of beliefs, the attempt to homogenize can and does lead to contestation, since not all agree on what constitutes the nation, its belief system, and its culture. Festivals thus become dialogical vehicles for enacting the disputed nature of the Bangladeshi national self.

Keywords: Ekushey—independence—martyrdom—nationalism—New Year's Day—*pahelā baiśākh*—partition—performance

Nationalism can be imagined in many ways. It can be ideologically inculcated from childhood, as Don Handelman (1998, 162–91) has shown to be the case in Israel, where he found Zionism already being taught in kindergarten through holiday celebrations. It can be disseminated in print, as Benedict Anderson (1983) noticed in Indonesia, where a common literary language was created to use in newspapers for the dual purposes of inculcating patriotism and uniting a polyglot collective of islands into a “one nation, one language” model, a technique used unsuccessfully in South Asia, such as in Sri Lanka, where it resulted in a long civil war. It can be formulated religiously, as Peter van der Veer (1994) has demonstrated in India, where religion was used as a vehicle to construct national identities, but at the expense of communal violence; this also happened to be the case in the former Yugoslavia, according to Vjekoslav Perica (2002). It can be articulated as folklore, as several scholars have shown to be the case in Europe and elsewhere (Baycroft and Hopkin 2012; Dow 1991), where many countries have used it as a way of demarcating, then exhibiting the perceived essence of the nation.¹ It can also be performed as a way of protesting against the state, as Slyomovics (2005) has shown to be the case in Morocco when it comes to such issues as human rights. Or it can be a variety of these things and more (for example, poetry, dance, theater, literature, television shows, films, etc.), which is what we find in Bangladesh, for instance, the key country in this article.²

Most importantly, however, nationalism is something embodied, as van der Veer has suggested in this collection of articles, for it involves the multifaceted process of remembering, which Paul Connerton (1989) has shown to be based on “silting” memory into mankind’s corporeal consciousness, thereby fusing individual and collective memory. Embodiment is thus a way of inscribing experience onto the personal psyches of individuals who make up a collective within the nation to create a citizenry that lends to either the coherence or disruption of the whole.³ Memory is therefore the basis of praxis and praxis is by nature embodied in performance, as we notice with the New Year’s inscription on the cheek of the young boy in figure 1. The performance of nationalism, however, is not always harmonious, for, as adumbrated in the preceding paragraphs, it is multivocal in nature, leading to various and contested interpretations.⁴ Yet, at the same time, the government must ideologically intervene to create a semblance of order and harmony for the sake of projecting a politically beneficial image of a stable state to its citizenry and the outside world. Bangladesh has been fairly successful in this regard, for it has convinced UNESCO to



Figure 1. A young reveler participating in a parade on the streets of Dhaka in 2014 with *śubha nababarṣa* (auspicious new year) tattooed on his face, literally to inscribe the event on his body as a way of preserving and disseminating collective memory. Photo by and courtesy of the author.

recognize two key nationalistic celebrations in Bangladesh as being integral to the world's intangible cultural heritage. But it has also paid a price for this, with a history of violence surrounding the public events to be explored in this article.

Whatever the reality is, the government's task, of course, is to see to it that citizens peacefully and harmoniously celebrate the nation as something shared by all, in most cases. However, when such displays of nationalistic unity fail, violence results, which challenges the notion of the nation's unity and harmony. In this article, I want to show how one public event, a national holiday in Bangladesh, is used ideologically to try to create a sense of unified citizenry, despite numerous political challenges that oppose the construction of Bangladesh in the way that it is currently depicted by the ruling party; that is, as a secular nation free of radical religious orthodoxy. The event upon which I wish to focus is New Year's Day (*nababarṣa*), which is also celebrated in West Bengal, India, but not for the same purposes nor with the same verve. New Year's Day celebrations will be compared with another national holiday observed on February 21 in memory of the so-called "language martyrs" who died defending their right to speak, read, and write in Bengali. I choose these two recurring occasions for the purpose of contrasting peaceful, celebratory modes of nationalistic performance with more violent, observational ones that take on the guise of civil ritual. In comparing and contrasting the two, we notice how one is dependent on the other in order to complete an annual rite of passage that results in the remembrance of the bloody death of an old nation that was necessary for the glorious birth of a new one.⁵ Before delving deeper into my specific case study, some historical background will be useful to situate the data in their proper context.

Origins and kinds of nationalism in Bangladesh

The origins of Bangladeshi nationalism date back to the colonial period before Bangladesh actually became an independent country. During the era of British rule, much anticolonial activity was associated with greater Bengal (the Bengal Presidency), which would be partitioned in 1905 by Lord Curzon into an eastern and western portion based on religious majority populations. Upper-caste Hindus, whose population was greater in West Bengal, were, by and large, opposed to the Partition of Bengal, while the Muslims who predominated in the eastern portion were in support of it.⁶ Despite the fact that the partition was nullified in 1911, it left an indelible effect on the populace, and it was the first event that emphasized religious difference as a mode of separating people geographically within the growing freedom movement in British India (Wright 1998, 30–35).

One could confidently say that the first partition of Bengal was indeed the beginning of religious nationalism in what was then the eastern rim of the British Empire. Some romantic nationalists, such as Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), though, tried to de-emphasize religious difference by waxing poetically on the feminine beauty of the Bengali homeland: its golden color, its mango-scented groves, and its moist, muddy soil. Motivated by the partition, he composed his song *My Golden Bengal* (*āmār sonār bāṅglā*) in 1905, which was set intentionally to a non-sectarian Baul melody composed by the nineteenth-century mystic Gagan Harkara (1845–1910) as a mode of resistance to the British divide-and-rule policy.⁷ Religious nationalism more or less came to an end in the Bengali-speaking territory after the Partition of India in 1947 that led to the founding of Pakistan, which came to have an eastern and a western portion.

East Pakistan quickly lost interest in religious nationalism after it experienced constant discrimination from West Pakistan that was not only about political underrepresentation and economic exploitation but also about cultural exclusion. Such discrimination gave birth to ethnolinguistic nationalism in East Pakistan, which Bengalis saw as more important than an imagined common Muslim identity upon which Pakistan was purportedly founded. It initially took form as the so-called language movement of 1952, which demanded regional autonomy for East Pakistan (Alam 1991; Dil and Dil 2011; Islam 2008). One of the first to be arrested due to his association with the movement was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1920–75), a founder of the Awami League who would become the first president of Bangladesh in 1971 and be given the title “father of the nation.”⁸

Sheikh Mujib was detained on March 11, 1948, then later insisted that “we want to speak in Bengali” in an address that he gave to the Pakistan Constituent Assembly on September 21, 1955. In yet another speech to the same assembly on August 25, 1955, he also insisted that East Pakistan be renamed East Bengal, since it has its own history and traditions. Ultimately, East Pakistan achieved independence from Pakistan in 1971, when it came to be known as Bangladesh, Bengali land. It is perhaps the prime example of a country acquiring independence on the grounds of linguistic nationalism; even UNESCO recognized this fact when they declared February 21 to be International Mother Language Day (IMLD) on November 17, 1999.

The independence of Bangladesh was, of course, a great victory, but it also led immediately to problems of exclusion, when Sheikh Mujib (also known by his

nickname *baṅgabandhu*, friend of Bengal) came to emphasize Bengali nationalism, which meant forced acculturation among the more than thirty tribal communities of the fledgling nation, especially in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, who were neither Bengali ethnically nor linguistically. Sheikh Mujib's assassination in 1975 over this controversy, compounded with political instability and exacerbated by the famine of 1974, led to several coups and counter coups before Ziaur Rahman (1936–81) took power, founded the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), and declared himself president in 1976 (Uddin 2006, 122). To distance himself from the ethnolinguistic debacle that plagued his predecessor, Zia attempted to craft a territorial nationalism that was not solely based on language, for, in a speech that he gave on the subject, he stated that it was not just linguistic but also cultural. He asserted that Bangladeshis are different from their neighboring Bengalis in India because Bangladeshis have a different history, a different set of traditions and cultures, an environment within which even the Bengali language was “modernizing” in a manner that was distinct to the new nation.⁹ Finally, he asserted the territorial claim by stating that Bangladesh's geographical position is different, as are its rivers and soil. Its people are also distinct and sovereign due to a new consciousness that is different from those of its surrounding neighbors (Huq 1984, 58). From then on the people of Bangladesh became known as Bangladeshi, not just simply Bengalis.

Zia cleverly used this speech to distance his country from its neighbor India, which had close ties to Sheikh Mujib's Awami League regime. Bangladeshi nationalists also agreed with him that the territorial model of nationalism had greater unifying power than the ethnolinguistic one, since it allowed for the inclusion of all of the country's non-Muslim and non-Bengali-speaking populations. But then Zia made the mistake of concluding his discourse with a line about placing absolute faith in Allah, in an attempt to distinguish further Muslim Bangladesh from Hindu India. Zia's decision to emphasize Islam alienated non-Muslim Bangladeshis even more, resulting ultimately in his assassination in 1981 and, after another coup, the eventual rise to power of Hussein Mohammed Ershad (b. 1930) in 1982, who founded his own political party, named Jatiya, in 1986, then declared Islam the state religion in 1988 (Uddin 2006, 136–44). He was ousted after a popular, pro-democracy uprising jointly led by Khaleda Zia (b. 1945), the widow of Ziaur Rahman, and Sheikh Hasina (b. 1947), the tenth and current prime minister, in 1990.

Today, the two main parties, the Awami League under Sheikh Hasina and the BNP under Khaleda Zia, both continue to use nationalism as a political and ideological tool, but they do so differently. Nationalism in contemporary Bangladesh is conceived variously as secular or religious, depending on who you ask and when (Uddin 2006, 136). I will argue in the following paragraphs that the Awami League, the current ruling government, ultimately wishes to project a form of Bangladeshi nationalism that is both respectful of Islam but emphasizes the democratic nature of government and the egalitarian status of its citizens. To accomplish this ideological feat, the government must assert control over dissenting voices, such as those provided by members of a religious party known as the Jamaat-e-Islami (*jama'at-e islami*), by silencing them in public.¹⁰ In what follows, I analyze primarily the way that such

secular nationalism is enacted through celebrations associated with the Bengali New Year.

Nationalism on display

There are two annual events that best display the performance of nationalism in Bangladesh: Ekushey (*ekusé*) and New Year's Day (*nababarṣa*). Ekushey literally refers to the “twenty-first” of February 1952, when a song written by Abdul Gaffar Choudhury was published to mark the beginning of the aforementioned Bengal Language Movement, during which Pakistani police opened fire on a number of Dhaka University students marching to protest the exclusion of Bengali as an official language of the state. Several protestors were killed during the shootout, after which a makeshift memorial was erected in Ramna Park, Dhaka, on the 23rd. Once Bengali was recognized as an official language in 1956, a permanent structure designed by sculptor Hamidur Rahman was erected to commemorate the event in 1963, but was destroyed during the liberation war in 1971. It was later rebuilt and expanded in 1983 to achieve its present form (Islām 2000; see figure 2). This image has been reproduced in a variety of forms circulating in popular culture, ranging from paintings and t-shirts to refrigerator magnets and other kitsch sold to tourists in malls and at airports, which has led to what we might refer to as semiotic saturation: this does not allow for a day to go by without reminding someone, somewhere about the important event behind the symbol.

Titled simply the Twenty-First's Song (*ekusér gān*), Choudhury's composition is better known by its first line:

āmār bhāīyēr rakte rāṅgāno
Colored by my brothers' blood



Figure 2. A refrigerator magnet of the Shaheed Minar in Dhaka, marked with a disc at the center that is red in living color, representing the blood of the martyrs who gave their lives for the Bengali language. Photo by and courtesy of the author.



Figure 3. A terracotta sculpture titled Our Pride on the campus of the Bangla Academy, an autonomous think tank organized specifically for the propagation of Bengali language and literature. Photo by and courtesy of the author.

The five-verse song is full of the imagery of violence and bloodshed. It calls to arms those who would become martyrs (*śahīd*) for language and liberty.¹¹ The vivid image of blood is found both on the national flag, which shows a red circle centered on a field of verdant green, as well as on the Shaheed Minar (*śahīd mīnār*), the Martyrs' Memorial referred to earlier in this article. A distinct red circle representing the blood of the patriotic martyrs who died for the language and the nation appears at the center of both (see figure 2).¹² The iconic image of the martyrs is found represented in statuesque public art throughout the city, including at the Bangla Academy, an important autonomous institution founded in 1955 and funded by the government solely for the propagation of Bengali language and literature, where we find a terracotta sculpture titled *Our Pride (moder garab)* that was installed in 2007 during the Ekushey Book Fair.¹³

The Shaheed Minar, which is the center of annual attraction during the ritualistically tinged barefoot marches to it on February 21, is the memorial site at which the language martyrs are praised as crowds sing the song that powerfully commemorates the original event with a dirge-like melody first composed by Abdul Latif. The collective singing of the song in public functions to remind the participants of the sacrifices made by those students who died fighting for the Bengali language on that same day in 1952:

āmi ki bhulite pari / āmār sonār deśer rakte rāṅgāno
How can I forget my golden country's blood spread?

This poignant line contrasts the “golden” hue of the agricultural countryside in the national anthem that is now “reddened” land stained with the blood of martyrs fighting and dying for language and country.

Figure 4 shows a rickshaw panel from Rajshahi painted in the 1970s by the Bangladeshi artist Naj, in which he depicts a woman hiding in the jungle to protect her innocent child from the onslaught and ravages of the Pakistani army during the war for liberation. Such visual reminders are seen repeatedly by Bangladeshi citizens as they move about to perform their day-to-day tasks, so that every ride in a rickshaw becomes a poignant reminder of the horrors encountered during the struggle for freedom, and how the purity of the land was polluted by the penetration of the foreign soldiers committing violations to the motherland.

The images of violence and bloodshed characterize the Ekushey observance past and present, yet the other major event celebrated annually is a merrier occasion during which the people of Bangladesh are supposed to enjoy their unity in diversity, as the media exhorts them to do (see figure 5). The celebratory side of nationalism displayed during New Year performances functions to balance the more solemn side of nationalism observed on the 21st. The former emphasizes prayer, while the latter emphasizes play. Praying and playing thus delicately balance each other out but can also be volatile when not managed properly. I turn now to a more in-depth discussion of this purportedly lighter side of Bangladeshi nationalism, before concluding with some general observations.

The Bengali/Bangladeshi New Year is celebrated on the first day of the lunar month of Baishak; hence, another name for the festival in Bangladesh is First Baishak



Figure 4. Detail from a rickshaw panel painted by Naj in Rajshahi depicting the rape of Bangladesh. Photo courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico.



Figure 5. The cover of a New Year's Day supplement in the English daily known as *The Daily Star*, in which people are urged to celebrate unity through diversity with the display and consumption of such things as colorful animal masks worn by participants during the annual parades performed to mark the occasion. Photo by and courtesy of the author.

other pastes (*bhartā*), the opening of new account books, and so on, are practices shared across the borders of West Bengal and Bangladesh. However, the Shobhajatra is what makes the Bangladeshi version stand out as a distinct cultural display that has been recognized since 2016 by UNESCO as a unique aspect of the country's intangible cultural heritage. The pageant's origins are in Jessore, where it was first performed in 1985. Students at the Faculty of Fine Arts within Dhaka University imitated the Jessore event in 1989, when they took it to the next, grander level. Since then, the Dhaka version has come to be the largest and most colorful display in the country, where large thematic floats, colorful masks, and other items are made, displayed, sold, and paraded through the streets of the city solely for the purpose of the display and consumption of the happy nation (see figures 6, 7, and 8).¹⁷ It is "a festivity of syncretic traditions," remarks Nahela Nowshin (2017, 2), which is "a paragon of national and cultural unity and a form of resistance against divisive forces" (*ibid.*), while another observer who is an assistant director of the Folklore Department at the Bangla Academy calls it "a playful affair," during which "rural life comes alive with diverse cultural events" (Zakaria 2017, 6).

(*pahelā baiśākh*), which is officially celebrated on April 14 with a large and colorful procession known as the Mongol Shobhajatra (*maṅgal śobhājātrā*) or the auspicious decorative procession.¹⁴ Some scholars, such as Wilhelm van Schendel and Henk Schulte Nordholt (2002), have suggested that the festival goes back to pre-liberation times as a demonstration of resistance to Pakistani hegemony, but this is difficult to prove.¹⁵ While it is true that the festival has been celebrated in greater Bengal since Mughal times, when Akbar had the lunar and solar calendars fused for tax purposes, the way that it is celebrated at present is a rather recent development that is tied to the birth of the Bangladeshi nation (Khan 2017). As such, it is intended to display and perform national culture with pride. It does not, it should be noted, serve this same function in neighboring West Bengal, India.¹⁶

Some aspects of the event, such as the wearing of new clothes, eating *pāntā bhāt* (fermented rice with green chilies and salt) for breakfast, the preparation and consumption of special sweets and

However, not everyone sees these aspects of consumer society in a positive light. In an editorial recently published on New Year's Day, Nilima Jahan (2017, 7) complains that the Shobhajatra is becoming commercialized as a result of corporations and businesses donating money to the production of the floats and masks in exchange for advertisement. This, she writes, goes against the spirit of the event, but organizers at Charukola (FFA), such as Professor Nisar Hossein and cartoonist Rafiqun Nabi, opine that without corporate sponsorship the only method of raising money to complete the work is to sell off the items used in the parade, which was not originally the intention of those who first envisioned the event as a public display of national pride.¹⁸ Crass consumerism is not the only sign that more lies below the surface than the common good.

Fahmida Zaman (2017, 4) points out that Islamist groups, such as the Hefazate-Islam, the Islam Oikyo Jote, and the Islami Andolon Bangladesh, have all banded together to call for an end to the celebrations, in response to the government's decree that all educational institutions, be they Bengali or not, must take out processions on Mongol Shobhajatra, since everyone is, in theory, a Bangladeshi. Zaman sees the debate between Muslims, Bengalis, and Bangladeshis as a precarious pendulum swing between "religious subjugation and ethnic Bengali hegemony" (ibid.) that reached a peak in 2013 with the Shahbagh movement, to be discussed further in the following paragraphs.

The event begins privately and stationary in the home, with simultaneous gatherings and picnics in Ramna Park, where a Tagore song welcoming spring is sung under a banyan tree to open the festivities. It then moves out onto the streets for the public procession that winds its way around key monuments in the city. At the same time that others are preparing for the public portion of the festival, the Bangla Academy, in an effort to promote Bengali language, literature, and folk culture, simultaneously organizes a *melā* (festival) highlighting the arts and crafts of the various regions of Bangladesh in a microcosmic bazaar on the grounds of the institute (see figure 9). Also included are Ferris wheels and other activities for children, who, like Handelman's kindergartners referred to in the introduction, begin their nationalistic inculcation early on. But looming large at the center of the Bangla Academy's campus is a grandiose stage with all of the trimmings and trappings of a politically sanctioned event, replete with reserved seats for VIPs and other dignitaries.

The event starts very early in the morning after a breakfast of *pāntā bhāt* with speeches by the organizers emphasizing the greatness of the nation and special guests who complement the organizers for their patriotism. The speeches are followed by a variety of performances ranging from tribal and folk dances to classical music and celluloid kitsch (see figure 10). The performances begin with the youngest, most inexperienced dancers dressed like Bangladeshi flags, then work up to the adults and professionals, until there is a grand finale at the end.¹⁹

The activities on the stage then continue throughout the day, as people come and go, shop at the artists' booths, let their children play on the Ferris wheel, eat special foods being sold by vendors wandering the festival grounds, and generally enjoy the cultural and culinary traditions playfully linked to New Year. The Bangla



Figure 6. A group of arts students working on the bamboo frame of a bird float at the Faculty of Fine Arts of Dhaka University in 2014. Photo by and courtesy of the author.



Figure 7. Students making and selling art in preparation for New Year's Day celebrations in Dhaka during 2014. Photo by and courtesy of the author.



Figure 8. Mongol Shobhajatra on the streets of Dhaka on New Year's Day in 2013, with a helicopter flying overhead to patrol the festival. Photo by and courtesy of the author.

Academy's bookstore is also open during the occasion to provide food for thought for the more intellectually inclined.

Throughout the day, the state-run television channels broadcast live from different parts of the country to propagate the diverse yet harmonious practice of cultural traditions. While one station will be airing wrestling matches from Chittagong, another will be showing bull races from Munshiganj. Yet others focus on even more traditional games such as boat racing, cockfighting, or pigeon racing.

The festivities look like all fun and games to the casual observer, and for city folk, watching rustic pageants and sports in faraway villages reminds them fondly of their agrarian past. At the same time, however, journalists repeatedly remind readers and viewers that the New Year's celebrations have also become part of the diaspora (for example, Mapril 2014). One newspaper in 2017 noted that the Bangladesh Embassy in Thailand celebrated Bangla New Year "with grandeur" (Anonymous 2017, 9). In the evening, various cultural programs including song and dance are included to bid farewell to the previous year. Annual business ledgers are also closed to invite the New Year to begin. During the following days, newspapers and magazines discuss the holiday in terms of its success and harmony. Yet all is not love, peace, and happiness during this festive occasion, as already noted in passing, which is quite clear from the ostentatious police presence on the streets (see figure 11) and the imposed curfews placed on the Shobhajatra parades.²⁰

In fact, 2013 was quite a volatile year, since heated trials initiated by the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) in



Figure 9. Potters from rural Bangladesh painting their wares to sell to customers at the Bangla Academy's New Year's Day *melā* in 2013. A wide variety of crafts representing regional styles from throughout Bangladesh were on display and for sale.

Photo by and courtesy of the author.



Figure 10. Girls and young women representing three different age groups dance during the grand finale at the Bangla Academy on New Year's Day in 2013. Notice the red and green saris worn by the three youngest dancers in the foreground. Photo by and courtesy of the author.

2009 were going on in the capital, and some who were found guilty of being traitors were sentenced to life imprisonment, which was mocked in public through street theater and other means of performance.²¹ One group of pro-government activists, who set up shop along the main parade route to call for capital punishment for those convicted of war crimes, displayed the banner shown in figure 12 to depict what they thought should be done with a traitor who is found guilty in the war crimes tribunal.

Yet, while pro-government forces who condoned the actions of those in power were allowed to display their support of the war tribunals and other sorts of governmental interventions through side-street theater shows, those who opposed the ruling party, such as the Jamaat-e-Islami, were silenced, which culminated in a number of hostile encounters on the street and stimulated the musings of commentators like Zaman, discussed in the preceding paragraphs, who sensibly argued that both sides present singular, grand, master narratives that do not apply to Bangladesh's rich pre-liberation historical and cultural heritage, which is not based on exclusion, but rather on a recognition of pluralism. She concludes by stating that, "it is time for a political and social recognition that being a Bengali and a Muslim in Bangladesh is not mutually exclusive. Neither are they requirements to be a Bangladeshi" (Zaman 2017, 5).

Although I cannot go into great detail here concerning the causes and consequences of the back-and-forth oscillations of nationalism in Bangladesh that are determined by the political party in power at any given time, some general observations can be made. The picture we arrive at is one of managed harmony, in which the official ideology of peace and unity across religions, languages, cultures, and traditions is regularly disrupted by dissenting voices that are forcibly silenced by the state. This has resulted in an "us and them" mentality that is based on exclusivity rather than a necessary inclusivity, despite the current government's periodically unsuccessful attempts to force participation in public displays of national unity. The key mechanism by which an image of national harmony is conveyed both within and outside of the nation is by the propagation of Bangladesh's folk culture, as we



Figure 11. Police in full regalia on the streets of Dhaka to impose curfew and keep guard for trouble on New Year's Day in 2013. Photo by and courtesy of the author.



Figure 12. A banner showing a traitor being hung as part of a street theater performance that occurred during the New Year's Day celebrations in 2013. Photo by and courtesy of the author.

have seen to be the case at the major series of events orchestrated annually on the grounds of the Bangla Academy. It is “folkloric Bangladesh, . . . a profound mystical ride,” as one popular article proclaims (Chandan et al. 2017, 8).

By visibly projecting an image of the country as celebratory, happy, peaceful, and, most importantly, secular, Bangladesh continuously attempts to manage its religious, linguistic, and ethnic diversity through large-scale public displays of nationalism. Performances, such as those done on Ekushey and New Year's Day, express the two poles of nationalism. The former, which I have not explored in depth, emphasizes the tragic by observing the violent and bloody death of martyrs sacrificially portrayed in the *Ekusher Gaan*, while the latter emphasizes the celebratory nature of Tagore's *Amar Sonar Bangla*, which was ironically chosen as the national anthem in 1971. First and foremost, it teaches its citizens to love the nation from its very first line:

āmār sonār bānglā / āmi tomāy bhālobasī
My golden Bengal. I love you.

Recited by every child of the nation regularly and known by heart by every adult, the national anthem provides the warm and loving image of the land as

mother that is celebrated colorfully each year on New Year's Day. This warm and loving image, of course, contrasts sharply with its opposite of a bloody and desecrated land presented on the 21st that needs purification to give birth to the new nation of Bangladesh. I would argue that both are part of a necessary, annual rite of passage that constantly provides the country's citizens an opportunity to renew their faith in their still-young homeland. Violence reminds one of the death of the old order, and peace reminds one of the new order brought about by the birth of the nation. Given the ongoing, fragile contestations that occur over the sacred and the secular in Bangladesh (Uddin 2006, 116–44), however, the government and its citizenry must constantly play a dialogical game to maintain the moral and ethical order of civil society. In conclusion, the image of the reveler in figure 13, wandering the Faculty of Fine Arts campus on the evening before the 2017 festivities, suggests this embodied

balance between the golden and the bloody. Bearing an *ektārā* (one-stringed instrument used by Bauls) in his right hand and a mango popsicle in his left, wearing a homemade billboard hat made of recycled newspaper bearing nationalistic slogans, and grinning from cheek to cheek for the camera, he displays the happy-go-lucky character so prominent on the streets of Bangladesh during the News Year's Day celebrations. His t-shirt, however, which identifies him as a member of the Maheshpur Chapter of the Mukti Joddha Sangsad, a nonpolitical welfare association established in 1972 by ex-freedom fighters, once again reminds one of the violence and blood spilt to liberate the nation from the shackles of oppression: a hand holding a knife within a red circle at the center of his garment makes him a walking, performative example of the same ethos embodied in the Shaheed Minar portrayed and discussed earlier in this article. This old warrior is a perfect, living example of the embodiment of nationalism's delicate balance.



Figure 13. A member of the Mukti Joddha Sangsad, a veteran's association founded for the upkeep of those who participated in the war for liberation, who attends the New Year's celebrations each year. He is the perfect embodiment of Bangladesh's ambiguous nationalistic dualism. Photo by and courtesy of the author.

AUTHOR

Frank J. Korom is a professor of religion and anthropology at Boston University, where he teaches courses on South Asian religions and cultures. He is the author and/or editor of ten books. In addition, he is co-editor of *Asian Ethnology*.

NOTES

1. For the background of Bengali nationalism in general, see Korom (1989; 2006; 2010), and for Bangladesh in particular, see Sufia M. Uddin (2006).
2. For examples of the use of some of these, see the other articles in this collection.
3. It is very difficult to determine whether we should refer to the independent country of Bangladesh as a "nation" or a "nation state," if we define the former as a large aggregate of people united by common descent, history, culture, or language inhabiting a specific country, and the latter as a sovereign state whose citizens are relatively homogeneous in terms of factors such as language and common descent. I would argue that Bangladesh, being a relatively new country (*des*), is still in the process of attempting to define itself, which is why nationalism is so

important in the construction of Bengali identity. For consistency's sake, however, I will use the term "nation" or "country" throughout this article.

4. The term "multivocality" is associated with the late Victor Turner (1920–83), who used it to refer to the polyphonic nature of symbols and how they are displayed and performed, especially during large-scale public events. See, for example, his 1983 edited volume.

5. Death and rebirth is, of course, a standard feature of what Arnold van Gennep (1960) first termed "rites of passage" in 1908 in the French edition of his book of the same name. For him, they could be biological, cultural, temporal, or spatial, but all shared a similar structure and function. Much of Turner's subsequent work drew heavily on van Gennep, and both of the public events explored in this article fit into their model, but I am more interested in looking deeper at what the two events say about Bangladeshi society and what they accomplish socially and symbolically. Turner (1968) would say that they exemplify what he terms "structure" and "anti-structure," two social conditions between which all cultures oscillate to maintain a precarious balance of order and chaos. Turner's universalistic notion must also be seen locally to understand how such broadly based ideas are played out on the ground in any given context, which is where I wish to take my discussion in this article. I am less interested in universal structures and more concerned with local practice on the ground in what follows.

6. One could be more specific and say that views on the partition were primarily class oriented. It was specifically the so-called Ashraf Muslims who claimed Perso-Arabic descent that were in favor of the split.

7. Bauls are a sect of minstrels who sing mystical songs that appeal to both Hindus and Muslims in greater Bengal (Capwell 1986); hence, Tagore's use of them to craft a song that would unite all Hindus and Muslims against the British. Ironically, the first ten lines of Tagore's song were chosen in 1971 to constitute the national anthem of the new nation named Bangladesh, after both the language and the land. See, for example, Korom (2006, 2010) for more on how romantic nationalists contributed to the freedom movement by using folklore as an ideological vehicle to disseminate political agendas. More will be said about this in the following paragraphs.

8. He has also become a folk hero in Bangladesh; see Mahmud (2016).

9. Bangladeshis, for example, used the word *pānī* for water, while West Bengalis use *jal*. The former is the Urdu word for water that is also used in Hindi, India's lingua franca. What he suggests to be "modern" is really Islamization, since there were efforts to replace Sanskrit words with Perso-Arabic ones in East Pakistan, just as there were efforts to purge Urdu of Sanskrit words to make it distinct from Hindi. The only difference is that Bengali in the east and in the west share the same script, whereas Hindi and Urdu do not. On the differences between the two forms of Bengali used in India and Bangladesh, see Dil (1991).

10. It is a socially conservative political and reformist movement based on the teachings of Syed Maududi (1903–79), which was founded in Lahore in 1941. Their goal is to establish an Islamic state based on the principles of *sharī'ah* law. There were earlier chapters in India and Pakistan, but the movement was banned in Bangladesh for collaboration with the Pakistani army during the war for liberation and their opposition to independence. However, they reorganized under the name Islamic Democratic League in 1979 and aligned with Zia's BNP. In 2013, they were outlawed, after the International Crimes Tribunal of Bangladesh sentenced several of their members to death. Their ongoing presence has been the reason for much of the recent violence

in Bangladesh, according to the ruling party, such as the brutal murders of twenty foreigners in 2016, even though ISIS has taken credit for this attack.

11. Unlike in the West, Hindus and Muslims alike commonly use the religious term “martyr” for those who die for their country. Terms like “hero” or “patriot” are rarely evoked in the context of sacrificing one’s life for the country.

12. Coincidentally, red and green are also considered the primary colors of Islam, but here the intention is clearly to remind viewers of the blood (red) spilled to liberate the land (green).

13. First suggested by the linguist Muhammad Shahidullah (1885–1969), the All Party National Movement demanded it on April 27, 1952. The United Front then made it part of the 21-Point Manifesto that served as their platform for elections in 1954, which was implemented after their victory by Syed Azizul Haque, the education minister at that time. It was founded on the model of the French Academy, with four divisions: research, compilation, and folklore; language, literature, culture, and publication; textbooks; and planning and training. See Bašir (1986). On the ideological background of the book fair specifically to bolster nationalistic pride (what she calls “commonness”), see Khatun (2015; 2016).

14. There are various disputes about whether the dates follow Hindu or Muslim calendric systems, but one thing is certain. In 1966 Muhammad Shahidullah headed a committee to revise the old Bengali calendar, so that the first of Baishak would fall each year on April 14, which is why New Year does not always occur on the same date in Bangladesh and West Bengal. The Bangladeshi government officially adopted the revisions in 1987.

15. Van Schendel (2002, 37–56) elaborates more on this. See also Amin (2016).

16. In this sense, it is not exactly an “invented” tradition (Uddin 2006, 123–28), as Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger termed it in 1983, since it has a long history in Bengali culture. It is, however a “revitalized” tradition that is given newly infused meaning based on recent events that have been determined to define a nation coming into being. On the invention of tradition in pre-Partition Bengal, see Korom (1989). For another example of revitalization in this collection of articles, see Miyamoto, Magnusson, and Korom.

17. Shamsuzzaman Khan (2017, 60) suggests that the Jessore and Dhaka parades are based on village *michils* (processions) that were performed in the past, and that they often had sociopolitical connotations, such as when they became “symbols of protest” against the autocratic rule of General Ershad in 1989. *Michils* generally refer to political processions that are carried out to protest things such as repression. Masks therefore serve as good covers to achieve anonymity and escape persecution during crackdowns. But from a phenomenological perspective, masks also allow the wearer to perceive things from the inside out, rather than the outside in, which is the perspective of the observer or audience member. On this, see Gill (1976).

18. The sad truth is that all is not fine at the Fine Arts Faculty, where bands of miscreants wander the staging area looking for victims to harass or rob. On one visit in 2014, for example, a foreigner told me that she was pickpocketed as she wandered through the crowds to observe the floats and masks being prepared.

19. For several years, the former executive director of the institution has also organized an international folklore conference on the grounds to coincide with the New Year’s festivities, not

only to provide an intellectual air to the entire occasion but also to show off foreign dignitaries, whose presence adds more prestige to the events.

20. There is also a heavy police presence at the Bangla Academy, where everyone is searched before entering to avoid any mishaps on their *melā* grounds.

21. It all culminated in the Shahbagh protest that began on February 5, 2013 to support more stringent sentences on war criminals after Abdul Quader Mollah, known as the “butcher,” was sentenced to life in prison for a host of war crimes, which many thought was too lenient. At first, the protesters at Shahbagh only demanded capital punishment for anyone convicted of war crimes, but then they expanded their demands to have the Jamaat-e-Islami banned from politics. They also demanded the closure of Jamaat-related organizations. As a result, the Jamaat-e-Islami mounted counter protests, which led to the murder of Ahmed Rajib Haider, a self-proclaimed atheist blogger and supporter of Shahbagh, outside of his house. Within a month, more than sixty people had been killed, mostly Jamaat activists who claimed they were being unfairly charged as “war criminals,” but also police and civilians who supported the Shahbagh protests. This is why the police watched the 2013 New Year pageants very closely.

REFERENCES

- Alam, S. M. Shamsul. 1991. “Language as Political Articulation: East Bengal in 1952.” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 24 (4): 469–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472339180000311>
- Amin, Sonia Nishat. 2016. “Cultural Symbols as Resistance: The Shahbagh Movement, 2013.” In *Folklore in the Urban Context*, edited by Firoz Mahmud and Shahida Khatun, 231–52. Dhaka: Bangla Academy.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Anonymous. 2017. “Bangladesh Embassy in Thailand Observes Bangla New Year with Grandeur.” *The Daily Star*. April 14, 2017, p. 9.
- Baśīr, Helāl. 1986. *Bāṅgla Ekāḍemīr Itihās* [Bengali Academy’s history]. Ḍhākā: Bāṅgla Ekāḍemī.
- Baycroft, Timothy, and David Hopkin. 2012. *Folklore and Nationalism in Europe during the Long Nineteenth Century*. Leiden: Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004211834>
- Capwell, Charles. 1986. *The Music of the Bauls of Bengal*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press.
- Chandan, Shahnawaz Khan, Upashana Salam, and Fayeka Zabeen Siddiqua. 2017. “Folkloric Bangladesh.” *Star Weekend*. April 14, 2017, p. 8–9.
- Connerton, Paul. 1989. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511628061>
- Dil, Afia. 1991. *Two Traditions of the Bengali Language*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Dil, Anwar, and Afia Dil. 2011. *The Bengali Language Movement and the Creation of Bangladesh*. Dhaka: Adorn Publications.
- Dow, James R. 1991. *Folklore, Politics, and Nationalism*. Nagoya: Nanzan University Anthropological Institute.

- Gennep, Arnold van. 1960. *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gill, Sam D. 1976. "Disenchantment." *Parabola* 1 (3): 6–13.
- Handelman, Don. 1998. *Models and Mirrors: Towards an Anthropology of Public Events*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger, eds., 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781107295636>
- Huq, Abdul F. 1984. "The Problem of National Identity in Bangladesh." *Journal of Social Sciences* 24: 47–73.
- Islam, Rafiqul. 2008. "The Bengali Language Movement and the Emergence of Bangladesh." *Dhaka University Journal of Linguistics* 1 (1): 221–32.
- Islām, Raphīk. 2000. *Āmār Ekuśe o Śahīd Mīnār* [Our 21st and martyrs memorial]. Dhākā: Paramā.
- Jahan, Nilima. 2017. "Artwork for Sale, Not the Shobhajatra." *Star Weekend*. April 14, 2017, p. 7.
- Khan, Shamsuzzaman. 2017. "Social Change and the Transformations of Bangla New Year's Day Celebrations." In *Social Change and Folklore*, edited by Firoz Mahmud and Shahida Khatun, 53–60. Dhaka: Bangla Academy.
- Khatun, Shahida. 2015. "Ekushe: Becoming a National Discourse from a Student Paradigm and Transcending National Boundaries." In *Folklore: New Challenges*, edited by Firoz Mahmud and Shahida Khatun, 239–51. Dhaka: Bangla Academy.
- . 2016. "Amar Ekushe Granthmela: A Center of Gravity for Enrichment of Commonness and Creativity." In *Folklore in the Urban Context*, edited by Firoz Mahmud and Shahida Khatun, 273–98. Dhaka: Bangla Academy.
- Korom, Frank J. 1989. "Inventing Traditions: Folklore and Nationalism as Historical Process in Bengal." In *Folklore and Historical Process*, edited by Dunja Rihtman-Auguštin and Maja Povrzanović, 57–84. Zagreb: Institute of Folklore Research.
- . 2006. "The Role of Folklore in Tagore's Vernacular Nationalism." In *Tagore and Modernity*, edited by Krishna Sen, 34–59. Kolkata: Dasgupta & Co.
- . 2010. "Gurusaday Dutt, Vernacular Nationalism, and the Folk Culture Revival in Colonial Bengal." In *Folklore in Context: Essays in Honor of Shamsuzzman Khan*, edited by Firoz Mahmud, 257–73. Dhaka: University Press.
- Mahmud, Firoz. 2016. "Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman: A Living Folk Hero." In *Folklore in the Urban Context*, edited by Firoz Mahmud and Shahida Khatun, 135–80. Dhaka: Bangla Academy.
- Mapril, José. 2014. "A Shahid Minar in Lisbon: Long Distance Nationalism, Politics of Memory among Luso-Bangladeshis." *South Asia* 9: 2–16. <https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.3733>
- Nowshin, Nahela. 2017. "A Festivity of Syncretic Traditions." *The Daily Star*. April 14, 2017, p. 2.
- Perica, Vjekoslav. 2002. *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States*. New York: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195148568.001.0001>
- Schendel, Wilhelm van. 2002. "Modern Times in Bangladesh." In *Time Matters: Global and Local Time in Asian Societies*, edited by Wilhelm van Schendel and Henk Schulte Nordholt, 37–56. Amsterdam: VU University Press.

- Schendel, Wilhelm van, and Henk Schulte Nordholt. 2002. "Introduction." In *Time Matters: Global and Local Time in Asian Societies*, edited by Wilhelm van Schendel and Henk Schulte Nordholt, 7–18. Amsterdam: VU University Press.
- Slyomovics, Susan. 2005. *The Performance of Human Rights in Morocco*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Turner, Victor. 1968. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- , ed. 1983. *Celebrations: Studies in Festivity and Ritual*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Uddin, Sufia M. 2006. *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, Ethnicity, and Language in an Islamic Nation*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Veer, Peter van der. 1994. *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wright, Denis. 1988. *Bangladesh: Origins and Indian Ocean Relations*. London: Sterling Publications.
- Zakaria, Saymon. 2017. "A Playful Affair." *The Daily Star*. April 14, 2017, p. 6–7.
- Zaman, Fahmida. 2017. "Suffering from an Identity Crisis?" *Star Weekend*. April 14, 2017, p. 4–5.