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Dipartimento
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Istituto Culturale Internazionale
Institut Culturel International
International Cultural Institute

International workshop:

MAKING CONNECTIONS ON THE MARGINS. PERSPECTIVES ON INDIGENOUS AND VERNACULAR INDIA



Aula Magna Silvio Trentin

Ca' Dolfin (Dorsoduro 3825) - Ca' Foscari University, Venice

Friday, 04/12/2015 - 10.00-19.00

Concept note:

It is not only a truism that Indian society has changed rather rapidly over the last decades under the impact of economic and cultural transformations often epitomized by an expanding middle class or at least a 'middle class consciousness', but also that indigenous people – either claiming this status or being classified in similar terms – have been affected to a large extent by the very same socio-economic and cultural transformation processes leading to various new aspirations and subaltern empowerment (Carrin/Guzy 2012)¹, but also to different forms of labour migration or increased mobility including forced displacement, marginalization and social exclusion (Behera 2013, Padel 2008)².

The workshop will go beyond questions of networks and mobility, but critically looks at the issue of connectivity as outlined by De Bruijn and van Dijk (2012)³ which we apply to socially and culturally marginalised contexts. Taking clues from the authors we would like to discuss how connections are established, forged, maintained or appropriated but also undone in the overlapping spheres of religion, politics, economics etc.; how they might differ in terms of their quality and materiality as well as their scope and immediacy; how are they utilized as markers of status and wealth or as back-up, security net, resource or the like and how they might have been altered in changing environments, mediatized in novel ways or even lost in a new order?

We are specifically interested in the role of media in these processes of linking and relating and propose a wide understanding of media which are expressing and informing the socio-political dynamics and change of contemporary indigenous, Adivasi and vernacular India. These connective media forms are tied to indigenous ideas and modes of indigenization, transmitting concepts of the Sublime, the Self, the otherworldly Other as well as the pragmatics and practice of local agency contesting social and political dynamics of exclusion. We consider these processes as intrinsically linked to, imbued with and penetrated by power, wealth and status.

Our workshop addresses the use of diverse range of traditional and modern connections mediated through rituals, movements, texts, audio-video materials, bodies etc. It discusses how diverse marginalised groups or individuals forge or renew ties to contest, question, alter or sustain a local tradition. We focus in a broad perspective on 'traditional' and 'modern' forms of connectivity and on links as instruments of empowerment, as capital, as forms of agency in Adivasi, indigenous and vernacular India and invite papers dealing with them.

¹ Carrin, Marine / Guzy, Lidia (2012): Introduction. In: Marine Carrin / Lidia Guzy (eds): *Voices from the Periphery. Subalternity and Empowerment in India*. London / New Delhi: Routledge, pp. 1-18.

² Padel, Felix (2008): *Cultural Genocide: The Real Impact of Development-Induced Displacement*. In: Hari Mohan Mathur (ed.): *India -Social Development Report 2008. Development and Displacement*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 103–115;. Behera, Deepak K. (2013): *Dams, Development and the Exclusion of Indigenous Groups: A Case from Odisha*. In: Uwe Skoda / Kenneth Bo Nielsen / Marianne Qvortup Fibiger (eds): *Social Exclusion and Inclusion in Contemporary India and Beyond: Structures, Agents, and Practices*. London: Anthem Press, pp. 167-188; Carrin, Marine / Guzy, Lidia (2012): Introduction. In: Marine Carrin / Lidia Guzy (eds): *Voices from the Periphery. Subalternity and Empowerment in India*. London / New Delhi: Routledge, pp. 1-18.

³ De Bruijn, M. / van Dijk, R. (eds.) 2012. *The Social Life of Connectivity in Africa*, New York: Palgrave.

Workshop programme:

10.00: Opening

10.30 I Session. Chairman: Antonio Rigopoulos

10.30 Gregory D. Alles (McDaniel College)

The Gendering of Being Possessed in Eastern Gujarat

According to oft repeated anthropological truisms, possession phenomena are characteristic of women more than men, and the prevalence of possession among women is attributable variously to their social marginalization, particular psychological makeup, or even biology. Through an examination of “acts” of being possessed among the Rathva, an adivasi group in eastern Gujarat, I will argue for an alternative account. Being possessed among the Rathva does in fact vary systematically by gender, but the truisms fail to explain the variation. Instead, possession occupies a place within the broader practice of ritual communication. It is a means of communication that utilizes the entire, embodied person to add force in circumstances when more common communication strategies, such as words and gifts, fail. Local features, such as indigenous ontologies and the positions of men and women within the communicative field, determine the structure of this communication, including above all the gendering of being possessed.

10.50 Fabrizio M. Ferrari (University of Chester)

Agriculture in a Mediaeval Bengali Śaiva text: On Ritual and Technical Knowledge

Bengali sources abound with descriptions of the ploughman (*kṛṣṭk*) Śiva. Such narratives may be considerably lengthy poems, such as the *Śibāyôṇ* of Rāmkrṣṇô Kôbicandrô (seventeenth century) and Rāmeśvôr Bhṛṭṭācāryô's *Śibsāmkīrtôn* (first decades of the eighteenth century), or short sections inscribed in heterogeneous compositions. The paper relates on *cāṣ* (agriculture) sections from Rāmāi Pôṇḍit's *Śūnyô Purāṇ* (c. sixteen-seventeenth centuries) and cognate literature. Though inscribed in essentially ritual texts, these short mythological narratives on agriculture present scant references to religious practice. In fact they permit to assess the knowledge and techniques of farmers in premodern Bengal. Few elements, however, emerge as distinctively associated to the religious life of the peasantry. By tracing parallels with the still popular sayings (B. *bacôn*; Skt. *vacana*) of Ḍāk and Khēnā (from c. eighth century) as well as with Sanskrit sources such as the *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* of Varahamihira (sixth century), *Agnipurāṇa*, *Kṛṣiparāśara* (c. no later than mid-eleventh century) and the *Vṛkṣāyurveda* of Surapāla (c. twelfth century), the paper discusses the diffusion of rites for the protection of the land and seeds, for keeping away pests and diseases and to ensure abundant rains. The discussion aims at assessing the transmission of technical, ritual and devotional knowledge at the cusp of vernacular and Sanskrit texts as well as providing a historical background for a genealogy of Śivāyana literature.

11.10 Ülo Valk (University of Tartu)

Hinduisation of Landscape in Rural Assam: From Vernacular Knowledge to Institutional Authority

The paper is based on fieldwork conducted from 2009 until 2015 in Letekupukhuri, Lakhimpur District, Upper Assam. According to oral histories the area had been devastated in wars, and was in the early 20th century covered by jungle and inhabited by the indigenous tribal peoples, such as the Khanti, Koch and Mishing. In the 1920s the Assamese people, followers of the neo-vaishnava movement, started to return to the area and the landscape was gradually deforested. Soon after India gained independence in 1947, claims were made by people in Letekupukhuri that they had discovered the birth place of Saint Mādhavadeva (1489-1596), the legendary leader of the bhakti movement and author of the popular devotional song book (*Nam-ghosh*). Connection with Mādhavadeva was revealed through dreams and miraculous events that marked out two locations as sites of the historical childhood home of the great saint. Two competing shrines emerged at a distance of one kilometre from each other, both claiming to be the historical birthplace of Mādhavadeva. The two centres are run by different neo-vaishnava

institutions whose doctrines and rituals contradict each other. The paper addresses narratives and personal memories of adherents of the two shrines about the controversial history of Letekupukhuri. How do they remember and narrate the process of re-Hinduisation of the area, perceived as a wild landscape that was revealed as the historical homeland of Assamese neo-vaishnava culture? How do local people relate themselves to the two inter-connected narrative traditions and institutional polarisation that has split their community? What kinds of argument, strategy and vernacular genre are used to establish the authority of the two competing religious institutions? The paper will look for answers in fieldwork interviews.

11.30 Marine Carrin (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique)

Performing Indigeneity and the Politics of Representation: The Santals in Jharkhand, Odisha Bengal and Assam

The Santals, the largest Austro-asiatic group in India, are known for their rebellion of 1855 and have a long tradition of exploitation and migration. I shall compare Santal responses to economic and political crisis in Jharkhand, Odisha, Bengal and Assam.

In Jharkhand, the Santals and other Adivasis have evolved a powerful form of political imagery, generated by official and subaltern legacies, which have contributed to create the political space of the recently formed Jharkhand State. Adivasi populations have been emotionally invested in questions of identity, but factors related to the exploitation of natural resources (forests, mines, water) have brought dispossession and exploitation.

Bordering Jharkhand, Mayurbhanj, formerly a princely state in Odisha, is seen as the bastion of Santal identity, though illegal mining, migrations and the activism of the Hindu right threaten the tribal economy, curtailing the rights of indigenous people on resources. It is certainly in Bengal that the Santals are most integrated in the mainstream society though they are often landless labourers exploited by Bengali landowners. But at the cultural and political levels the Santals are still associated with the Naxalite movement of the seventies in Bengali political imagination.

Santal migration to the Bodo region of Assam, in the 1880s, was planned as a missionary utopia. Today, Assam has become the theatre of ethnic conflict between the Santals and the Bodo, where the Santals are targeted as outsiders. From Jharkhand and Odisha, this conflict is seen as a struggle for Santal identity. The Santal community in Assam is economically and politically entrapped, since many have left the region for fear of Bodo attacks. I shall show that while the Santals try to move along the rights in Jharkhand and Odisha, promoting new forms of indigeneity, they have organized resistance in Assam as the Santal Tiger force.

The Santals, as one of the major indigenous groups in India have affinities with Hindu castes as well as with other tribal groups. The impact of cultural contact and economic change have been marked, so much so that various Santal institutions and patterns of behaviour reveal appreciable departures from the traditional mode. In fact, the Santals sometimes deplore their “volatile historical memory”. Still, the consistent claim to Santal identity and the persistent adherence to familiar cosmology and rituality have led to recent reinventions of the Tradition.

11.50 Discussion

12.20 Presentation of the exhibition “Zan Par. Unknown elements of rituals in India and in the Himalayas to replace the sacrifices”

Opening ceremony: 03/12/2015, 18.30

Dates: 03-06/12/2015

Visiting hours: 14.00-18.30, by appointment in the morning

Venue: ICI – Magazzino del Caffè, Rio Marin, Campo San Simeon Grando, Santa Croce 923, Venice

Special tour for the workshop participants: 05/12/2015

Abstract: Primary intent of ICI - International Cultural Institute is to spread and share the culture and professionalism, making known, through specific objects, some of the most interesting cultures of Himalaya's area. For this reason ICI Venice decides to produce and promote an exhibition / study on ZAN PAR. The exhibition will be the celebration of the publication of a letter of the Galleria Le Toit du Monde by François Pannier, scientific curator of the exhibition, which is one of the few specific scientific papers dealing with the subject directly ZAN PAR.

12.30 Lunch

14.00 II Session. Chairman: Stefano Beggiora

14.00 Margaret Lyngdoh (University of Tartu)

The Water Nymph and the Snake People: The Folklore of Water and the Khasis of Northeast India

The term puri in the Khasi ontology is descriptive of a divine female endowed with beauty and likened with the western concept of “fairy”. And across the sub communities of the Khasis, puri um is roughly analogous with a water nymph. Popular narratives about the character of the puri um is that they inhabit streams and lakes, deep in the unfrequented recesses of the forest. If a Khasi man goes fishing, or to bathe in such a water-body, inhabited by the puri um, he becomes ensnared by them. A man enchanted by the puri um, will behave in a peculiar manner - at midnight they go to the water-body to meet their non-human wives. In the physical reality, such men often die after a period of madness. This occurrence is known as ngat puri or kem puri.

While such folklore about the puri um is present among the Khyntiam, Bhoi, War and Pnar sub communities, in the West Khasi Hills region, among the Lyngngam sub group of the Khasis, the puri um is said to be the daughter of the snake people or Sangkhini.

To introduce the Sangkhini, I may say that they are human beings possessing the ability to transform into a being who has the head of a bull and the body of a snake. A Sangkhini has its dwelling in water and is the guardian of righteous people. But there are bad Sangkhini too. Certain places within the river Rwiang are said to be the inhabited by the guardian deity of all Sangkhini's. Always associated with water, the puri um and the Sangkhini are connected in the belief world of the community, through the origin narrative of the Sangkhini which connects a man (Stepiong), a puri um and the Sangkhini.

Drawing on my experience as lifelong resident of Shillong, the capital city of Meghalaya and seven years of fieldwork experience, I may safely iterate that the Khasi people are wary of water-bodies because of the folklore surrounding these places. There is a belief that it is ill advised to go near a water body at night because it is possible that the spirits who live in the water cause harm to human beings. But among the Lyngngam sub group, water is an integral part of the living environment, especially during the monsoon season and as such, water becomes the catalyst of transformation, of the human being into the Sangkhini. The puri is not viewed always as a malicious harbinger of illness and death to men, but as a natural entity.

This paper will attempt, in the light of the information mentioned above to explore the relationships between the natural environment and human beings and how fear of the element of water is responsible for the distribution of narratives and folklore about non-human entities. This presentation will also take a site-specific look at how urban development and the human incursion into nature contributes to the dwindling of such narratives in Shillong town; and how, in the peripheral areas of the Khasi hills, puri-enchantment and the human tendency of survival spawns a different kind of folklore about human-water relationship.

14.20 Monica Guidolin (EHES)

Dynamics Change and Reconstruction of a Collective Representation: the Pardhan Community of Bhopal between the Ancient Recited Memory and a Renovated Ritual Language

In the Pardhan community, the role of music has always had a central place. In its etymology, the word 'pardhan' contains 'pathari', which exactly means "one who recites". The traditional string instrument *Bana* is the "material translation" of this activity. The enormous oral production of narratives recited by Pardhan people is the perfect expression of their ancient role of "musicians and ministers" among Gond rajas, that ruled a large part of Central India from the 12th to the 18th century.

The Pardhans' function as official genealogists has permitted the preservation of the Gonds' cultural heritage throughout time and has performed the duty of disseminating this narrative knowledge up to the present.

Although today this relationship, and consequently the bardic institution, has necessarily changed, our enquiry wants to demonstrate how these myths continue to exist and sing the valour of heroic deeds with a glorious past, re-affirming the community identity in a social and economic fast, nonstop-moving reality. As a means to celebrate the transmission of memory, to express the devotion to the principal deity in the Pardhan *pantheon*, and to accompany the most important ceremonies during the principal stages of life, the music not only shows its role as a catalyst of the religious sphere, but it is closely following the social dimension inside the village community. In a difficult, fragile social and economic transition between rural and urban environment, the reconfiguration of the music sphere seems essential for the reconstructing of a collective representation and the offering of different ways to identify as Pardhan in the new context. Based on ethnographic fieldwork comparatively conducted in the Dindori district and Bhopal areas, this paper therefore explores these renovated perceptions engaging in a constant process of ritual language identity and social belonging.

14.40 Claire Sheid (University College Cork)

The 'Truant Soul' in Donyipolo: Revisiting Fürer-Haimendorf's 1937 Adi Language Invocations

This talk examines early anthropologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf's Adi language transcriptions and translations pertaining to the idea of the 'truant' soul, recorded on his 1937 expedition to the territory that is today Arunachal Pradesh, Northeast India. Fürer-Haimendorf documented occasions in which an ait-miri (ritual specialist) is required to 'coax' the soul back into its corporeal host during life, in the event that the two have become separated and the soul (ait) is traveling on the metaphysical plane (ait bedang), leaving the body in illness. However, a close reading of the miri incantations recorded by Fürer-Haimendorf reveals potential alternative translations, requiring contemporary researchers to reconsider this idea of the 'truant' soul, particularly as it stands alongside similar rituals currently performed today in Adi communities.

15.00 Discussion

15.15 Coffee break

15.30 III Session. Chairman: Thomas Dähnhardt

15.30 Lidia Guzy (University College Cork)

Music and Indigenous documentation – A medium of Cultural Connectivity - Example from Western Odisha, India

This paper discusses indigenous documentation projects of the Bora Sambar region as local attempts of cultural connectivity. It also reflects on the role of the ethnographer's involvement in fostering cultural connections through ethnography and mutual audio visual music productions.

This paper investigates on the one hand 1) the role of audio visual production as indigenous empowerment through connectivity with mediums of power, such as video and audio and 2) the role of the author as musician herself who together with indigenous musicians produced audio recording for culture recognition and preservation projects.

The paper investigates the double process of documentation, engaged research and full participation in the audio visual music industry of contemporary India.

15.50 Stefano Beggiora (Ca' Foscari University)

Aspects of Saora Ritual: Permanence and Transition of the Artistic Performance

The present article discusses the ancient technique of art performance of the wall paintings called 'anital' among the indigenous group of the Lanjia Saora of the Rayagada district in southern Orissa (India). The 'anital' is a painting in which the aesthetics has maybe a lesser importance if compared to its ritual function in Saoran shamanic practices performed by the Kuran (the medicine man of the community). Through the wall-painting, almost like some sort of window between the dimensions that constitute the cosmos, the group strengthens the covenant between the living and the dead. The subject of this adivasi art form is thus highly symbolic and usually tells a dream, or a vision of the shaman that, through his performance, portrays the subtle world. But by chance, in fact, during the advent of Christianity the 'anitals' have become a target of persecution among the converted, just because it embodied the tribal identity of the past. The recent revival of indigenous works and many initiatives developed by local NGOs tend to replicated ad infinitum the arcane motifs of anitals, identifying them as purely 'tribal art' deprived of its ancient and authentic religious value for the consumption of modernity. Despite the moment of profound social change and anthropological transition I will demonstrate how the traditional technique is still alive and it is possible to decrypt through knowledge of the Saora culture.

16.10 Uwe Skoda (Aarhus University)

The (Un)making of Ritual Connections: Durga Worship in a Former Princely State of Odisha

The presentation will introduce the dynamics of Durga worship in a former princely state in north-western Odisha by contrasting two different types of puja performed largely simultaneously. While inside the Raja's fort the older rituals commonly referred to as Dasara are conducted based on the idea of a sacrificial polity, in the market area a relatively recent tradition of "Durga Puja" has been established. In the former Goddess Durga appears primarily in the form of iron swords, but the connections to communities including Adibasis are currently disintegrating, though some elements are still very popular. In contrast to the fort-centred rituals, Durga Puja closer to the Bengali tradition has seen a considerable rise due to donations specifically from sponge iron factory owners and is increasingly overshadowing the older tradition in terms of spectacle offered to the local audience rather than relying on land-based hereditary ties.

16.30 Discussion

16.45 Coffee break

17.00 Documentary “**3 Shamans**” (title in French: *3 Chamans*)

Authors: Aurore Laurent and Adrien Viel (Hong Kong Connection and Epicserie Film)

Languages: English and French, with subtitles

Length: 77 minutes

Abstract: In the heart of Himalayan hills, shamans travel through the intangible. Their soul explore the world of spirits and ancestors to relieve human being from their pain. Each one has its method; 3 stories, 3 frame of mind; 3 shamans.

18.45 Closing of the workshop

