The Thinning and Thickening of Places, Relations and Ideas

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Poetics of the Bifocal “Fields”

The place or field, for me, is a sea of glowing parrot-green seedlings of rice—planted, transplanted, harvested, threshed, scattering into the air, rays of light and rice-dust, bouncing lightly on the ground before being swept into jute bags, loaded up on oxen carts, ready for the market—in Tamil, the word which overlaps vayal (paddy field). There is a different sense of the post-field for someone like me, as these rice fields reside in my memory, long before I have arrived back there, a returned child from the capital city, and long after I have left them, back to the cosmopolitan. These rice fields were fed by the Kavery river spreading over a massive delta-wide watershed, all the way to the sea, the Bay of Bengal, on the southeastern edge of the Indian sub-continent, and, in turn, fed my imagination, long before I became interested in the subject of my research—dry and wet ground rice flour threshold drawings—the kolam, a Tamil women’s ritual tradition.

The kolam—meaning form, beauty, ornament—is made every day by Hindu women to honor the goddess Lakshmi, a feminine, wide-hipped, nurturing and mother-like figure draped with layers of golden jewelry, who stands on a large open lotus flower, with a soft, sweet, mysterious, empathic and beneficent smile. The kolam is a visual call to goddess Lakshmi every morning—“Come gaze at me, O Goddess Lakshmi”—announcing the continued healthy functioning of the household. She is the carrier of good luck and wealth; alertness and quickness, shine and radiate out of her; she is someone by whose gaze and grace you want to be touched.

The “field”, in the sense in which anthropologists traditionally use the term, is one with which I have always felt uncomfortable, as it necessitates a distance of which I am incapable. I am not alone. I join many within anthropology and religious studies who have offered highly nuanced and compelling understandings of their reflexive positionings, and I feel deep kinship with those who speak of “crossing over”, and of “halfies”. The “field” of India was a return to my first home, the country my parents chose to leave when I was eleven, at which time I became a permanent alien resident in the United States. At that moment, America was the “field” in which I saw exotic, strange customs wherever I looked. But as I grew into a teenager I became more and more comfortable with my adopted home and its customs, reducing the perception of distance embedded in the word, “field”.

Whenever I returned to India, I fell into my Tamil “mother” tongue quite easily, as it had been lodged intimately in my everyday life in my diasporic home in Washington D.C. My memory flooded in and sometimes even took over my present experience, especially when my mouth formed a Tamil word. It was this simultaneous bi-focal vision, an integral part of my upbringing, which came to the fore when I returned to the field of India, the proportions between short and long view shifting, here India becoming the larger view, and America the shorter one in a faded background.

“Fieldwork” or, “ethnographic research”, for me, then, was about going home, having the chance to become the person I would have been had we never immigrated. And, yet, as time moves forward for everyone back home or away, “home” was always changing its directionality, like a changing root; each time I came to India, I tried to catch up with who and what India had become. Whenever I returned once again to my California “home” once imagined more as a “transit” zone, the horizon of the “field” oriented itself in quite a different direction, the proportionality shifting with the horizon, this American cultural frame, and increasingly filled with many different cultural orientations, and yet imbued for me always with the Indian inside myself.

Yet, it is important to add that when I was doing research in India, and when I “hung out” with my fellow American anthropologists, retaining this bifocality gave me a deep sense of unease. I was with my American friends, I joined in the comraderie of being a fellow anthropologist studying India, though I was always deeply divided within myself, as to who I was at the particular moment. I became impatient and horrified at oversimplified stereotypes which would be bandied around in informal settings and I found myself trying to set them right. Some were happier that I did than other friends. When I was with my Indian friends, I inhabited more in the Indian English dialect, spoke vernacular Tamil, and felt that I was not seen as a fieldworker, or an anthropologist, but more as a young scholar and writer. This bi-focality remains within me as I continue to teach and write about India in America.

January 2004, Fremont, CA

In the middle of January 2004, five years after the end of my formally funded research on the kolam (1987-1999), I decided to do some follow-up ethnography with the kolam. I attended a kolam competition in the diaspora in Fremont, CA, a city with a high population of Indian-Americans. The context was a Pongal Rice Festival celebration hosted by the Tamil Manram. I had attended similar Pongal celebrations nearly every year between...
1987 and 1994 in India, as these festivals were the heyday of kolam-making yet this was the first time I had attended one in this home of mine, northern California. I had never tried though to do “fieldwork” in the diaspora before, let alone with children, husband, and parents in tow.

I took with me my mother and father, visiting from their home in suburban Maryland; my Norwegian-Swedish-descended American husband; and our then three-and-a-half-year-old twin girls, Uma and Jaya. We entered the large auditorium of the junior high school, filled with noisy pools of commotion, and the organizers tried to steer us to different competitions, among them the kolam competition, in which I was most interested. I noticed right away many unusual aspects of this kolam competition. The drawings were done on paper with colored pencils and pens in people’s homes, brought to the site and taped on the walls; they were not done on actual marked floor areas as they are usually done in kolam competitions in Tamil Nadu. I wondered if that has to do with some of the legal rules of not marking up spaces with colored powders in a rented middle school auditorium, and how hard it would be to wipe away on the finished flooring space in a junior high school after the event.

I watched other people’s children and my own as they became slowly entranced by the kolam. They were drawn somehow to these designs on the wall, made by their older sisters and mothers and aunts and grandmothers, and people who looked like them. My children dabbled onto my body demandingly, insisting, “Teach me the kolam,”; “When are you going to teach us the kolam?” They looked excited, even at three and-a-halves, by everyone else’s love of the kolam.

I watched my mother’s eyes light up, as she came to each kolam design and analyzed it. That lotus flower is a bit loose, she would say, see that is imbalanced in the right corner; now this one is really beautiful, see how the lines are balanced cleanly, pointing to the lined figures. She would laugh if she found a funny one. There were teenagers, mothers, and grandmothers, all competing to make the best kolam. It was sheer fun, I could see, flowing over in women’s faces as they laughed, pointed and commented on their community of women drawing different designs, and competing with each other for the best one. And there were not a set of invited judges as usual at an Indian competition; the audience themselves were to be the judges, and each member of the audience was encouraged to do a written evaluation of each kolam entry, to be tabulated by the Tamil Association, until the first, second, and third winners were announced.

I looked into the faces of the Tamil women there; I began talking to them; they had emigrated from Madurai, Tirunelveli, Thanjavur, Chennai, Coimbatore and all other places in Tamil Nadu I had lived in and sometimes visited, for my kolam research. I looked at these women and realized how close the immigrant remains to her native place. The women had experienced kolams in their home country in these particular bodies, and were literally carriers of the tradition, as was my mother. At that moment, I became much more interested in the transmission of the kolam: how was it going to survive in this land which is so different from its native place? And yet, the buzz around the kolam in this middle school in Fremont, CA was surprisingly encouraging: there was still a deep, engaged interest in the kolam. I realized, all of a sudden, that we were all body carriers of memories of place, of habits of mind, of drawing designs, of kolams, of beauties which travel. I looked at the grandmothers’ faces; they resembled those I had been with all over Tamil Nadu. I felt almost at home again, as if I were back in India, though I was still in Fremont, California.

Like Stepping on a Thousand Good Lucks!

In the middle of July 2005, in a small town in the San Francisco Bay Area where I have lived for nearly twenty-five years, my mother took an entire morning to draw a huge kolam in a side patio of our home, and our girls Jaya and Uma watched rapturously, squatting, aged four-and-a-half then, not moving, still as a leaf not stirring on a windless day. I have almost never seen them so quiet, but as they watched this grand, room-size kolam coming into being, layer after layer of wet rice flour flowing evenly out of my mother’s hands, they sat, awed by the process itself, and by the hours and hours of quiet, steady, almost meditation-like movement that it took for my mother to practise this ritual. “There is a lotus flower, a lamp, a mango leaf, a step, a banana-laden stem” they would whisper to each other, having heard my mother tell what it is the first time she drew it. They talked about this gigantic kolam over the next year, as it faded from view through the next rain-laden northern California winter. After going to India for the first time in the winter of 2005-2006, and seeing kolams there all over India, Jaya remarked, with a big grin, “Amma, it is...
like stepping on a thousand good lucks!” I began to understand what my parents were trying to do with their friends in the 1970s and 1980s for the first time. When I was growing up in Maryland, they were building cultural organizations such as associations and temples, working every weekend to hold the cultural memories in place for them, but as importantly, perhaps more, for us, for the generations to come. At the time, I had been a somewhat surly teenager, refusing to believe that all their hard-won efforts would amount to anything, thinking that they were going to fail before they even began, it was impossible, I thought, begrudging them all their time away from us that went instead into the “Tamil community”. How could they bring India here? Now, I watched the thirty-year-long fruits of their actions, their desires, grateful for their and their generations’ efforts for the next generations to come. This was a culture that is serious about continuation.

I realized with a wry smile that I was almost “home”.

Thinning and Thickening of Places, Relationships and Ideas

I see post-field positionings as characterized by the unfolding of time, space and memory. Time moves forward, day after day “back home”, and the entire gestalt of fieldwork, its thinning and thickening relationships with people, ideas and places, recedes back into the time and distance of my memory. And yet simultaneously, as I increasingly dwelled within the charged space of writing, the people I met in India through my work on the kolam take on a new embodiment in my own life. They live within me, my own mental dwelling space, and I try actively to clear out other thoughts which may intrude on my thinking about the people who taught me so much. It is the gift of time that I am most struck with now, that women, after their everyday chores, were so willing and generous to give of their “free” time to me to discuss the kolam. And, I, in turn, am giving my “free” time to write up what I have learned. Time stolen from my duties of teaching, mothering, and serving the various communities I belong to. While you are far away from my duties of teaching, mothering, and serving the environment rather than a laboratory, office etc.”

My sense of time in the re-imagining and remembering of fieldwork texts and contexts in the writing process pulls together a complex weaving and reweaving of a thinning and thickening of relations among the multiple selves of the ethnographer and the many community members in whom she finds herself reflected, or into whose lives she seeks to actively imagine herself. These relations unfold in the movement of time and the changing, connecting links of knowledge, understanding and epiphany that occur both during fieldwork, and post-“field”.

References


Endnotes

1 Tamil Lexicon Vol. VI. 1982. (Madras: University of Madras), p. 3486. Other words with overlapping linguistic connotations include nilam, meaning ground, earth, land, sometimes adding a sense of possessiveness, as in my nilam; furthermore, bhumi, meaning earth, is another word used more in rhetorical language. According to The Oxford English Reference Dictionary, edited by Judy Pearsall and Bill Trumble (New York City: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 516-517, a field in English is “an area of open land, esp. one used for pasture or crops, often bounded by hedges, fences etc.”, and “fieldwork”, “the practical work of a surveyor, collector of scientific data, a sociologist etc., conducted in the natural environment rather than a laboratory, office etc.”


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