Happenings

FROM FIELDWORK TO PUBLIC DOMAIN:
SHILLONG WORKSHOP
(MAY 1-15, 2000)

Participants report
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List of Participants:

We were glad to attend this workshop as participants. The workshop provided a good opportunity to question some of the prevalent ideas related to folklore studies and fieldwork. The workshop was conducted by NFSC in collaboration with North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. The PROFRA team members also helped the organisers to make it a successful workshop. There were total of 32 participants and 7 eminent scholars from India and abroad. The participants discussed various issues related to documentation, methodology, preservation, transmission of knowledge, ecology, indigenous knowledge, and subtle theoretical issues involved in fieldwork during the fifteen-day workshop. Some of the participants focused on issues relating to the documentation of texts and contexts while others focused on the idea of documenting silence in folklore.

Professor Mrinal Miri inaugurated the workshop. In his inaugural speech, he remarked, I am not a folklorist, but I enjoy reading folktales. Folklores are the result of collective creativity of a community. Tribal communities in the region have effective ways of transmitting cultural teachings or moral ideas to the younger generations through these folktales. In the context of globalisation, he elaborated on the importance of epistemological approaches needed for understanding local knowledge systems. Later at a press conference, the eminent folklorists talked about the shifting boundaries between Anthropology and Folklore. Mary Hufford remarked, Folklore helps in nation building, while anthropology could go much beyond one nation. The concerns of the anthropologist do not confine to the geographical boundary of a nation state but it expands universally among the mankind.
Folklore goes into the aspirations, memories, dreams, life-patterns, and indigenous knowledge of various races. The folklorist needs to be attentive to the unknown. Participating in the discussion, M.D. Muthukumaraswamy pointed out that even national identities were created and built upon folklore. Finland is one such example.

The participants were divided into four groups. After each presentation the group assembled and with the help of a faculty member discussed the papers. Each of the group led by a leader and they produced group reports towards the end of the workshop. In addition to that participants also presented individual papers on the folklore of their own region. During the workshop, participants also visited smit village in Shillong, as part of their fieldwork and study to understand what kind of socio-political structures exist at village level. The visit to Chirapunjee water falls also known as Sohra, famous for being the wettest place, was an event in itself. It is the nature’s beautiful creation leaping into deep gorges, the limestone caves, orange orchards and the birthplace of khasi culture. On the way to sacred groves, we also observed the coal mining places. During the workshop, number of cultural programmes from all over the north eastern India took place at St. Antony’s College auditorium: Seng Khasi’s Khasi song and dance, Tripura student’s union’s Hrangkhawl post harvest dance, Arunachal Pardesh student’s union’s Nishi dance voice’s song presentation, Naga students union’s Sema dance, Manipuri dance by Manipuri students union, Sukra dance by Muswang village troupe and song and dance performance by Kiddies Corner. The trip to the museum at Don Bosco centre was also important. Alan Jabbour gave valuable insights on documenting the imperatives that went behind the services of an Afro-American church. Mary Hufford highlighted the fact that religions also play a major role and her own catholic background had a decisive influence often manifesting itself even in jokes at times. The museum is an excellent example how tradition and modernity manifest itself and is subject to local conditions.

The workshop started with Alan Jabbour’s paper on Folklore and Folklorists in the Documentary Century. In his paper, he traced the developments in ethnology and deployment of new documentation techniques. Unlike traditional documentary techniques based on drawing, manuscripts, new web based electronic documentation provide far greater impetus to the folklore fieldwork research, archiving, retrieval and dissemination of information. The arrival of photography, audio and video recording, and motion picture provided a new dimension for archiving and the way in which archiving is done. This also changed the relationship between the documentor and what is documented. The electronic archiving process is more interactive, context based, and explanatory. He also talked about the issues involved in capturing reality through photography. These new dimensions in documenting increased the accessibility/visibility of cultural past or memory. Folklore archive has become a cultural prism of the public domain. This also redefines or adds a new dimension to the work of the folklorist. These new processes also help the community as a whole in creating new circuits and multiplying channels of information across geographical and national boundaries. It helps the folklorist in seeing the life of her own work.

In a sense the uniqueness of the folk art and its reproducibility of it assumes political significance.
in their new orientation. Indeed the new electronic documentation implies repositioning of the object as well as the subject who documents it in all its dimensions – ethical, epistemological, aesthetical and political. This provides a new dimension to the work of the folklorist as archivist.

Alan Jabbour’s second presentation was on Omaha Indian Music, working with a community in the presentation of its traditions. Without songs you don’t really have a culture. If you listen to the words of them, they mean involvement with nature and our being and our surroundings. It’s a tie, a connection to everything remarked Omaha tribal archivist, Dennis Hastings way back in 1984. Continuing the argument Alan Jabbour remarked that, Fletcher and La Flesche were rigorous contextualists, continually stressing the inseparability of music and culture in all of their publications (including the one on The Omaha Tribe), and with their rich descriptions of social and ceremonial life providing us a window into the Omaha past. After the meticulous documentation, it is equally important to share what has been documented with the community as a whole. It reaffirms a kind of new friendship between the documented community and the folklorist. The dynamic community also would like to share their experiences with the archivist. In a way the documentation helps the community to continue tradition within it or outside.

In his third presentation, Fiddle tunes of the old frontier, the Henry Reed collection; the dynamics of cultural revival in the modern world, Alan Jabbour discussed the dynamics of cultural revival in our familiar and unfamiliar landscapes around. He talked about the cultural integration, evolution of music and the existence of divergent traditions in a single landscape. As an accomplished fiddle player, he demonstrated different techniques involved in playing different tunes. He explained his own experiences of ploughing back into the community a tradition that they lost, through a detailed sketch of James Henry Neel Reed’s life. During most of his life, Henry Reed’s influence was confined to his family and community…. But although his children and friends admired his music and his musicianship, they were also drawn to the more popular with their own generation…. A new pattern of influence began with my visits in 1966-67. Our band, the Hollow Rock String Band, performed dozens of Henry Reed tunes as a core element in the band’s repertory, and the tunes were regularly identified as coming from Henry Reed…. A number of tunes from Henry Reed are now in wide circulation among younger American fiddlers…. It is but one of many cases where Henry Reed was the narrow neck in the hour glass of tradition, through which tunes were guided back out into the wider currents of circulation. In his presentation Alan Jabbour stressed the importance of cultural mediation.

Three of Mary Hufford’s presentations were indicative of extending the boundary limit of folklore as a discipline. In her first presentation on Stalking the forest co-eval: Fieldwork at the site of clashing epistemologies, she tried to map the growth of two epistemological domains in the mountain region of West Virginia. In their growth the two domains were juxtaposed to each other. She argued in detail about how the penetration of capitalist institution had subjected the mountain region to new knowledge categories that was in complete contrast to native commoner’s imagination. The natives were exposed to the use of a variety of new epistemological categories that is quite different from the mental and ecological landscape of the natives.

In her subsequent presentations, she focused mainly on the question of how commons articulated their anxiety and apprehension. She stressed the importance of body lore and eco-lore and using case studies showed the political dynamics of mass protest. Using Mikhail Bakhtin’s theoretical tools she analysed the complexities of competing imaginary spaces. To create their own dominant cultural sphere, the commons were actively engaged in the world of lies, laughter and production of local memories and dreams. She remarked that the mind may forget but the body remembers its roots. She pointed out that, There is a story in these figures of a vernacular cultural domain that transcends state boundaries. Anchoring this domain is a geographical space—a de facto commons roughly congruent with two physiographic regions recognised in national discourse. One is the coal fields underlying the ginseng, most of which are controlled by absentee landholders. The other is the mixed mesophytic forest, known among ecologist as the world’s biologically richest temperate-zone hardwood system…. Ginseng may be a powerful tool for resolving some very thorny dilemmas. A touchstone for economic, cultural, and environmental interests, ginseng provides a tangible link between ecology and economy. Given ginseng’s predilection for native hardwood forest and rich soils, national recognition of its cultural value would be a way to begin safeguarding both a globally significant hardwood forest and the cultural landscape to which it belongs…. An alternative view of biodiversity flourishing in the context of community life—is rehearsed in stories and jaunts that map the commons back onto the land.

In his presentation on collecting tales and tunes in Rajasthan oral epics and music, Komal Kothari
focused on how oral epics are representative of a social imaginary of a given context. Drawing from his vast experience of working with and documenting the oral epics in Rajasthan, he argued that the study of oral epics also open up the possibility of studying the social context, cultural fabric and living patterns of the people. Moreover it is also an important indicator of ethnography. He felt that we need to explore further the social composition of the audience, performance space, time, musical instruments associated with it, the level of gender sensitivity within the community, participation of different age groups. Elaborating on the visual narrative presented in a Rajasthani scroll painting Komal Kothari took us on a voyage into the desert life. In his second presentation on Rajasthani folk music Komal Kothari explained the intricacies of Banaa wedding songs, compositions of Meera and folk instrumental music of Rajasthan. In his third presentation on Reviving lost musical instruments, he talked about how he worked with communities to document Rajasthani folk music. It was a collective effort and done with the modern electronic tools. Among the folk performers, there are two categories – professional and non-professional groups. The non-professional groups are mostly women groups without any prominent musical instruments and they perform only for the selected groups. But the professional music singers are mostly men and used variety of instruments also. They also received a lot more support from their agencies. He also raised concern about the dying musical instruments in Rajasthan and the enormous task involved in reviving the musical instrument production such as the components design and the socio-historical milieu of the production of that instrument. He expressed his anxiety about the disappearing traditions of musical instrument makers.

Birendranath Datta presented a talk on the myriad diversity of folklore of North-Eastern India. He also talked about the trends in folklore study in the north east. In his presentation he stressed more on the specificity of the region as well as their shared universal characteristics. The idea of togetherness is the core of north east folklore fabric. He also spoke about the use of folklore in our various contemporary life practices from myth to metaphors. It also constitutes the plane of ethnicity. The whole of northeastern India is also bound by common ecology and geography.

Ashoke chatterjee took a detour from the tempo of the workshop to talk about the use of folk crafts in present day industrial design and the need to develop adequate, long-term sustainable strategies. In concluding his presentation he pointed out that, Market success has to be at the heart of this effort, for unless the craftperson can be assured a decent quality of life through sustained earning, nothing will keep the next generations loyal to their heritage. The only sustainable assurance can come from buyers. Understanding their future needs, wherever they may be located, demands the market research upon which India has spent nothing all these years. It is the ability to manage the market that will ultimately decide whether India’s unique commitment to crafts, as an expression of its identity and of its well being, is to flourish in the millennium just ahead. Perhaps it is a new understanding of swadeshi that we need, not as an archaic slogan but as a vigorous, contemporary understanding of our real needs and prospects in an interdependent world.
While reflecting on her own work with DakshinaChitra and Madras Craft Foundation, Deborah Thiagarajan talked about various issues of presenting folk forms which originally are part of ritual contexts associated with them. She specifically talked about Devarattam, which is a ritualistic and social dance of the kambala Nayakar community of Tamil Nadu, whose primary occupation was hunting. The significant features of the dance traces the hunting movements of the human body to which have been added the movements that reflect household, agricultural and festive activities. These movements have been abstracted and stylised to fit into single beats in a cyclic rhythm given by the percussion instrument, Devadundubhi. It is generally performed on ritual occasions. She assured that the realm of the public domain and creating a new space for folk art is a creative task as well as a challenge.

Soumen Sen presented two papers in the seminar, Tradition, Folklore and Ethnicity: The key issues and Folklore in Modern World. He attempted to situate folklore fieldwork and study in the light of new developments and talked about the need to rearticulate the shifting cultural studies paradigms. He argued that folklore is a dynamic discipline and has the potentiality to accommodate diverse elements and new strands. He remarked, Tradition is a dynamic system that flows through culture and culture in turn flows through tradition. Culture, like several terms in history, has a history. Tradition is this history, with spaces in time and societal growth and in the process develops as a dynamic system. It will be wrong to define culture as civilisation and refinement with an elevated status, leaving out the so-called uncivilised and crude categories. Culture includes both since they are linked by tradition. Tradition is not simply a survival as it is usually perceived.

He argued that if we talk about tradition as a qualitative marker, it is then a dynamic process involving a way of feeling and acting, which characterises the group throughout generations. The horizontal and vertical flow along with ethnic variation is a common element in pan-Indian tradition. There is an urgency to approach folklore as a context-sensitive system.
In his second presentation, Soumen Sen stressed the importance of diachronic study of the proverb in a particular culture and the relationship of the proverb and social change provides a useful model for folklore studies in changing times. He also talked about the growing importance and utilisation of folk genres particularly the narratives, ritual events, cultural symbols, and folk metaphors in this assertion of ethnicity. Ethnic identity recurrently emphasised to achieve both structural and functional cohesion through both ritual and mythic performances. He also talked about the need to review the earlier conceptual categories and methodologies of folklore studies and look for new paradigms. Participating in the final three days of the workshop, Sharada Ramnathan, Programme officer, the Ford Foundation explained to the participants the programme development at the foundation for projects related to Indian folklore.

The workshop ended with the distribution of certificates to participants by H.W.T. Syiem, Secretary, North Eastern council. We are equally grateful for the warmth and support of A.K. Nongkynrih, Co-ordinator, PROFRA and his colleagues, Yobin and Sashinungla, Fr. Sebastian of DBCIC and staff of Hotel Polo Towers.

Indeed, the workshop was an intense creative experience for any folklorist. Informal meetings with resource persons were also mutually complimentary. It was a kind of workshop, folklorists will aspire to attend any day.

Out of the ninety applications received, NFSC staff selected twenty-five participants on the basis of their previous work, experience, regional representation and ability to contribute to the future of Indian Folklore studies. Opportunity to participate was extended to seven more local participants.

During the workshop, the board of Trustees also met and decided to follow-up and strengthen work in the following areas, a) to sustain NFSC’s relationship with north-eastern India, b) to identify specific areas and themes for folklore research fellowship c) to create new networks for dissemination of information, d) to explore various focal points related to all aspects of human development, e) to explore possibilities for collaborative publication programme, f) to make musical instruments which are on the verge of extinction and give them back to the communities, g) to create E-mail discussion list on environment and folklore, h) to focus research fellowship programmes towards development of manuscripts and research on sacred groves, i) to select some participants from the Shillong group for Jaisalmer workshop, j) to initiate scholar network, and k) to initiate a global convention on Indian folklore. Also, during the workshop representatives of twenty non-governmental organisations from different parts of north-eastern India met the board members. —— Editor

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Radiating Influence

Other bands developed in the Durham/Chapel Hill area after 1968, notably the Fuzzy Mountain String Band, the New Deal String Band, and the Red Clay Ramblers. Though each had its own style and focus, they all helped promulgate old-time music in general and Henry Reed tunes in particular to a wider circle of musicians and music lovers. In 1972 Tommy Thompson and I joined together with Jim Watson, a younger member of the Durham/Chapel Hill musical revival, to release another Hollow Rock String Band record (Rounder 0024, released in 1974), and there were occasional performances at the folk festivals that sprouted up around the country in the 1970s. But in essence the radiation of Henry Reed’s influence, both in the tunes that he played and in the style in which he played them, was less a matter of wide public visibility than a musician-to-musician process.
As part of their objective to make people aware of the culture around them they collaborated with the Government Museum of Chennai to organise a workshop on Thanjavur painting. This was different from the various other workshops that teach Thanjavur painting in the sense that the participants were told about the history of the art form as well as given hands on experience by being taught to make one themselves. It was a balance between theoretical and the practical knowledge. It was a five day workshop conducted between 21 - 26 May, 2000. The course was designed such that the mornings were devoted to lectures and the afternoons to doing the actual painting. To quote Muthukumaraswamy, Director, NFSC, the workshop was specially designed in this way so as to, “recover its fold roots through an analysis of its history and evolution. And in doing so they wanted the participants to reclaim the common in the public sphere and see that the form is saved from the gross commercialisation that we are seeing now.

The workshop was inaugurated by Dr. R. Kannan, Commissioner, Government Museum, Chennai. The lectures at the workshop by Mr. Lakshminarayanan, Mr. Jayaraj and Mr. Mohan (all from Government Museum, Chennai) encouraged the participants to explore questions such as: Where did Thanjavur painting originate? Which period did it flourish in? What were the influences in terms of techniques? Who were the patrons? Did it start as a folk art? How and when did it gain the status of being a classical art form? What folk elements has it retained, what classical features has it incorporated into its style?

The lectures were meant to help the participants to think along these lines and find answers for themselves. It was to help the participants to place this art form in a broader cultural context. The participants were also introduced to new techniques available about how to conserve the paintings.

Most of the participants came to know of the workshop through the papers and they were all registered on the morning of the first day of the workshop. It is a measure of their keen interest that they dropped everything else, almost at the last minute and chose instead to spend the rest of the week at the workshop. There were in all eleven participants, ranging in age from a school going student to the wife of a retired Government officer. They also came from varied backgrounds. One of them was a Hata yoga teacher, one a student of Dentistry, and one was a theatre artist. They were all unanimous in their praise for the organisational abilities of staff of NFSC and Government Museum. The participants’ every need was looked after by NFSC staff. They were also lavish in their praise for their teacher Muthukrishnan. They all mentioned that it was a joy to have such a patient teacher as him. He was very appreciative of the fact that what would take a professional artist four full days; the students managed to complete in half that time.

The 8th standard student Lalitha joined the course to keep herself occupied in the summer. She thought that this was better than most of the summer classes held for children. Also she felt that the detailed work that in making the painting involved increased her ability to concentrate. She understood the importance of focusing her energies on a single project.

Vijayalakshmi, a housewife joined the course, because this was something she had always wanted to do. On reading the advertisement she simply enrolled herself. She liked the fact the workshop was a mixture of lecture and demonstration.

Palani is a theatre artist part of the Koothu-Pattarai troupe. He came to know of this workshop through someone associated with the troupe. He joined the course out of curiosity about what such a workshop might evolve. He liked the concentration and the single minded focus that making a Thanjavur painting entailed. It was an experience unlike his theatre experience, which by its nature involved a lot of distraction, in terms of spatial movement. Making the painting meant that he had to sit in one place till he completed it. This was a different kind of experience for him. He also mentioned the fact that the use of colours and paints was same as that of making traditional masks where the face is painted. He found parallels between painting and applying make-up.
Malini is a History teacher, who resides in Lucknow. She enjoyed the discipline, which the making of the painting involved. Being a teacher herself she particularly appreciated the patience with which the teachers took them through the whole process in a systematic step by step manner. This experience would definitely enrich her and she felt that her colleagues in Lucknow would appreciate it. She also felt that she could use this experience in the classroom and help the students develop themselves.

Swati is an art student from Bangalore who got to know of the workshop through the paper. She enjoyed the different approach to art from her regular curriculum. She liked the use of soft and minute lines and detailed work that making a painting of this sort entailed. She said that there were many differences between the work that was expected out of her course work and at this workshop. Traditional work entailed the use of particular themes, motifs and colours and even shapes. It was quite different from the western approach with its emphasis on individual freedom of expression. This kind of work needed more patience than the routine classroom work.

Kalpana is an enthusiastic housewife who has always wants to learn about Thanjavur painting. She like a particular technique used to make a Thanjavur painting. It involved preparing various layers and each layer revealed a different aspect of the painting. She liked the use of the bright colours, the gold sheet and the stones, which gave the painting a different and ethnic look.

Lavanya is a nursery teacher working in Bangalore and interested in Thanjavur paintings. She liked the method employed to teach them about it, i.e. lectures as well as demonstration. She was specially impressed by the lecture on the conservation of paintings. She felt that made the workshop unique, because it taught not only how to make a painting but also how to maintain it as well. She was appreciative of the patience and interest exhibited by the artist and his family in teaching them the various aspects of the painting.

Mrs.Dandapani has all praise for the master and his family. Their dedication not just to the art form itself but also the dedication shown to the process of teaching and keeping the art form alive particularly impressed her. In spite of the students mistakes there was never a frown or any other sign of impatience shown by him. She also said that NFSC had done a wonderful job of organising the workshop. Their meals and every requirement was taken care of and they were able to work without a care in the world.

Giridhar is a student who is studying for his BDA. He was interested in knowing about Thanjavur paintings. He enjoyed meeting and working with people from other backgrounds. He said that he learnt to be patient. And he also realised that being patient had its own kind of reward.

K Sharada is always interested in learning about Thanjavur paintings. She liked the way the workshop combined both theory and practice. She particularly liked the Thanjavur style of painting because it included not just painting but craft work also. She had to cut and paste to make the different layers. She liked the fact that she had to use different materials in the making of this painting.

Gunashankara is a signboard painter by profession. Since the advent of the computers, computer graphics has been used for advertising and as well as the making of signboards. Therefore his business was being affected by this newer technology. He said that he wanted to acquire a new skill to supplement his income. This was just the beginning for him as he intended to work on this skill so that he may improve the quality and speed of his work. For him the whole process was fascinating, preparing the colour wash, the muttee layer, and the gold leaf layer and embedding the stones. And this whole process was what made the Thanjavur painting unique.

All the participants enjoyed the workshop and mentioned a desire to attend more workshops. They went home not only with their own masterpiece but also with some knowledge about the background of this art form. They also said that they would definitely want to attend many more such workshops about the visual art traditions of India.