

# DISCUSSING CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY: THE “PATACHITRA” OF WEST BENGAL BETWEEN GLOBALIZATION AND MODERN CONSUMER SOCIETY

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*Abstract:* The dream of authenticity, the savage sensibility, the idea that “modernity” – however meant – was a theme of very limited interest for anthropologists is a mark of the Western history of cultural analysis throughout a good part of the last century. Still today it remains in some not always marginal lines of western ideology with regard to other people and other places (exotic places, ethnic objects, strange rituals), as well as in a certain persistent conception of cultural anthropology such as a search for authentic cultural richness. In this paper, I concisely present the main lines of the authenticity debate and argue for a hybrid (and oxymoronic) notion of cultural authenticity focusing on an ethnographic case.

*Keywords:* tradition, authenticity, change, hybrid, modernity.

## PRESERVING CULTURAL DIVERSITY

The dialectic between tradition and modernity and attempts to interpret cultural change are a constant in the anthropologists’ reflection. In the past, anthropologists who described traditional societies, whether located elsewhere or nearby, glimpsed the presence of foreign elements, or presumed as such, like goods of Western origin (televisions, radios, clothes, tools, medicines) in the name of the “purity” of analysis.

This vignette (fig. 1), which has appeared on many sites around the internet, shows the natives who hurry to remove any sign of modernity from their hut before the arrival of anthropologists.



Fig. 1. *Natives who hurry to remove any sign of modernity from their but.*

Faced with the evidence that “their” subjects began to use “external” objects more and more on the one hand, and to produce objects or perform rituals for tourists on the other hand, anthropologists were always ready to complain about or condemn such changes. They were against the commodification of tradition, seen as the end of cultural authenticity (Filitz, Saris 2015) and of social relations in their full meaning.

Anthropologists have always been very devoted to safeguarding the integrity of “cultures” for many reasons including their nostalgia for the disappearing “cultural worlds”, the thrust of the ethnographic urgency that Franz Boas put in the foreground in his ethnographic programme, and the emphasis that so much anthropology has placed on “tradition” as a bastion and horizon of its own “pure” research activity. A famous passage by Claude Lévi-Strauss is symbolic of this: everything that smells Western is defined as a “our own filth, thrown into the face of mankind” (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 38).

Why did Lévi-Strauss, along with many others, hurl himself against the spread of Western cultural patterns? Why did he so emphatically condemn the risk of an advancing monoculture?

It is well known that, according to Lévi-Strauss, each culture progresses through an exchange with others, but only if it has something unique to exchange. It is the differential gap between cultures that makes their encounter creative (Lévi-Strauss 1985).

Geertz (2000) suggests that Lévi-Strauss's position reveals a common way of considering cultural diversity as alternative to us, suitable for a world in which many different and singular cultures were only marginally involved with one another, holding each other at distance and only occasionally communicating, in a moderate reciprocal exchange. Cultural integrity was readily maintained, as was cultural specificity. This is the matrix of cultural (and human) creativity:

the great creative eras were those in which communication had become adequate for mutual stimulation by remote partners, yet was not so frequent or so rapid as to endanger the indispensable obstacles between individuals and groups or to reduce them to the point where overly facile exchanges might equalise and nullify their diversity (Lévi-Strauss 1985: 23).

Loyalty to one's own values is an indispensable element in this view: getting lost in other cultures and celebrating them indiscriminately (all cultures are wonderful) means abandoning one's own, losing all specificity, flattening oneself into a carnival lacking meaning and identity:

such freedom would lead to a world "whose cultures, all passionately fond of one another, would aspire only to celebrate one another, in such confusion that each would lose any attraction it could have for the others and its own reason for existing (Lévi-Strauss 1985: xiii).

## MODES OF TRADITION

According to the Levistraussian anthropological vision, each culture is tied to its own way of life and its own system of values and encourages them, i.e. it continuously proposes and reproduces them, through the processes of transmission of knowledge and traditional heritage. This ideal collection of "cultures" presupposes that human beings live, in order to maintain their "pure" culture and their "strong" identity, within closed and separate social units dominated by "tradi-

tion”. Anthropologists have contributed to the strengthening of this view. This concept is well expressed by Ulf Hannerz:

the idea of an organic relationship between a population, a territory, a form as well as a unit of political organization, and one of those organized packages of meanings and meaningful forms which we refer to as cultures has for a long time been an enormously successful one, spreading throughout the world even to fairly unlikely places, at least as a guiding principle. Perhaps anthropologists, studying human life even in places where states have not existed, should have been a bit more wary of the construct. But with the personal experience of citizenship surrounding them in their own lives, facing the classical conditions of local fieldwork, and under the influence of a natural history tradition in which cultures are seen more or less as taxonomically analogous with biological species, they have hardly been more inclined than anyone else to scrutinize the assumptions linking at least people, place, and culture (Hannerz 1996: 20).

The position of Lévi-Strauss is fascinating: the desire to stop time, to enter the temporal gaps of the marginal and peripheral corners of the world. A temptation that few can resist (anthropologists or otherwise), and which is at the basis of the invention of tradition (Hobsbawn, Ranger 1992) as well as of the conceptualization of identities and cultural boundaries, typical of twentieth-century anthropology.

The concept of tradition, both as a heuristic instrument and as a cultural “asset”, part of a heritage to be safeguarded, is an abstract concept, useful to ensure cultural reproduction. This abstraction evolves through the concrete ways of transmitting knowledge from one generation to the next. It is a complex process that aims to preserve the accumulation of knowledge and experience of past generations and to mould (and inform) the individual members of a group. Each individual is led to acquire his or her own cultural autonomy, to assume his or her own responsibilities and initiatives in order to face the concrete situations of social life. The transmission of knowledge, formal (e.g. at school) or informal (e.g. in the family), individual or collective, by individual elements or by synthesis, is always carried out within a framework that integrates all traditional knowledge (Cardona 1989).



Every empirical process of cultural transmission reflects an abstract pattern, which is expressed in the cultural representations (the tradition) of the community. The reference to the abstract pattern governs the behaviour and outlines the content given to new generations.

The notion of pattern is useful to analyse the phenomenon, in its various forms. Based on the idea that concrete social forms are generated through logical operations that correspond to concrete empirical processes that can be identified in social reality.

Innovation and cultural change, however, are always hidden in these complex mechanisms of transmission of traditional knowledge. To adapt the knowledge of the past to the requirements of the present, in some cases, is a necessity.

Conservation and flexibility with regard to the needs of change are therefore implicit in the process of knowledge transmission. They are not realised in a vacuum but always with reference to a model, a local traditional one, or a global, “modern” one.

In the past, when contacts between different societies and cultures were marginal, when people within a society referred to themselves as “the human beings”, cultural integrity was easy to maintain. The process of transmission of traditional knowledge conceptualised by anthropologists worked well overall, or rather, it had some chance of matching some real situations.

Today, social and cultural boundaries certainly no longer coincide. We need another way of thinking about cultural diversity. There is less integrity because differences coexist at very close proximity, and they mingle.

This loss of cultural integrity, according to Lévi-Strauss, is an irreparable injury for the whole of humanity, even in terms of creative capacity. But James Clifford doesn't completely agree with this. He brings back Lévi-Strauss's metaphor of “filth” thrown on the face of humanity and re-elaborates it. Clifford takes an ambiguous position, stating that contact with the West certainly provokes cultural destruction, although different cultures resist and revitalise themselves (Clifford 1988).

Moreover, according to Michael Herzfeld (2001), to state the idea of the advancing world monoculture, as Lévi-Strauss

does, means accepting a superficial mask for reality; the world is flat (Friedman 2005) only on the surface, an appearance that hides the deepest differences and, above all, the inequalities.

Herein lies the real crux of the matter. That is to say, if it ever was, today anthropology should no longer be lacking a political dimension, merely the production of knowledge, regardless of local “intimate voices”.

## HYBRID CULTURES

In other terms, we are all immersed, so-called modern and traditional, primitive and evolved, civilised and wild, exotic and familiar, people within the same big temporal framework, that of simultaneity (Matera 2018).

Altering this framework and introducing temporal gaps means altering political relations between people. It means pushing some people into backwardness, into exoticism: it is their culture’s fault, wonderful but irrational, if they are poor and cannot get out of their condition. It therefore means concealing that the increasing areas of poverty all over the world are the outcome of precise political decisions, not of cultural conditions (Latour 1993).

Interacting between contemporaries, on the other hand, means representing and interpreting the lives of other people as impregnated in events that take place between contemporaries.

Restoring contemporaneity to the ethnographic encounter means bringing the people I have met back into the present instead of pushing them into the past, in search of the potential gems of wisdom that they can offer me.

Today in anthropology things have changed, and instead of assuming the contexts in which we study to be islands full of meaning and cultural richness, the emphasis is on the presence of elsewhere, of foreign objects, and on how to interpret these presences and their effects. Are they cultural hybridisations, forms of creolisation, products of a conjuncture, of a particular intersection of the articulation between the local and the global?



Fig. 2. Mamoni Chitracar performance in Naya village, September 2018.

## TRADITIONAL “HYBRID” PRODUCTS

During a number of stays in West Bengal I collected some notes on a local artistic practice that is emblematic of what I have outlined so far. A large number of paintings and depictions have been produced in West Bengal. The *Patua* or *Chitracar* (creators of paintings, hence the surname and first name of their caste), are an indigenous group of Bengals who have been specialised in the creation of scroll paintings (*pat*) and singing performances that follow the unrolling of the scroll (fig. 2) since the thirteenth century or perhaps even earlier.

Originally, the *Patuas* seem to have been Hindu. But then they were expelled because they did not follow canonical procedures in their craft. It is said that “they painted outside of tradition, violating the code of the arts (*Shilpashastra*, the aes-

thetic canons of Hindu iconography) and were expelled by the Brahmans who were “angry”. For example:

one day a *Chitracar* was painting a *scroll* of *Mahadeva* (*Shiva*), when the deity himself appeared near the painter. Out of fear, the artist put his brush into his mouth, severely offending the great god: Mahadeva cursed him, saying “You will hereafter earn your livelihood painting with polluted brushes. From now on you will be *Yavanas* (Muslims) (Bhattacharjee 1973: 95, quoted in Korom 2006: 34).

There are, however, many other versions of the origins of the *Chitracar*, as I have noticed in the field, while collecting stories in the village of Naya and Habichak. A continuous oscillation between Hindu and Islam is the main trait of the vicissitudes of the *Patuas*, always in search of protection. The common trait of many versions and reconstructions is the event “lowering of caste” and loss of Hindu religious affiliation, even if today many *Patuas* declare themselves to be Hindu.

The *Patua* men always supported themselves by moving from village to village, performing their works of art and describing them in songs that they composed themselves. The artistic skills of these painters/storytellers were passed on from generation to generation, from fathers to sons, according to the “transmission of traditional knowledge” pattern. Their function was to entertain or disseminate, to make myths popular, to educate to their message; or, in the case of the *pat yama*, ritual paintings made on the occasion of the death of important people, the function was informative, to spread the news from village to village.

It is a practice rooted in the past that has shown great flexibility to incorporate the so-called “dust” of modernity (Appadurai 1996), according to a complicated process. Not all villages produce *Patachitra* that are “contaminated”, so to speak, by the global world. In Habichak, for example, *Patachitra* still depict and represent mythology and traditional stories, even if they are largely made with the intention of selling them (Yet, and perhaps it is not a coincidence, these “traditional” *patachitra* do not fully match the tastes of tourists, or foreign visitors, as I have seen in the field).





There are also cases of a clearer reworking of traditional themes. In the village of Naya, for example, which has been revisiting the *patachitra* since the nineties and which has now become the most famous place for the creation of *patachitra* in West Bengal. The *Patuas* incorporate and express modernity in the stories, in the songs, in the production of images, for example through the local reading of global events. The majority of the artists today are women, some of whom are well known even on an international level.

In Naya they opened up to the market economy, they made themselves part of modernity and made a local tradition part of the global discourse.

Transformations in the political, religious, social and cultural context challenge a tradition, test its ability to remain alive and relevant, and to become hybrid. According to a process that is common to many other forms of popular art (and folklore), which suffered a loss of centrality in people's lives due to the changes induced by what we can generally define as "modernisation" until they almost disappeared (dialects and local languages have suffered in a similar way), the *Patachitra* have also suffered marginalisation.

However modernity should be interpreted (Latour 1993), its advent, in terms of objects that oppose tradition such as the radio, the television and the telephone (today, the mobile), at least initially eliminated the main function of the *Chitracar*, i.e. storytelling; the demand for stories dropped, people were watching television, had a telephone and no longer wanted to listen to the same ancient stories.

Many *Patua* had to look for other occupations, and they became farmers, rickshaw drivers, street vendors, until the 1980s. In the following years, however, there was an inversion of direction, a gradual recovery of *patachitra*, reinvented and re-adapted.

In this regard, on several occasions, I met Amitava Batlacharya, the founder of *Banglanatak.com*, an association based in Calcutta and active throughout West Bengal to promote awareness among local artists of the artistic value of their skills and to facilitate the link between artists and various wider areas, festivals, markets, international exhibitions, etc. (fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Banglanatak Office in Kolkata, January 2015.

Banglanatak's action stems from the conviction of its founder that traditional art is a crucial tool for the growth of rural areas, not only in economic terms but also in terms of recognition, dignity and rights. A synergy between culture and economy which is the key to the improvement of living conditions and also to the revitalisation of cultural heritage throughout India. I cannot address here the problems related to this kind of intervention in the villages. It is also important to encourage new generations to realise that traditional art can be a good business. The living conditions of rural populations in the villages improve thanks to their artistic heritage and creative capabilities. The encounter with the market also pushes

them to diversify their production (t-shirts, ceramics, lamps, etc.), and to open new sales opportunities (festivals, fairs, etc.). This implies more changes, but also remarkable revenues that allow for example to enlarge and modernise houses, to install a telephone, to buy a television, to send children to school (fig. 4).

Of course, the traditional practice has changed. A glance in search of cultural “purity” – a classical ethnographic gaze – would not escape the contaminations, the transformations of *Chitrakar* art.

According to Korom (2006) the main change consists in the fact that today the *Chitrakar* sell scrolls, no longer use them as a means of their singing performances; performance is no more the central moment for the economic dimension of tradition, and some do not compose songs, but make scrolls to sell.

However, as I noticed several times, the sale itself is often prepared by a performance, offered to visitors in front of the houses, covered with scrolls of all sizes, as well as other objects decorated in the style of the *patachitra*. Another important change – suggests Urmila Chakraborty (2014) – is that today the majority of *Chitrakar* are women, whereas in the past they were men (although the women at home have always helped to prepare the cloth and the colours). Moreover, the topics depicted in the *patachitra* have also changed.

In addition to the traditional themes of Hinduist mythology or those taken from the Islamic religious heritage, artists are increasingly dealing with subjects related to current events. Both local topics (the victims of Nandigram, a town 70 km south-west of Kolkata, where in 2007 a protest against the project to build a chemical pole was violently suppressed by the police) and international events, such as September 11<sup>th</sup>. The *Chitrakar* are now depicting issues such as violence against women, birth control, elections, ecology, AIDS, tsunami, deforestation and flooding (fig. 4).

Furthermore, as a consequence of the literacy of the new generation of artists, songs are now written down, whereas before they were only sung. Finally, transport has introduced a new dimension: artists travel, exhibit in the city and at festivals, and go abroad. The men of the villages often stay at home to look after the family.



Fig. 4. Pages from the catalogue showing of a lot of items in patachitra's style to buy.



Fig. 5. A *Patua* from Naya village performing on the *September 11 attacks*.

Some argue that this path will lead to homogeneity and global culture; that the path to modernity erases local creativity. Others say that *Patua* continue to negotiate their artistic tradition just as they have been negotiating their identity for centu-

ries: they insert the new within a local framework. The *patachitra* on the tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup>, for example, is not a simple account of the facts but a sort of indigenisation of modernity (Sahlins 1994), a reinterpretation of the facts according to local aesthetic norms, values and sensitivity (Biswas 2005).

The song that follows the scroll is about the son of a wealthy Bengali family who travels to the United States, indulges in excessive sexual activity, and dies as a result of the attack. The moral of the story is a religious message: the world is too sinful and must redeem itself.

Thus, these reformulations and “glocal” readings indicate that alongside the destiny of “advancing monoculture” one can envisage for local cultures a future of “creolisation”, blending, through an ideological process of mediation of global elements.

However, many questions remain open. Which interpretation of modernity can be grasped from artists’ new way of working? Have their products become simple commodities? What conflicts arise in the community as a consequence of these transformations?

According to Appadurai, local products become goods when they move out of the local context and enter international trade circuits. A constant in this process is that when it enters the international arena, local art becomes contested (and competition dynamics start). Conflicts arise because of envy, sponsorship, innovation, property, intellectual rights (Korom 2006). Something similar has been happening in recent years in the village of Naya.

In any case, it is clear that today’s *patachitra* depict a form of modernity that is neither totally local, nor purely imported from the West: it is a hybrid produced by the forces (and attraction) of the market, by politics, and by the local perspective. The language of local tradition learns to use a wider register, projected on a larger scale, and offers a local revisitation of global problems.

This requires a lot of attention: it would be a big mistake to perceive, interpret and represent other people as if they were living in a chronotope.

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*Methodological note.* Data were collected through an ethnographic approach during several stays in Naya (2015; 2016; 2018) in Habichak (2017) and in Kolkata (2015; 2016; 2018). In the village of Naya and in the village of Habichak I conducted interviews with local people, including Patuas (men and women), some political and religious leaders of the communities, and a very important old *master of Patachitra*, Dukhu Shyam Chitrakar, who told me what I consider to be a kind of “official” history (from the local perspective, of course) of Patachitras, from the time when they were poor beggars’ items, to the time when they were abandoned and the artists started to do other very menial jobs, ‘until the time of their revaluation – as a consequence of a powerful “dream” – when the community of artists decided it was time to create Patachitras again but in a renewed style. In Kolkata, I visited the Banglanatak office several times, and had several conversations with many people (male and female) working there, and an interview with Amitava Battacharya, its founders. In Kolkata, I also had the precious support of an informed specialist in the local traditions of West Bengal, as well as anthropologist at the Department of Anthropology of the University of Kolkata, professor Arnab Das.

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