**EASA Media Anthropology Network**
**e-Seminar Series**

**http://www.media-anthropology.net/workingpapers.htm**

# Kerstin Anderson
## *The Online Durga*

(12 - 26 June 2007)

**Abstract**

The paper focuses on the role of the new ICT technologies in the creation, formation and maintenance of a Diaspora identity among the Kolkata intellectuals. Among the Kolkata intellectuals migration has been a common feature since the end of the 19th century. In contemporary Kolkata, almost every family in this category has one or several relatives living in the Diaspora. Satellite TV and the ICT technologies that entered the arena during the last decades have got an increasing importance among those groups. The new technologies affect the flow of ideas and gives way to new global forms of interaction. Access to new forms of communication alters identities and social forms, the relationship to the home country changes. The flow of religious and cultural expressions increases. Kolkata Websites have become the major channel for news, information and contact. Virtual communities and networks have appeared. Religious and symbolic forms of expression alter and are re- configured. For example the Durga puja ritual has become a major icon for Diaspora unity and identity among the Kolkata intellectuals. Pictures from all the puja sites in Kolkata are displayed and anjali offerings to the goddess are performed online. The paper is based on fieldwork made in Kolkata in 2000-2001.

| | |
|---|---|
| **From:** | jpostill@usa.net |
| Subject: | [Medianthro] Andersson e-seminar opens now |
| **Date:** | 12 June 2007 16:45:34 GMT+08:00 |

This is to announce the start of our e-seminar on Kerstin Andersson's working paper on the Bengali diaspora, "The Online Durga", now available at **http://www.media-anthropology.net/workingpapers**.

Kerstin Andersson is currently completing a PhD in social anthropology at the University of Gothenburg, in Sweden. Her thesis is entitled Intellectual Movements in Bengal and is based on fieldwork among Kolkata (Calcutta) intellectuals in 2000-2001. As part of her research, Kerstin studied satellite TV and ICT uses within this group.

The discussant will be Matthijs van den Bos (University of Amsterdam) who has studied and published on Dutch-Iranian transnational networks, most recently in the journals International Sociology and JRAI. His PhD, Mystic Regimes, was an investigation into the long-term development of two Shiite Sufi orders in Iran.

As previously announced, it would be impractical to try to introduce all the proposed changes to how we run the e-seminars at such short notice, yet there is one novelty: the session will last two weeks rather than one, starting now and ending on Tuesday 26 June at around 9 pm GMT.

It's over to Matthijs now for his discussants' comments. These will be followed by a brief response from our presenter, after which we'll have a first round of brief comments and questions from the list.

Many thanks

John

| From: | M.E.W.vandenBos@uva.nl |
| --- | --- |
| Subject: | [Medianthro] comments online durga |
| Date: | 12 June 2007 19:01:29 GMT+08:00 |

Comments on Kerstin Andersson's 'The Online Durga'

'The Online Durga' describes a case of diasporas and new media. It focuses on websites that offer an online ritual servicing diasporic Kolkata intellectuals. The ritual in question, the Durga puja, is the main religious festival of Bengali Hindus, celebrating Durga, the ten-armed goddess of fertility and the third embodiment of the Devi (10). Kolkata intellectuals are broadly defined as "the Bengali Hindu community consisting of the three castes of bramans, kayesthos and badias" (3). The paper first elaborates on their social, historical and intellectual background, then delves into their migratory histories and reconstructions of home and tradition, and subsequently addresses the role of new media in these processes (particularly the phenomenon of E-Durga puja). This last section also recasts the analysis of community construction within a larger phenomenological perspective.

The value of the paper as I see it, lies in its detailed description of how new media usage may connect actors transnationally but within a particular ethnic-cultural realm, and how it may mould their communications in individual cases. Second, the original, syncretic uses of email that the paper documents - by either offering typed messages to the provider or sending handwritten and scanned messages - underscore the value of studying local articulation rather than resorting to easy technological determinism. Third, what struck me as opening up new space for research was the contrastive depictions of online and offline (diasporic) interaction. Tradition in Kolkata marriage and religious observance comes across as fluid and reflexively practiced - as in the case of the wedding couple who left out the fire ritual and the ensuing public debate on its legitimacy among the Kolkata diaspora (6). Although E-Durga puja is framed in similar terms, it is non-reflexive statements that stand out, among which: "the different rituals and the prescriptions for performing them correctly are displayed" (13), or "the specific rituals that are performed during the puja are described" (12) - I would be interested to learn Kerstin's verdict on whether that is significant. In the following, I will state some questions that remained on my mind after having finished reading the paper, and some doubts I have regarding parts of the argument.

The section on 'diasporic media' helpfully outlines the development of ICTs globally and in India but uses a questionable label to indicate their adoption in Diaspora -geographically defined usage does not modify the media. Illuminating new media development, an outline is then given of how an initial email service transformed into a multifunctional portal providing for the diasporic Kolkata population. It is claimed here - not apparently on the basis of Kolkata communication but as if an undisputable fact - that "online communication and email has

become the major means for communication with and among the Diasporic populations" (9, cf.15). This is actually what the case study needs to help substantiate, but it doesn't seem to do so.

The recurrent notion of Kolkata websites being important for diasporic imagination and community apparently derives from their number and numbers of hits rather than an analysis of online and offline usage, either in Kolkata or in Diaspora. Neither look like very convincing criteria in this context. There are "numerous sites for overseas pujas" (12) - but is comparative data available on (the impact of) offline print media, i.e., numerous on what scale? Durgapujas.com is managed by an international team, which suggests diasporic embedding, but equally telling clues are not given for other sites such as bangalinet.com. "Millions of viewers from over 50 countries" for durgapujas.com (13) sounds massive, but for the sake of the argument: these hits could just as well be on account of non-Kolkata visitors. The hits alone do not seem to bear out that "Durga Puja websites have become very popular among the Diaspora population" (12).

Apart from its views on the large impact of E-Durga puja sites, the paper shares a perspective on online media that considers them significant transformative channels of (diasporic) communication. This is seen, for instance, in the idea that "access to new forms of communication alters identities and social forms" (abstract). Indeed, it is not difficult to conceive how a website allowing individual users to cherry-pick the Durga puja ritual elements would affect the ritual's communal foundation, for instance (cf.13). Regarding the offline Durga puja, the paper observes that "often politically influential men have a leading position in the puja committees" (11). It again seems likely that distanced and individualised online involvement in the ritual would challenge such authority wielders, i.e., that diasporic online media usage actually transforms offline reality here. But all this is hypothetical and would emerge empirically only from a view on online and offline practice in Kolkata and Diaspora.

What does stand out from the material presented in this paper is something that arguably points in the opposite direction. However they may alter identities and social forms within Kolkata diasporas, the new media are not producing new audiences in a broader sense. The paper underlines mono-ethnic identification on a larger scale (and presumably with an intensified focus on its cultural constituents?), but I did not find cosmopolitan tendencies, indications of ecumenicalization, cross-ethnic hyperlinks or larger national Indian identification in this rendering of the online Durga. Similar facts and circumstances have been documented by many observers over the past two decades: whether or not one believes that deterritorialization is the essence of globalization, globalization goes hand in hand with ethnic fencing and (re)assertion.

Furthermore, anthropologists often present cases where globalization is felt to fundamentally alter ethnicity, ethnic labels being either made into huge categories with uncertain referents or, inversely, large signs having fatally misplaced concreteness - accounted for by factors such as modern bureaucratic intervention, global capital undermining state sovereignty, or transmigration. Here we seem to have a case, however, with some of such factors involved that simultaneously remains very familiar from a more traditional perspective: new transnational media usage sustaining a particular ethnic-cultural realm whose borders remain unaffected.

Matthijs van den Bos

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Dear Matthjis

Thanks for your very interesting comments. I will do my best to sort things out a bit.

  - What I consider to be your main point is the necessity to push the research into the area of the relationship between on-line and off-line interaction. I agree fully that the paper lacks an empirical grounding in a local Diasporic community. But I think that you are underestimating the force and veracity of cyber communities. They should be understood and dealt with in their own right, as new arenas for interaction and communication among the Diasporic groups. The relationship between on-line and off- line interaction and the configurations that follows from on-line interaction in a local setting are highly interesting and as you state outlines a new area of research. (Those are issues that have been discussed on this list earlier)

  - Diaspora websites and online interaction
I am a bit surprised by your questioning of the relevance of IT and websites among Kolkata intellectuals in the Diaspora and it is probably due to the fact that I might have been a bit unclear in some of my statements.

First, in the text, I describe the emergence of the first Kolkata website, Kolkata online, in the end of the 90ies. I probably should have clarified that in 2000-2001 it existed three Kolkata websites. Today the number has exploded, something, which is reflected in for example the great number of sites focussing solely on the Durga puja.

I have made quite a lot of research on NRI and Kolkata websites and my experiences is that this is a media heavily used by NRIs and Bengalis. The introduction of the new technologies has resulted in the proliferation of a lot NRI networks, virtual communities and Diaspora websites. They are basically topical or community oriented. Topical or interest oriented groups commonly crosscuts community and ethnic belonging while community oriented online groups have a more defined membership. Political networks/ sites have also appeared in online form. General websites for NRIs are common and there exist a lot of specialised websites, NRI news, NRI service centres giving information and help to NRIs regarding their stay abroad, settlement, government regulations, economic advice, websites that focus on professional associations and Indian student associations, Indian fashion, Indian sports, Indian cooking, Indian music, Bollywood and so on.

Further, on a more general level the importance and significance the new technologies among Diasporic groups have been emphasised by for example UNDP (1999) and I think that Tsagarousianou gives a good illustration of the situation when she states that Diasporic medias form "spaces of communication where remote localities and their experiences come together and become synchronised into complex landscapes characterised by multidimensionality and multiplicity of flows". (Tsagarousianou, R, 2004, p. 61- 62).

- Regarding the validity of measuring the importance of the Durga puja in online form in terms of numbers and numbers of hits I think that the great number of Durga puja sites gives a good illustration of the outreach of it. The number has increased quite rapidly over the last years, something that I probably should have pointed out more firmly. Durga puja is a regional festival specific for Bengal and Kolkata and as I describe in the historical part on the puja, it also is very closely knit to the Bengali Hindu population.

Considering the big number of NRI websites, and the strong proliferation of sites and cyber communities into specific focuses, I find it likely that different communities tend to focus on websites that represents their community and interest. Non-Kolkata visitors might hit the site, but I still consider the major user category to be the Bengali Hindus. The reference to the organisation of Durgapujas.com is given as an example on the management of a Durga puja site. I didn't consider it necessary to give this kind of information on all the sites that I visited putting together this part of the text. But the same connotation is put forward for example in the denotation of bangalinet.com as "home away from home", the "the holidayspot.com" explicitly states that they want to offer the possibilities for Bengalis that are not at home to make a virtual offering to the Durga and so on…..

- Non- reflexive statements
What I want to illuminate with the Durga puja sites is how the traditional Durga puja has been removed from its local grounding and setting and put into the new context of online interaction and how the traditional symbols and meanings are framed in the new context. The "non-reflexive statements" are put forward on the website to illustrate the way that the puja is described and made into a fact about the common tradition. The "traditional" features of the puja are displayed (and highlighted) through statements about how the rituals are performed according to tradition, the elements that should be included and so on.  It gives possibilities to reflect on and scrutinize the different elements. The Durga puja has adapted to online conditions and virtual celebrations through for example virtual pandal hopping, e- offerings, online puja games, different puja downloads, possibilities to experience the dhakis and puja songs. Religious and symbolic forms of expression have been removed from their local context and been reformulated and are re- configured in the on- line setting. The Durga puja, the tradition and its symbols have been charged with the meaning of the present situation and in the discursive practices in the new context.

- Ecumenicalization
This is not a concept that I have seen in discussions regarding Hinduism and India. I have seen it in relation to Christianity and Islam. But I might be wrong? In the Indian context secularism is common notion, but in this context the concept denotes equal acceptance of all religions.

- Cosmopolitanism and globalisation
I'm working with intellectuals. The Kolkata intellectuals have had an extensive interaction with external cultures and traditions. The Intellectual category is an agent of creation, interpretation, transformation and transmission of ideas.  (See for example Beteille1977, Khathake1977) They are situated in the intersection between the colonial and postcolonial discourse and the dynamics of the heterogeneous and diversified indigenous tradition. When I bring up issues regarding globalisation and cosmopolitanism among my informants they commonly answer that this is nothing new for us; we have interacted with external centres and external forces for a long period of time. For example Chatterjee (1997) states that the colonial encounter in the 19th century led to a search for a distinct and authentic national cultural identity and at the same time an inclination towards cosmopolitanism, a consistent urge to keep up with the most advanced trends in the rest of the world.

- Online media as significant transformative channels of (Diasporic) communication.
The new ICT technologies have introduced some new aspects that are significant for Diasporic groups. They enable interaction in time across space and make it possible for scattered Diaspora groups to enter into interaction both with the place of origin and with each other. According to Appadurai, Korom, Mills (1991) Cultural forms and traditions are closely related to the processes and means of transmission. New forms of media and new forms of distribution and production influence the cultural form and tradition.

- Finally, I have some problems with your identification of Diasporic groups and ethnic groups, which I think includes the postulate that a Diasporic group is founded in a common ethnic identity. I think that Rosa Tsagarousianou (2004) puts forward a more relevant postulate stating

that Diasporic communities are "imagined communities" continually created, reconstructed and reinvented. Diasporicidentities are formed at the Intersection of connectivity and cultural reinvention and reconstruction. (Tsagarousianou, R 2004)  I want to frame it in the phenomenological terms of the lebenswelt, the life world, intersubjectivity and the constitution of a common worldview and socio-historical and cultural life worlds among the subjects. This would rend the Diasporic identity in other terms than as a particular ethnic-cultural realm whose borders remain unaffected. Further, a phenomenological approach gives openings for integrating diverging discourses into the community identification. The community identity is constantly reconstructed and reformulated, integrating and redefining elements. The rendering of the Diasporic community is not static or with closed boundaries, but open ended and constantly being renegotiated. Although I still agree that it would be highly interesting with an empirical study in a local Bengali Hindu community in the Diaspora…..

I hope that I have managed to make things a bit clearer....

Best Kerstin


*References*

Appadurai, Arjun, Korom, Frank, 1991 *Gender, Genre And Power In South Asian Expressive Traditions*, Philadelphia: University Of Pennsylvania Press.

Chatterjee, Partha, 1997 *The Present History of West Bengal, essays in political criticism*, Oxford University Press.

Tsagarousianou R, (2004) " Rethinking the concept of diaspora: mobility, connectivity and communication in a globalised world" in *Media and migration, Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, vol1, no 1.

*UNDP report*, 1999, Oxford University Press, Cary, NC



| **From:** | jpostill@usa.net |
|---|---|
| Subject: | [Medianthro] Andersson e-seminar opens now |
| **Date:** | 13 June 2007 18:07:58 GMT+08:00 |

Thank you very much for that detailed response to Matthijs' comments, Kerstin.

We can now open up to the list for a first round of brief questions and comments. Let's try and have a busy first round of posts so that we can build up towards a discussion. To post, please write directly to medianthro@easaonline.org adding your institutional affiliation. If for some reason your post doesn't seem to have reached the list please contact me offlist, as sometimes they take a while to do so.

Many thanks
John

With the apology for not attending the recent discussions, I will start by picking some of the issues discussed by Kerstin and Matthjis. Here are my thoughts or questions that are triggered by the starters:)

1. How can we calculate the significance of a website?
It is also a technical issue not really solved but there are several ways and sites (ie. alexa.com) to do some measurement. And then there comes some kind of comparative work? between different sites in the field and similar regional sites all over the world or some kind of ranking analysis between transnational sites (i mean let's say CNN or BBC or Google) and the mentioned sites here.

A 'thick' ethnographic description could be more helpful in order to determine the significance of a website? Informants' pattern of usage of different technologies or agenda-determining role of the new media can all be thickly described (maybe again in a comparatively/ compared to old media?)

2. Decontextualized, to what extent?
Dear Kerstin, in stating "religious and symbolic forms of expression have been removed from their local context and been reformulated and are re- configured in the on- line setting," do you also mean online setting homogenize the local varieties? or old formulas/rituals are reproduced online and distributed to diaspora centers with all the differences carried from the origin of rituals.

3. Regarding cosmopolitanism and globalisation, maybe one should look beyond what informants' own words. i do believe the Kolkota intellectuals had more exposition to transnational waves from the beginning but the contemporary global flows might have had some real difference.

I hope I am clear enough and thank you Kerstin for sharing your paper with us!

Cordially,
Erkan

Erkan Saka
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Field diary: http://erkansaka.net
Teaching Assistant at the Faculty of Communication in Istanbul Bilgi
University, Turkey

Well, I'm primarily interested in the issues Kerstin's paper raises for digital media research, so first I'd like to thank Kerstin for a most interesting and informative paper. The paper opens up important debates about the relationship between the people who create sites and those who use them - about the power of virtual communities vis-à-vis geographically situated communities in the mediation of social and cultural practices.

What emerges for me from this paper is a question about how we should investigate the play between the content-laden environment of the website and the opportunities for interaction (usually fairly subscribed) that the website supports. The website is constructed of databases - lists of cultural traditions; lists of stories, photos, events, genealogies, recipes, contacts, links. As archival repositories they are essential and wonderful - but the question of exactly how important they are in the lived contexts of everyday life is not explained by their existence. At issue here is the relationship between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 - the website as archive versus the website as host to an active collective intelligence. While both of these elements are evident in Kerstin's analysis, there seems to be a tendency to deduce the latter from the former, and this may not prove helpful in the final analysis.

Secondly, I completely agree with Matthias that it is difficult to judge the significance of websites and web forums by numbers alone. The measurement of both memberships and hits is potentially extremely misleading, and a reason why the advertising industry has been pouring effort into finding ways to measure online 'engagement'. From an anthropological perspective, explaining the nature of community engagement online and how it does or does not connect to geographically situated communities is really important.


Virginia

Associate Professor Virginia Nightingale
School of Communication Arts
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Australia

Member of the Centre for Cultural Research

Thank you very much for sharing this interesting paper with us, Kerstin. The paper deals with a couple of timely and interesting topics, such as the diaspora's use of the Internet, religions and the Internet, and our beloved issue of communities in cyberspace. I like Kerstin's idea to put her research into context and tell us about the historical and the migration background of the diaspora she is dealing with, although we get to know little about the diaspora itself. This is not

a problem, since, and I agree with Kerstin, online communities can (not necessarily should) "be understood and dealt with in their own right, as new arenas for interaction and communication among the Diasporic groups".

Having said this, I would also like to mention what I was missing in the paper, which builds up a lot of expectations, talking about new "patterns for social organisation, social action and relationships", about the central role of the Internet "in the processes of group formation and identification" etc. Precisely because Kerstin wants to deal with these online communities in their own right, she should get us much more involved in these online negotiation processes. There is a good start in the media and ICT section of the paper, where we get to know about what kind of media the diaspora uses and a broad variety of Durga puja facilities online. What is missing is the outline and the analysis of the often mentioned (but not explicated) negotiation, reflection and transformation processes, during which the online diaspora's identity and their community is constructed and built.

Putting more emphasis on what actually goes on online, Kerstin could make use of the extensive body of literature on online communities and / or of the growing number of publications on online religion and religion online. The latter differentation could also be an interesting point of investigation: Is it just the transfer of offline religious ideas and practices into cyberspace or does something new, a new online religion so to say, evolve?

It would also be interesting to know how the "Durga online" contributes to much broader identity construction and negotiation processes of the Bengali diaspora online, in which way ICT really manages to integrate the diasporic community and whether we are really dealing with an online community (and there is still a lot of dispute going on what that actually is) or with another social phenomenon.

What I personally would be interested in as well, is what role Kerstin played in this 'online community' / these 'online communities' (?) and how she got access to it / them.

Of course, not all of these points can be dealt with in a short paper. And I apologize for maybe bringing up too many issues. But what I am trying to say is probably that I would love to read a more ethnographic account of the online diaspora studied by Kerstin and I am looking very forward to getting some more ideas about this in the course of our discussion.

Thanks and regards,
Birgit

| From: | tinni.andersson@telia.com |
|---|---|
| Subject: | [Medianthro] the online durga |
| Date: | 14 June 2007 20:37:17 GMT+08:00 |

Thanks for you very good comments, I'll try to give some brief responses to them!

Erkan

1. I agree with you on the point that a possibility to decide the significance of the website might be a "thick description of informants' pattern of usage of the different technologies or agenda-determining role of the new media". Another line of investigation that I think might be of interest considering the scattered nature of the user groups might be to try to enter it through one (or some) of the websites, and in this way be able to delimit a group of users from different

Diasporic locations for online interviews and discussions.

2. You ask whether or not I think that the rituals are "reproduced online and distributed to Diaspora centres with all the differences carried from the origin of rituals" or if there is an element of homogenization in the process. I would prefer to see it in a more flexible way. I think that the meaning of symbols and rituals are fluid and defined in the actual discourse, in the discursive practices and the inter-subjectivity through which the subjects constitute their life world. A ritual, symbol may take on new connotations and meanings in a new context. One example of how meaning and significance of a religious/ traditional feature has \altered in different social and political contexts is the way that, during the nationalist period, the Durga took on the meaning of "mother India" and her fight with the demon the connotations of liberating India from the colonial forces. The ritual became "charged with the meaning and import of the present".

3. Cosmopolitanism and globalisation- of course it is relevant to look behind informant's statement. There is a lot of external factors that are heavily influential in those processes, as increasing flows of information, ideas and culture, changing patterns of economic flows, entrance into a global labour market and so on. Secondly, my experience is that informant's statements might have a very weak connection the actual situation. Often they project an "ideal" version of things, more a reflection on their expectations on the reality, how they want things to be than how things really are. But I still think that the Kolkata intellectuals have a certain openness and awareness and often a critical and reflective attitude towards those issues, based on their long experience of the impact of external forces, discourses and system of ideas. For example they put forward great debates on western rationality and modernity back in the 19th century.

Virginia

I find your points on the interplay between the environment of the website and the opportunities for interaction and your concept of "online engagement" very interesting. I don't consider the significance of the sites to be explained solely by their existence or by numbers of hits. I put forward that I think that the great number of Durga puja sites and the rapid increase in the number of sites might be an illustration of the outreach of the sites in an attempt to counter Matthjis' questioning of the relevance of Diaspora websites. The significance of the site in everyday life includes a lot of aspects and I think that this is where the role of off-line research in a local Diasporic community might be very illuminating. Regarding the concept of online engagement, I think that it gives a lot of interesting openings into the field but how to determine the engagement? You relate the concept to the advertising sector, would for example the number of online offerings performed on a puja site be an indicator on it? Finally, thanks for your very good advice on the importance of the nature of community engagement online and its relationship to local Diasporic communities.

Birgit

Thank you for pushing me further in this direction. You put forward a lot of difficult questions for me and my primary reaction is that I think that you are right, those topics should be dealt with in a more extensive way. From the point of view of online ethnography, questions as the nature of the online community (or other social phenomenon), more explicit discussions on the processes of online activities of community construction and identity formation, further exploration of the borderlands between the online activities and the integration and inclusion of local Diasporic groups are highly relevant. But as you also state, it is impossible to include everything in one paper. So far my role has been as an external observer, and maybe it is time to try to enter into online interaction in a more active way. I will most certainly take a closer look at the literature and research findings that you take up. As I remember form earlier

discussions, this is close to your own field of  interest, and you probably have a lot good ideas on the topic.

Thanks again for your comments.
Kerstin

I begin, too, with thanks and apologies. Thanks first to Kerstin Andersson for this paper, to the commenters to date, and to John Postill and the listserv for deciding to keep the seminars going. Apologies now for my scattered thoughts and for the direction of my comments; although I received excellent exposure to anthropology through the Culture and Media Program at NYU, I am coming to this paper through Film Studies, and in that regard, my guiding question is 'What does this look like?' and there is an offshoot, 'What can be determined or understood about the practice of these online sites through the examination of their formal and textual qualities?'

These questions dovetail with the questions of the Internet medium itself and the questions raised earlier about the issues of Web 1.0 and 2.0. What is interesting about the Internet is the way in which certain seemingly discrete concepts are fused:

· Text becomes image as in the case of the scanned letters. And I'd ask here: what is happening with this? Are there servers dedicated to scanning in these letters? Are they intended to further ensure the ethnic re-fencing mentioned earlier, as the handwriting suggests proximity of origins and produces a texture of authenticity in its appearance? And what then of those rejecting this format (as the man who did not want his handwriting recognized)? In archival sites—virtual repositories of culture—the scanned in document stands for the authentic, tangible not available online; what happens when it is circulating and a mode of communication and exchange? Clearly, there are practical elements in scanning and sending, but retyping the letter for email is an alternative that works without the burden of opening attachments, etc. In the end, I would love to know more about these sorts of images.

· Icon-Network: In a more direct sense than with the emailed scanned letters, text/image is conduit when it functions as link to others.  Little to say here at the moment, except that the choice of link icons may reflect something—or not.

· The e-greetings and wallpaper that can be downloaded: are they uniform images and greetings, are there changes that reflect NRI status? Are there options for people to upload their own greeting cards? Part of what makes the Internet so dynamic for study is the idea of user-driven content, so I am interested, I'll admit in wanting to know differences between sites with servers located all over, and what, if anything, people contribute to the sites, and if sites are actively drawing from one another. Is there a variety among cards, posted recipes, or anything that can suggested the adaptations made when people move? From what I've seen through my wandering in these sites, images that seem 'classic' are often alongside those that are possibly less so—such as the blinking cartoon lion who is missing the recipient during the Puja festival.

· In a question that perhaps finally moves to real world-virtual world links, I noticed that some sites post pictures of Durga puja as celebrated around the world; I wonder if these create links and suggest innovations and transformations .

· All in all, I wonder about the use of images as a means of tracing social networks examining the constitution and transformation of communities. How does a consideration of aesthetics and the formal qualities of media work with explorations of the social practice?

And an aside from my perusal of related sites: On one site, every time I tried to get a closer look at the e-greeting cards, I was interrupted by a pop-up advert telling me I had traces of pornography (visits to porn sites) on my computer and that I should download a product to rid my computer of said traces. I can't help but wonder if this is a targeted advertising to harness and make the most of the guilt of someone about to send a card regarding a religious holiday?

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Just a quick question triggered by Birgit and Virginia's comments:

In Religious Authority and the New Media, Bryan S. Turner, Theory, Culture & Society, 3 2007; vol. 24: pp. 117 - 134.

Prof. Turner mentions how some online experts of Islamic Shariah emerged.  These (highly educated in secular institutions) people are mostly located in American or European locations, they set up religious reference sites, mediate between the lay muslims and traditional clerics and eventually emerge as a new foci of religious authority.

So Kerstin, do you think a similar (cyber) social group emerged to represent a new intellectual power?

Cordially,

Erkan Saka

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Teaching Assistant at the Faculty of Communication in Istanbul Bilgi
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Dear Kerstin

Many thanks for the challenging paper you have offer for the debate (and for John, my sympathy for keeping the ritual alive)

Even if it would look less polite, I would not spend to much time in stressing the benefits of your study - in fact I will just forget that ritual sequence....; I prefer to go directly to the controversial issues (which could look obviously in a science in which almost everything can be put under question). From my point of view (which can look to much embeded in the traditions of classical anthropology :-)):

1. I think that the short notes on the transformation of the tradition and of the notion of home in a myth (or in myths?) has to be more elaborated: do you conceive myth as a process through which, by debate, meaning is created and contested (as Bird states, in a post-structuralist perspective), or as a framework (as the first reference to Kapferer suggests) - myth as a more or less rigid cultural unit that gives an already existing meaning to something ( in your case the social memories about home and tradition)?. Not to say that in the context of your demonstration myth seem to be understood more as an ideological construction (close to illusion, altereted conscience, even social accepted lies, as from Platon to Barthes a lot of thinkers have understood it). Later you use the term myth in a more traditional way to label Durga story....

2. A distinction should be made between a ritual repertory ( material objects phisically present in a house of a priest let say, or imaterial and material objects as the ones to be dowloaded on the site) and a ritual performance. It seems to me (maybe I,m wrong) that you are tempted to consider the simple downloading act as beeing already the performance of the ritual.... Is visiting a site that shows you the performance of a ritual (even if it is your own, traditional ritual) sinonimous with a virtual performance of that ritual? The same debate was enacted by specialists in tele-evangelism and by media-events scholars on a slight different subject - is television consumption a ritual performance?

3. If , as you state, "on the Durga puja sites tradition and the myth of the home are explored, reflected upon and debated in a dynamic process of meaning making" - how does this come with the performance of a ritual? Is it performed traditionally or in a more or less modified way? There are no ethnografic accounts in your paper, but the paragrphs on the ritual function of the sites suggest a traditional re-enactment of the ritual; if so, which are the factors of contestation and symbolic reconstruction?

4. Even if you reiterate several times the ideeas of contestation, meaning construction, cultural reflexivity etc, there are no ethnographic arguments ( be there observations, statements, practices, texts) to support these assumptions; in the paper, more elements occur to support the ideea of the conservation of a traditional "patrimoine" as a tool for imposing a cultural identity, than the ideea of contesting and re-shaping it. It looks like a gap between the declarative level and the demonstrative level of your paper;

Once again many thanks for your study - I have the feeling it will generate a lot of interesting debates

best
mihai coman

| **From:** | pedeltmh@umn.edu |
|---|---|
| Subject: | [Medianthro] Assessing online depth |
| **Date:** | 17 June 2007 06:09:07 GMT+08:00 |

A quick thought concerning the online assessment issue raised in the wake of Kerstin's paper. I have been conducting a survey lately that has taken me to numerous online discussion forums. It seems like it is pretty easy to assess the depth and breadth of these communities, as is the case in Kerstin's study. In such sites there is a rich record concerning how many people take part, how often, length of discussion threads, etc. The difference between someone's wishful-thinking website and a robust and active discussion forum is immediately obvious.

Mark

| **From:** | pedeltmh@umn.edu |
|---|---|
| Subject: | [Medianthro] Durga |
| **Date:** | 17 June 2007 07:20:39 GMT+08:00 |

Thanks for the interesting and useful paper, Kerstin.

The rich details you provide were extremely interesting, as was your analysis. I am going to ask a few nudgy questions that might help you reinforce your analysis and argument.

I like the following comment and sentiment:

"The Durga puja, the tradition and its symbols have been charged with the meaning of the present situation. The meaning and value of the ritual and the ritual actions are constructed in the discursive practices of making sense of the world, the here and now, the life in the Diaspora."

I wonder, is this interpretation shared by your informants? Members of the diaspora might argue that instantaneous communication with the homeland is helping to preserve a more primordial identity and tradition, even if it is, as the above quote indicates, inventive. We hyphenated children of immigrants are often loath to admit that we have invented something new. To quote an Irish-Irish friend when discussing the subject of Irish-American identity: "That (Irish-American identity) has shit-all to do with Ireland."

Questions:

1) Do online forms of communication really erase time and distance or is this just another way we allow ourselves to believe that we "really" know what is going on at a distant site? Is it like news "knowledge", the belief that just because we have constant images from overseas we might actually "know" something about the referent time, place, and culture? Does frequent and instantaneous communication really lead to deeper knowledge and connection to a distant site/people/mind? (Communication as in "to make common")
2) Assuming there is a more coherent and connected diasporic community thanks to web 2.0, is this making the diaspora more conservative or innovative? Diasporas are often more culturally conservative (nostalgic) than their imagined homeland. While the metropole at home often has no problem integrating outside influence into its cultural constitution and

imagination, diasporic communities often work to "preserve" a more concretized sense of "authenticity." Has the online element changed that dynamic? To take your argument to the extreme, is this the erasure of diaspora itself?

3) Is this a more "official" normative discourse and a subculture within the diaspora? Are there more "popular" discourses taking place in other forums? Is there some self-selection in terms of who chooses to take part in the online community you have studied? A better sense of the digital demographics might be useful.

I guess I am a bit suspicious of statements like the following:

"Consensus is reached on the significance and the different elements become formalised. The Durga puja is made into an icon of identity, uniting and holding together the Diaspora population. They form an online community defined by a sense of belonging and a specific virtual culture. The virtual community engage in a common interpretation of identity and a common notion of the life world."

It seems that below and outside such a consensus there is usually more of a contest for meaning-making going on. I would suggest that you explain how it is that such a remarkable and sustainable consensus is formed, and how the new comm tech facilitates such consensus. This seems like something qualitatively new.

Thanks, Kerstin, for instigating this conversation. You have done what Anthropologists do best. You have provided a critical and comparative window into a specific time, place, and culture.

Mark

Thanks for a very interesting paper.

I have a few questions I'd like to ask.

1) What is the role of language in all this? In my work I have found strong disjunctures between Elite groups, such as Bengali intellectuals, who are English speaking and outward looking, and less privileged groups, which seem to be associated with non-English speaking.

Are there such stratifications around the Durga, and to what extent is this usage of the net also an example of an elite group absorbed into the terms of reference of the 'Anglosphere' and discussing issues that might appear on the BBC website, or discusssing the war on terror, or liberal democratic-economic values etc etc...

Or are the Durga websites very exclusively host to discussions of the ritual itself? If so, how is the link to Kolkota intellectuals significant?

2) Which brings me on to my second questions. I can only echo Birgit, Erkan and Mark in calling for the views of your participants / informants about the sites and thier relationships to them. What woudl be particularly useful is a record of how they discuss such issues amongst themsleves. A useful concept for analysis is that of commentary (Hobart's baby). The use of this idea is precisely to help you narrow in on the spaces and practices where those involved reflect on and thus modify what they do. This is in addition to various proxies for more direct observation that a website might offer, and would fit with your overall approach:

"I think that the meaning of symbols and rituals are
fluid and defined in the actual discourse, in the discursive
practices and the inter-subjectivity through which the subjects
constitute their life world."

To answer briefly the question about advertisers and websites,
I know first - hand that focus groups are becoming increasingly popular
 foils for interpreting site statistics, because they bring out how
people relate to the sites, and thus render the numbers a bit more
meaningful.  Site analytics generally have a bad name in web-marketing
circles, because they are notoriously hard to interpret on their own.

3) I think Mark Pedalty is right to raise the issue of not assuming consensus.  As soon as community and communication get anywhere near each other, assumptions of consensus tend to pop-up.  It would be nice to think that these sites in some ways hold the communities together, but is there evidence from either commentary or other sources that this is so?  What if the sites provide a focus for very divergent ideas, and thus allow the semblance of community to stand in for other ways of establishing intersubjectivity e.g. the phone.

I am not proposing this as an answer, but trying to illustrate the intellectual risks of investing in consensus.

4) I wonder if we will see Durga Pujas in second life one day...

Daniel

| | |
|---|---|
| **From:** | tinni.andersson@telia.com |
| Subject: | [Medianthro] the online durga |
| **Date:** | 18 June 2007 23:21:33 GMT+08:00 |

Thanks for all those interesting and penetrating questions and  comments, and all my excuses for delays in answering. I was forced to  focus on some other issues in the middle of everything. I will start  with Leshu's and Mihal's comments and I will have to get back to the  rest of you later on. I hope that I will be able to clarify the  points a bit ....

LESHU
• 	the text becomes an image

I would not consider the scanning of a letter in the handwriting of a  person as an act towards ethnic re-fencing. My experience is that it  is an expression of closeness and proximity between members of family  and relatives. My informants were often a bit hesitant towards emails  since they didn't conceive them as expressing feelings, values and  emotions. Some of them even stated, "You have to see a person for  being able to talk with him." Another factor pushing towards scanning  is the language question. Usually in the families and among friends  they tend to speak Bengali, although they generally are very well  versed in English.  Since the use of Bengali fonts is not very  widespread, the scanning of a letter in Bengali handwriting might be a proper solution and a more emotional way of communication.  Regarding the point on web 1.0 and 2.0 and the authencity of the  scanned documents in the archival sites contra

circulation of scanned  letters, my reflection is that maybe the distinction of web 1.0 and  2.0 is an externally constructed and enforced distinction, not  reflecting the state of reality.

- Differences between sites, user driven content, varieties etc

My experience of the sites is that they are diversified and often  have a quite specific focus. For example the Anandautsav site has a  strong focus on illustrations of different pujas in Kolkata and over  the world, giving photo displays and video displays from different  puja sites. The holidayspot.com focus only on e-offerings to the  Durga (and also other festivals). Bengalinet.com gives a good  exposition of the traditions, legend and elements included in the Durga puja and so on. There also is a certain overlap between the  sites regarding the topics. I have not seen any sites that are  drawing on each other, except for some of the e-card sites that to a  certain extent display the same cards. Regarding the sites put  forward by the Diasporic groups, they in much represent the local  Bengali community and their way of celebrating the puja. It exist a  lot of different ways to contribute to the sites. You can for example  upload photos and videos, recipes, make comments on the site,  customize your card and so on.  And you have a lot of interactive  features as the online offerings, online games and other things.   Regarding the variance among cards etc suggesting an adaptation to   the Diasporic context I think that this is a difficult question and a  very wide issue. First, I consider the whole adaptation of the puja  to online circumstances to be an expression of the Diasporic situation. Those sites appeared as a way for the Diasporic  communities to communicate and it is expressed in features as e- cards, online gift giving, e-offering etc. the content is adapted to the new technological forms in different ways as for example the case  with the blinking cartoon lion.

Secondly, I think that it is difficult it is difficult to define  variation in terms of visual images and make a distinction between  classic images and others in this case. In Hinduism the murti- the idol of the god has a central position, and often the god can take  different shapes and forms but still be same. The Durga murti is  divers and there exist a great variety in the local context. Old  family pujas might have their family murti, made in the same form  through generations. In community pujas, the recent element of  competition has led to an increase of visual expression. Further, the  outlook of the murti is also a question of fashion, differing over  the years. What I consider to be the basic element regarding the  Durga image is the making and preparation of the idol and the  materials out of which the idol is constructed. The making of the idol is a holy process that should be made in accordance with the  shastras (traditional texts) and by a certain artisan caste group in   Kolkata. The craft is passed down through the generations in the  family. The idol should be made out of specified materials that are  derived from the Ganga and it should include certain basic features.   For example she should be depicted as "Dashapraharana-dharini", the   face should be shaped as a Betel-leaf, her sons and daughters,  Lakshmi, Saraswati, Kartick and Ganesh should be included in the  image. But the rest are very flexible elements. in this context there  appears a transformation in terms of other types of material,  colours, size etc.


- Icon/text and the virtual and real

I think that your questions regarding Icon/ network- text/image and  real world-virtual world are interconnected. You suggest that the  choice of the icon reflects something/ or not. First, I have problems  to see the icon of the Durga puja as an intended choice made by  scattered Bengali communities. I would rather suggest that the  meaning of the icon is formed in the life world and inter  subjectivity among the different Diasporic groups. The durga and the  Durga puja is very close to the Bengalis Hindus, and ever-present in  their tradition. The icon is made into a significant of identity  among the scattered groups. As stated on one of the diapsora puja  sites, "The worship of the Mother Goddess is not only limited to  Bengal only, but the Bengalis have taken her to all parts of the  world where she has been revered by all communities." The Durga puja  sites of the Diasporic groups and the photo displays form different  pujas in Kolkata and the rest of the world becomes a uniting and co- ordinating feature among the different

communities and Diasporic groups. The sites and photos put forward a statement of the unity within the different groups and the unity among the dispersed Bengali communities around the world. As Tsagarousianou states Diaspora websites form "spaces of communication where remote localities and their experiences come together and become synchronised into complex landscapes characterised by multidimensionality and multiplicity of flows". (Tsagarousianou, R, 2004, p. 61- 62)

- targeted advertising to harness and make the most of the guilt of someone about to send a card regarding a religious holiday? This is probably due to the fact that porno sites are banned in India and not connected to religious guilt…

MIHAL

1. I don't consider Kapferer's approach to myth to be a description of "myth as a more or less rigid cultural unit that gives an already existing meaning to something" and I think that you are misreading his phenomenological approach towards myth. Myth is not a rigid cultural entity denoting an already existing meaning. Instead myths provide a framework through which the experiences of the world achieve significance. You put forward that the meaning is defined and static, "the social memories of home". I consider those memories, meanings, to be constituted and constructed in the present, in a process of discursive practices, negotiation and reflection against the past. In the terms of Kapferer the imagined reality of the past achieves its force through its construction in the present, in social and political processes, although it is experienced as if it flowed from the past. Radical breaks and discontinuities have appeared.[1] The past and the memories of the home are constructed and get their meaning in the present and in inter subjectivity. In phenomenological terms; we intend, constitute the world. History, the past, the present and the future are intended by us. We all share things and a world in common. It affects not only my conception of what there is but also my conception of what has been and what will be.[2] Further, personally I have some problems with post structuralism/ postmodernism since they neglect a placement in time and space, reject history and ends up in cultural solipsism. Societies and cultures become free-floating entities without interconnection.

   Regarding your comment on the use of the concept of myth in relation to the Durga puja, it should probably be better to use the concept the legend of Durga in this context.

2. I don't agree with you on this point. My experience is that the distinction between ritual repertory and performance is invalid in the Bengali context. Dualistic categories as mind-body, thought action, empirism-rationalism, natural and spiritual are rejected and common elements in the rituals are features as eating specific food, anointing and feeding with specific substances, dress in a specific way, immersion, aspersion or sprinkling, touching various parts of the body, recitation of mantras and specific words. Inden and Nicholas state that the rituals are actions that affect both the material and the spiritual or physical and mental parts of the body. They affect the whole person, for example bathing is purifying ones heart and mind as well as the exterior surface of the body. Lamb (2000) states that the Bengalis are highly body and material oriented in their constructions of social identity. Bodies are like persons, open, composite and dividuals. The Processes are at the same time somatic, social, emotional and spiritual.[3] My informants in the Kolkata context expressed it through the concept of Aha.[4] The concept denotes all the things we take in with the senses. You become what you take in with the senses; the things taken in with the senses are given to the god that is within you. In phenomenological terms, the body and physical experience are included in the perceptual act. The approach discusses the object as perceived by us. The cognitive activities integrates seeing, focusing, moving about, on the correlation of seeing with touching and grasping and other senses and certain motor skills.[5]

I do not consider the simple downloading act or the visit to the site to be a performance of the ritual. First, there is a distinction between puja and ritual. The puja spans over four days and includes a series of rituals. Second the sites might be explored on different levels. They include descriptions of the puja, the tradition, how to perform it etc. those are factors that gives the possibility to debate and define how the puja should be performed, what the myths and traditions behind it are, how the meanings of the rituals are constructed. The sites display images from pujas in Kolkata and in different locations in the world and unite the different Bengali communities. The tradition of pandal hopping and socialising is sustained in the online context with the possibility to make virtual visits to different puja places. The traditional element of status and power in the social universe showed through the grandeur of the puja and the competitive element among the community pujas are maintained. Often on the local puja sites statements as this community has made this puja into something specific, we had the first overseas puja, the most inclusive puja nad so on are put forward. Finally The puja sites includes a lot of different elements that are itnegraated in the celebration of the Durga, (the puja), for example the possibilities to listen to the performance of the agamani songs online, the perormance of the dakhis (drummers) and the recitation of mantras, the Durga chalisa and other things. Some of the sites also give the possibilities to make an online e-offering to the Durga, (one of the rituals included in the puja). This offering includes all the elements that that should be in accordance to the prescriptions for the anjali ritual, the lightning of the ancestral fire, garlanding the Durga with flowers, offerings of fruits and so on. Those ritual actions are performed through the click and drag mechanism on the site. At one of the sites you even receive prasada, the leavings of the goddess after the ritual. And here it exist an interesting possibility to explore the performance and perception of an on-line ritual further. An interesting element is for example that this offering should be performed by the Brahman or the family purohit, here it is open to anyone.

4. I think that you are misinterpreting the scope of this paper a bit. I'm not explicitly dealing with the specific rituals and the Durga puja. I want to illustrate how, through the new technologies, the Diasporic communities have got new arenas for reflection, debates and contesting of the Diasporic identity. Regarding your point on "the conservation of a traditional "patrimoine" as a tool for imposing a cultural identity" I think that you are underestimating the force of emotions, tradition and religion. Those factors have a significant position in the intellectual discourse and differences between intellectualism and religion are not emphasised. A quotation by one of the better-known Diaspora intellectuals, Dipesh Chakrabarty, might illustrate the point a bit.

"A similar point can be made about the so called religious as it comes into our lives and shapes the structures of our perception cognition and affect, a large range of our pleasures, desires, emotions and understanding of what constitutes the social (including the family) have the religious built into them at least as collectively practised rituals. How else could I- and here I deliberately speak autobiographically, as a male Bengali (Hindu) middle class Marxist (of some kind)- have emotional access to the human and other relations conjured up in (middle-class versions of) the Ramayana and Mahabarata in medieval Bengali literature about minor gods and goddesses, in Vashnava stories and songs about Radha and Krishna, in the Puranic legends about Durga and Kali, in the mystical songs of Bauls and fakirs. What makes it possible for me (and many others) still to be moved by nationalist songs of Mukundadas and Tagore, D.L. Roy, Atulprasad Sen, Nazrul Islam that directly draw on dharma /kinship to provide a sense of the nation/ community….."[6]


Kerstin

[1] Kapferer 1997
[2] See i.e. Follesdal, 1998, Sokolowski 1999, Embree, L 1998 for a discussion on phenomenology

[3] Inden, R, Nicholas, R. W, Lamb 2000,

[4] It might be possible to refer the concept "aha" to the Sanskrit term "aahaara", meaning food or in a wider sense all the things that are taken in with the senses. The form "aaharati" means taking something towards you, in direction towards you. (Lindberg 2001, personal communication)

[5] See i.e. Howarth, J 1998, Macintyre, 1985, Follesdal, D 1998, Sokolowski 1999 for discussions regarding phenomenology and the body

[6] Chakrabarty 2000b, p262

| **From:** | mcoman@fjsc.ro |
| --- | --- |
| **Subject:** | [Medianthro] Misreading |
| **Date:** | 20 June 2007 00:09:59 GMT+08:00 |

Hi Kerstin

I have read carefully your reactions to participants in the debate and it seems to me that in the storm of the arguments some of the conceptual details of my remarks were "misread". I'll take only one example, about the myth.

Here is the paragraph in question from your article (at page 7) "But meaning, significance and memories are created and constructed in the here and now, in the specific Diasporic settings. Tradition and the notion of home becomes a myth, "a dynamic process, through which people debate and contest meaning" (Elisabeth Bird, 2005 no page). Or as Kapferer (1989) states, the meaning of the past is constructed in the present. Myths constitutes a framework through which the experiences of the world achieve significance. Myths are treated as historical facts or having foundation in fact and can be seen as embodying the ultimate truth (Kapferer, 1989, pp 47-48)"

In terms of logical analysis you states first that tradition and the notion of home becomes a myth (A is/becomes B, and B, the predicate, explains A); later the B (myth) becomes a subject (myth is a dynamic process ... etc) being explained by the predicate "process"; later on, quoting Kapferer you states that myths constitutes a framework (again A (myth) is/constitutes B (framework), and B explains A); and later myths are treated as historical facts : A (myths) is B (historical facts) ...

So, in less than 10 lignes, myth is 3 times a logical subject which should be explained by process, framework and historical facts - which are heterogenous and even contradictory categories. This is what I have tried to stress in my short remarks I think that the short notes on the transformation of the tradition and of the notion of home in a myth (or in myths?) has to be more elaborated: do you conceive myth as a process through which, by debate, meaning is created and contested (as Bird states, in a post-structuralist perspective), or as a framework (as the first reference to Kapferer suggests) - myth as a more or less rigid cultural unit that gives an already existing meaning to something ( in your case the social memories about home and tradition)? obviously without misreading Kapferer phenomenological approach, because it was not Kapferer that was at stake here

Best
Mihai

Mihai

I am not totally clear what is at stake with Kapferer, but your logical analysis of Kerstin's argument seems on the face of it to contain a flaw:

Myth is not necessarily one thing but can be a shifting object within a set of "mythifications."

As such the logical inconsistencies you point out (Myth cannot equal A, B and C at the same time) could just be Kerstin saying Myth becomes A then B then C. (The THENs can be ANDs or ORs even.)

Which is not so strange if you treat myth making as an active aspect of practice  (i.e. mythification a la Hall's identification) rather than as a logical object / category.

This,  to my limited understanding, is a general problem with semiotic analysis: a tendency to fix the object-sign as the unspoken foundation of the analytical approach. This is actually a general problem with logical analysis: The scaffolding tends to imply fixed foundation categories, as a necessary condition.

Hence "symmetry" (as an expression of invariance within change)  being a buzzword in physics, an approach that mathematical analysis then follows on from.

Daniel

Daniel and Mihai,
A semiotician's remark:
Indeed I think that Mihai's opinion should be supported, as myth is not necessarily set in binary relation to what Mihai calls the opject-sign.  However, both notions, namely that there would be a binary relation, and that the object-sign is the "unspoken foundation of the analytical approach" in semiotics, are rather unclear. The first due to the reason stated above, the second, however, due to the fact that semiotic myth was addressed by Barthes (Mythologies) and he established these two levels of myth. This approach, however, is so hopelessly structuralistically outdated that it does not suit the current discussion, and I suggest that unless the discussants care to fix their "myth" terminology with some sources and/or definitions which help to eradicate the dissensus, a dynamic understanding of myth is accepted. To me, the processes of how myths are established are much more substantial than the ensuing question as to what is the logical/semiotic basis of a myth. Also, disecting a myth structuralistically won't

help, as unfortunately people's experiences are really too diverse to tell whether the sign-level meaning is exactly true for the entire community of interpreters.

In short: if you want to be semiotic about myth, avoid Barthes/semiology please.

Best,
Guido

| | |
|---|---|
| **From:** | tinni.andersson@telia.com |
| Subject: | [Medianthro] Online Durga |
| **Date:** | 20 June 2007 20:43:50 GMT+08:00 |

Hi,

You are really giving me a hard time!!

But I am really very happy and thankful for all those tricky questions and comments, forcing me to reconsider and push my arguments further into different directions.....

Daniel

1. The language issue is of course an important factor and I think that the Kolkata intellectuals might be described in the terms that you put forward, as an "out- looking English speaking" group. As I've put forward earlier, they are usually bilingual, Bengali is used in the sphere of the home and English in the public sphere. The correlation between knowledge in English and position in the society is applicable in this context also. The lower groups are generally not very good at English and this is a fact that to a certain extent restricts the access to the net. (There exist websites in indigenous languages)
The Diasporic groups from West Bengal have a specific character. The groups consist mainly of Bengali Hindus (Kolkata intellectuals). Kolkata is a multi ethnic city. The Bengali Hindu community in Kolkata comprise three upper caste groups. There exist very few low caste Bengalis in Kolkata, although they are found in the countryside. The intellectual category has a position in between the economic elite and the lower groups. Both the economic elite and the lower groups are groups that come from other states, for example Marwaris and Biharis. Migration from west Bengal is mainly constituted by the Bengali Hindu category. There exist some working class migration, but not very much. Partha Chatterjee explained this by the fact that In West Bengal there is less press to "get out of the village". The employment situation is stable in the rural areas due to the communist government and the land reforms. [1] The Durga puja is closely related to the Bengali Hindu category and was originally a festival organised by and sustained by them. In the community pujas in Kolkata, other sectors of the society are integrated in terms of different occupational categories. Among the Bengali Hindus in the Diaspora, the Durga puja has a great significance. The websites on the puja are both sites covering only the Durga puja and general Bengali websites. Further some local Diasporic groups have their own websites.

2. I agree to the request for a further investigation of the websites, both in terms of developing the analysis of the section in the paper and in term of including online ethnography and participants / informants views on the sites, put forward by several of you, Brigit, Virginia, Mihai, you and others and I'm really thankful for the suggestions and recommendations made. Also thanks for clarifying the point on advertisers and websites. Your last question I will take in relation to Marks, since you basically ask the same thing.

Mark

Your first point; I think that Lahiri gives a good illustration of this point defining her position in a perplexing bicultural universe, filled with diverging expectations and assumptions that she was shuttled between, as an ongoing cultural translation. As second generation immigrant she states that "Unlike my parents I translate not so much to survive in the world around me as to create and illuminate a non-existent one"

1. I think that you are getting into a very interesting and difficult issue, and I don't have a good answer to it. I consider online interaction and communication to differ in character and nature from off-line interaction, as also stated by my informants regarding email messages, but I don't think that it "really erases time and space". I think that the new technologies open a new area and new possibilities for communication. When I refer to the importance of the centrality of the time- space co-ordinates, it is because I consider the possibilities to connect subjects/ groups that are geographically dispersed in a direct communication and contact very improtant. You question if we might "really know something about the referent time, place, and culture". My approach is mainly to see online communication as one among several forms of expression that that reflects and illustrates the ways that the Diasporic groups understand and constitute their situation and their life world. Other forms of expression are for example film, literature, satellite TV. It doesn't render an objectively true reality, but the phenomena as they are manifested through human activity and practice.[2]

2. I have some problems with the dichotomies that you put forward, Diaspora/ home, conservative/ Innovative and the statement that diasporas are often more culturally conservative. What I am arguing for is that the notion of tradition is not fixed, static or precisely defined, but is constructed and reinvented in the context and situation. "Tradition" is a constructed category that is defined in the intersection between the place of origin and the new setting. The concept of tradition includes nostalgic links and memories but meaning, significance and memories are created and constructed in the specific Diasporic setting. I'm not at all sure that the metropole at home integrate external forces in a more uncomplicated way. I would suggest that the same process takes place in the place of origin. New factors and ideas are constantly negotiated, reflected upon and meaning and value is constructed integrating them into the cultural discourse. My interpretation of the Kolkata intellectuals perceives the intellectual discourse as part of a contested terrain of meaning out of which actors make sense of their world and their own place in it, constructed in the existing tradition, constantly reformulating it, attaching new meanings to existing features and ideas and integrating new aspects. The influences of the new technologies that I have observed in Kolkata indicate a proliferation of language, local culture and so on. So I don't think that this is some kind homogenising threat for the Diasporas…..

3. You suggest that "A better sense of the digital demographics might be useful" and you are totally correct. I've tried to look through some of the websites run by local Diasporic groups, and what I have found is a quite big variety. Some of the groups focus only on the pujas, others are run by a local Bengali association, cultural clubs or other organisations. (Bengalis are very much into clubs, groups etc) Some of the sites describe how the association have been taken over by the younger generations, one site was started by the young ones. Not uncommonly the members are described in terms of families and not individuals. The associations usually have a lot of activities except for the puja as a Bengali school, Bengali library, different cultural, art and dance activities. You are probably very right that it exist differing subcultures and groups among the Diasporic groups, but this is something that I have missed to look at. For example I can imagine that blogging has become big among the younger generations, and might constitute a diverging field. A very interesting area to explore further…..

Daniel and Mark

Finally, the question that you both took up, regarding community and consensus. I think that I have touched this issue in my earlier answers, but I will give it a new try. I think that the photo displays showing different puja sites on the websites might constitute an illustration. Anandautsav.com offers "pandal hopping", a custom in Kolkata where people walk around between the different "pandals" (constructions at puja sites) at different spots in Kolkata to check out different pandals, Durga idols, lightning works etc. pandal hopping also includes socialising and meeting family and friends at the different pandals. The pandal hopping at Anandautsav.com includes the possibilities to submit photos from the own puja and displays photos from community pujas, apartments pujas, old family pujas in Kolkata and west Bengal, pujas in other parts of India and pujas in the rest of the world. In 2006 the site displayed about a 100 albums from Kolkata, more than 100 albums from apartment pujas, and old family pujas, 40 albums from the rest of Bengal, 12 albums from pujas In other parts of India and about 80 probashi albums showing pujas outside of India, covering a great number of countries. The albums vary, some include only an image of the Durga, others have series of photos on the puja committee, cultural events, rituals performed and so on. I would suggest that this possibility to make virtual Visits to different puja places through the photo exhibitions put forward a statement of the unity within the different Diaspora groups and the unity among the dispersed Bengali communities around the world. As Tsagarousianou states Diaspora websites form "spaces of communication where remote localities and their experiences come together and become synchronised into complex landscapes characterised by multidimensionality and multiplicity of flows". (Tsagarousianou, R, 2004, p. 61- 62)

[1] personal communication 22/3 2000
[2] Kapferer 1997

| From: | John Postill |
| --- | --- |
| Sent: | Friday, June 22, 2007 5:09 PM |
| Subject: | [Medianthro] Durga individuals |

My question to Kerstin has to do with leadership and individuality. In 2002-2005 I was part of Netcultures, a team of social anthropologists comparing the uses of digital technologies for 'local governance' in multiethnic neighbourhoods of several countries. One key finding from all case studies, which we discussed at the 'New Mediators' panel of the EASA conference in Bristol last year (2006), was the critical importance in each locale of a handful of creative individuals with a rare mix of political acumen and technical skills,

See http://www.nomadit.co.uk/easa/easa06/easa06_panels.php5?PanelID=53

I was wondering, Kerstin, whether you found such individuals in your research. We get glimpses of individuality in your account, but could you tell us a bit more about individual leaders?

John

Hi everybody.

I was very interested by Kerstin's reference to phenomenology, but I could not see even a single line of the paper being influenced by the approach.

The way I interpret the term would lead me to expect descriptions of experienced life, not 'imagined communities'. While I agree with Brigit, who argues that online communities should be worth of interest on their own (forgive me if I have expressed your idea too roughly), as an anthropologist, I would like to know more about the people composing this/these Diaspora/Diasporas. What I would expect from a paper claiming to be media anthropology and to have a phenomenological approach, and would like Kerstin to share with us, is what actual people do with the sum (or a selection of) of practices that constitute this diasporic mediascape. I think it would be relevant to know: 1) what do people 'do' with the material they derive from the media context and practices, how does this reflects on their life experience, value, habits, identity practices?

2) what are the different ways in which this takes place? We cannot really assume that the Bengali intellectual diaspora is an homogeneous whole, so, what are the differences within it, and how are they influenced by the media?

3) for people like me who do not know the specific circumstances, there seems to be a kind of 'jump' in the text (sorry if that derives from my lack of understanding or attention) from a situation in which the internet is a completely 'new stranger', at least on the Kolkata side, to one in which it is the primary medium. How did it happen? What would you argue has made the internet the main medium in the field? Is it something you argue or the actors involved think it themselves?

I think all these questions at least partially correspond with an interest in a more precise clarification of the ethnographic facts and methodologies you employe dto reach these conclusions, an argument that has been touched by others and which I think is essential in order to define the anthropological character of a paper. I hope I have not been too critical, I just would like to know more about both Kerstin's data and approach as they both seem to go in very interesting directions.


Best,

Fausto Barlocco
PhD candidate (Social Anthropology)
Loughborough University, UK

Dear Fausto

Thanks for your comments.

You have misinterpreted the concept "method". What I'm discussing is method in terms of analysis, the ways that you structure and interpret your data. If you are interested in a phenomenological method, you should read some of Kapferer's work. He is the main proponent for this approach in anthropology.

Regarding point 1-3, this we have already discussed and I don't have much more to add to it at this point.

Kerstin

Hi John,

I've tried to check this out a bit and I think that the situation with the Durga sites is quite different from your discussions on e- governance. You are discussing the role of individuals as mediators in the implementation and use of the new technologies. As far as I understand, the cases includes some kind of intermediary "agency" (government, NGO agencies and others) that has the function of delivering, forming and facilitate the use of the new technologies among different groups, local settings, immigrant groups etc. in the case of the Durga puja sites, the sites are sustained and run by the local groups themselves, either in the context of the more general Durga puja sites, or specific sites run by a local Diasporic group. Among general Durga sites, the background and aim seems to differ quite a lot. A couple of examples: Bengalinet.com was started in 1999 by a group of people that "wanted to place Bengal on the net". They describe the site as their passion and they want to combine professionalism with creativity. Now the group also design websites, make designs, illustrations and animations for companies. Another site was run by a history professor working at a university in Britain. "With the aim to provide a scholarly yet readable narrative of some aspects of Indian culture." Among local Diasporic groups, the websites are run and supported by the puja committee representing the community or a local Diasporic association, including the puja committee. In those cases the structures are usually well organised, defined and fixed. Membership is often defined in terms family. I would suggest that the leading positions in those committees are held by the locally influential families. The necessary technical skills are available through the young generation of Bengali Hindu migrants, to a certain extent constituted by IT- professionals. One of the best technological institutes in India, with a good international reputation, is based in Kolkata and the brain drain is big. Regarding your point on "creative individuals with specific assets, in my reading the intellectual ethos includes creativity, radicalism, political, cultural awareness, although I'm not at all convinced by this "political acumen".......

Hope that I've managed to provide some info on it.....

Kerstin

| From: | John Postill |
|---|---|
| Subject: | [Medianthro] E-seminar closed; next e-seminar |
| Sent: | Wednesday, June 27, 2007 4:38 AM |

Dear All

It's now time to close our seminar on ICTs and the Kolkata Diaspora. I'd like to thank Kerstin Anderson for responding to the many issues raised, Mattjihs van den Bos for his discussant's comments and all other participants for a rich set of contributions. It's good to see that reports of the e-seminar series' ill health have been greatly exaggerated! As always, a PDF transcript of the session will be up on the website as soon as we can get it done (with many thanks in advance to our volunteer transcriber, Ivan Kwek).

Our next presenter will be Mark Pedelty (Minnesota) with a working paper entitled "Musical mediation: the role of popular music in political activism". This e-seminar will run for two weeks from 18 September to 2 October.

John