Arts, Activism, Ethnography: Catapult Arts Caravan, 2004-2010*

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Abstract: This paper gives an account of the Catapult Arts Caravan performances in North East and Central India from 2004 to 2010. Intermixing digital audio-visual techniques with performative folk-art practice, community participation, and debate, the Caravan process provokes community discussion on issues of common concern. In addition to providing an occasion for self-reflection, the performance event creates a Rabelaisian moment by allowing a mix of many local voices to express their particular views on a shared moment. As a technique for awareness and advocacy, the Caravan events become a means of critically evaluating the context and availability of shared natural resources. Treating oral performance as communication, the Caravan performance event serves as a public platform that is open for sharing, contestation, and reconciliation, and is an occasion for the fusion of text and context.

[Keywords: *Audience Participation*, *Social Dynamics*, *Performativity*, *Ethnography*, Bakhtin, *Methodology*. Keywords in italics are derived from the American Folklore Society Ethnographic Thesaurus, a standard nomenclature for the ethnographic disciplines.]

A Personal Observation

In late 2011, two members of the Catapult Arts Caravan video team asked the organizers if others could use the Caravan process. During public performances of the *Karvaan* (Caravan) over three years, they had seen how the documentation of everyday lives, challenges, and cultures of communities, of people whose lives had little room for maneuver could be turned into an engaging and public storytelling event in a way that is rarely seen (see http://www.jatantrust.org/caravan).[1]

The artists' collective, of which both were members, worked with poor *dalit* (low caste) and tribal communities and was interested in using the Caravan process as part of its cultural community activities. However, what excited them as filmmakers was the thrill of using the larger-than-life presence of the projected image to draw public attention to overlooked aspects of the landscape and daily life, more so to the aspects experienced by those whose stories were seldom told. Another colleague in the artists' collective was struck by the knitting together of video interviews and narratives with folk- and "street"-art forms. And both agreed that the

mixing of the recorded and the live used local idiom in an engaging way and would help air aspects of local community life that were rarely the subject of public debate.

However, the origins of the Catapult Arts Caravan lie elsewhere, in the belief that contemporary folk culture is not dying but simply recasting itself in the contemporary age. The need to make sense of details of one's life and surroundings does not disappear, and local articulations and expressions continue to emerge. Having lost the reasons for retaining earlier explanations, what we often hear and sometimes see is the incorporation of the "contemporary" in its new "tradition." What this means for earlier "pure folk" traditions (if they can be called that) and how these are transformed can be seen somewhere every day. All of this illustrates how, given a chance, people will continue to create things of beauty and belief in the "new" world in which they find themselves.

An imaginative exploration on the nature and making of "oral" tradition in a changing age is to be found in Ismail Kadare's novel, *The File on H* (1998). Here two American folklorists arrive in Albania with a tape recorder in order to discover the "oral epic" that lies behind the Homeric literary tradition. When the tape recorder meets ethnic sensibility, the events in the story run their course, leading to the destruction of the machine. Finding their work covered in a newspaper article en route home, one of the American folklorists says, "What a tragic misunderstanding," even as the other recreates the oral: he begins "to chant, in a flat and expressionless voice, the lines of verse that he had just heard read to him" (Kadare 1998:201).

About the Caravan: Activity, Materials, and Methods

These days, the *rangoli* (a folk floor- and wall-art form found across India) sometimes has the English word "welcome" integrated into it. Among some Indian observers of vernacular culture, such an expression of contemporary folk tradition is usually rued as its demise. On the other hand, and striving to adopt a less essentialist perspective, the Catapult Arts Caravan works on the premise that, given a chance, people who make the *rangoli* will continue to do so in the ways they know with the imagination of the present-day.

As an informal collective of artists (digital and traditional) and community activists, the Catapult Arts Caravan is an attempt to express local themes and concerns using a "folk-digital" creation. The immediate objective of most Caravan performances is to collect and share information on challenges and solutions, lives and livelihoods that are connected to water, the land, and the forest and to raise awareness of them. Since the issues are local, often part of the unchallenged or mostly uncontested noise of everyday life, the idea emerged for a "digital plus" variety entertainment that would be able to travel and creatively publicize the identified concerns. Supported by local intellectuals, community leaders, and computer- and camera-savvy local youth, Catapult Arts Caravan performances help to create for an evening and some time after an atmosphere of dignity and reflection despite local diversities and despite beliefs and counter-beliefs that those in attendance have about each other. In the tradition of the *jatra* (a folk-theater form of eastern India), Caravan shows have been vibrant, interactive forums for audiences: rich artistic and cultural expressions of contemporary events, local history, and the surrounding environment.

Drawing on a preexisting "tradition," such techniques of public awareness and advocacy not only re-present contemporary folk cultures, but their creation and performance deepens relationships with the communities, highlighting local contributions and gaining greater public visibility. As Robert Baron (2008) notes, it is in such ways that the public folklorist has enriched both the theory and methodology of folklore.

Many experiments in contemporary ethnographic practice look at collaborations between art and anthropology. The Catapult Arts Caravan uses fieldwork arising from a range of experiences, from activism to audio-visual documentation and documentary film research, as a source of an artist's material and inspiration. It is usually possible to see congruence between the act of making art and the role of creativity in the fieldwork process. However, when art and ethnographic research combine to produce representations, they inevitably lie outside the conventions of ethnographic texts or films because of their evocative or immersive qualities.

As a platform for neighborhood- and community-awareness-raising and debate, the Catapult Arts Caravan performance troupe attempts to express local themes and concerns in a combination of "digital" and "folk" creations. Caravan performances are a combination of street plays, video readings of oral and local texts, and songs and music. They are visible on open-air stages in public locations and are characterized by a projection screen that serves as backdrop. These in turn were inspired by the *jatra*, a combination of epic play and musical concert; it intersperses monologues and duet routines on open stages in open-air locations with still and moving images projected on a screen as backdrop. As in modern Hindi theatre, the structure of a Caravan performance is not derived from any particular tradition, and its exploration of the problems of identity has a decidedly modern orientation, with varying degrees of "folk" flavor. However, the explicit use of the video image to blur the difference between audience and subject is an important aspect of the Caravan process.

Drawing on the process of documentary filmmaking, the projected images of a Catapult Arts Caravan performance hold audiences to witness local stories expressed as a "variety" performance. As the flick of a switch turns the video player into a live camera, a palpable tremor passes through the audience as those present see their own faces fill the screen. The on-camera discussion that follows creates a markedly democratic space, as the camera moves from elite (that is, members of local power networks who may be old royalty, middle-class professionals, landowners who are active in local electoral politics, or lower-middle-class people who are literate) to commoner and poor, making no distinction in the screen space that they occupy. This facilitates public reflection on issues of concern, making for an engaged audience that moves into spaces of awareness and contestation. These performances have acted as a catalyst for public participation and civic debate in rural areas, articulating issues of common interest and concern through media performances set in public spaces, most often at public markets, main streets, or the riverside steps or *ghats* in the towns in which the event is hosted.

When Artists and Community Activists Come Together

Collective action as it emerges in public spaces and in everyday conversation contributes to shaping the public in action, through association and dis-association; expressions of concern, agreement, or disapproval; and manifestations and expressions of collective views. Here, the audience is not just a collective that allies, agrees, and shares worldviews and opinions. Oral narratives of everyday life experiences connect artist and audience to create a collective representation of the present, expressed and commented on in local and public settings. Over the few years of its existence, Caravan events have been able to invite collaborations between community activists and video- and folk artists and to publicly tell local stories from everyday life and events.

This form of storytelling uses the potential of live video shows to facilitate interactive actions, such as a public discussion conducted by an MC. Through dialogic imagination and responsive expression, audience members move beyond being spectators. They are now participants in a living experiment that brings local, oral storytelling to a wider but still local audience. Through this technique, the audience is now also the subject.

The oral narratives are based on the memories and experiences that community members contribute and that local artists retell. The artistic devices that Caravan members use range from music videos to short theatrical dramas to adaptations and improvisations in ballad and song. As a result, the performance becomes a useful ethnographic tool, reflecting a multiplicity of points of view about the world alongside a digital video archive of local oral narratives on land, water, forest, and everyday life, many of which are ripe for further academic exploration.

A Caravan performance is, then, more than an open public discussion; its performative elements allow it to be seen as a Bakhtinian carnival, at the boundaries between cultures where the mixing of attitudes or points of view reveals a site of intense and productively-contested cultural life (Bakhtin 1984).

Through electronic media, precedence can be given to inter-relationships and connectivity, processes that enable the emergence of dialogic artworks. Making a distinction between dialogic processes and interactivity, the Caravan process is uniquely suited to explore and develop a dialogical aesthetics. The dialogic principle changes our conception of art; it offers a way of thinking that requires the use of bidirectional or multidirectional media, and the creation of situations that can actually promote experiences that engage two or more individuals in real dialogic exchanges.

The artistic processes behind the Caravan event are not unique, nor are the skills in video-documentary making and in documentation. It is the combination of actions and their artistic explorations that make it interesting. As an artistic enterprise, the Caravan process is localized and decentralized, on the one hand, as a consequence of local language distinctiveness; and on the other, due to the need to include and drop collaborators depending on the location and form of storytelling that has been chosen. Consequently, the Catapult Arts Caravan never formalized its structure, working instead as an informal collective in places as far apart as Madhya Pradesh in Central India or Manipur in the North East of the country. Today, it goes wherever any of its earlier collaborators travel. While any new team of local artists may not have worked with the Caravan video team before, their artistic experience enables them to contribute effectively; for

working artists, designing a performance requires the same degree of engagement wherever they may be.

Bakhtin–Carnival–Caravan

In his study of Gargantua and Pantagruel (*Rabelais and His World* 1984), Mikhail Bakhtin pointed out the truly subversive nature of festivals in general and of carnival in particular, even those that political and religious authorities sponsor and organize. Even more important, his "dialogism" made the case that all interactional speech (i.e., conversation) carries complex references that give it multiple possible meanings. Roger Abrahams shows how verbal exchanges that take place in the marketplace contain "alternative and confrontative voices" empowered through bargaining and display (1989:203). For observers of cultural performance, the marketplace can be a metaphor for complex interactions not only during a performance but in every exchange in the "marketplace of ideas."

Carnival, in Bakhtin's (1984) thinking, is the model occasion for the open and intense involvement of the populace in festivity and makes an assault upon everyday notions of order and hierarchy. Besides, carnivals look to the past in drawing on devices (that is, the "tricks of the trade" that storytellers and communicators use) and also to the present and future in developing these interactions. Postmodern scholars see carnivalization as a way of foregrounding politically and socially subversive motives, whether in literature or in gatherings of people. With the distinctions between art and life and between presentation and representation broken down, carnival becomes "life itself," with all voices and all expressive forms and codes brought into conversation with one another. Even though such an ideal "carnival" has never existed, both François Rabelais (ca. 1494-1553) and Bakhtin (1895-1975) knew that they were living in unusual times, when things that were taken for granted in less troubled times lost their certainty and entered a period of contest and flux.

Drawing from the Bakhtinian analogies, it is possible to explore what happens during a Caravan performance as an extension of the idea of "carnival." In the carnival, according to Bakhtin, the social hierarchies of everyday life—their solemnity and etiquette as well as all ready-made truths—are overturned by normally suppressed voices and energies. Thus, fools become wise, kings become beggars; opposites are mingled. (For an overview of the festival literature that synthesizes and explains these themes, see Stoeltje 1992.)

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; rather, they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all of the people. The intimate connections of a Caravan evening performance with the audience and the creators are made visible by video and by folk performers (Zulfia Cresswell, personal communication, March 26, 2010). The festive temporariness of the Caravan event makes it possible for it to become a discussion space even when such a development is not palatable to all. So when a street-seller in Lamlong, Manipur, points to the apathy of buyers, regular shop-owners, and local government officials, the presence of these others at the performance makes for a compelling narrative.

The many-languagedness or heteroglossia of the Caravan event resides neither in the intention of the speaker nor in the text but at a point between speaker and writer or listener and reader. This is what makes the Caravan event a rich space for a different kind of variety entertainment, involving local subject matter and performance. For example, a video of the surrounding locality

that accompanied a reading of the *tutenlong*, the collection of Meitei folklore on water management that was codified about 400 years ago, brought home the degradation of local environment. The disconnect between the audio reading of past knowledge and the video evidence of present indifference and disarray was powerful enough for a person present at one Caravan event to invite the organizers to his village, saying, "I want to shame my village, so that they can see what they are doing to it" (anonymous speaker, heard by the author at a July 2004 event at Lamlong, Manipur, and at a November 2007 event at Pipariya, Madhya Pradesh).

In a passage from his early essay, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" (1990), Bakhtin argues that the spectator is in fuller possession of the suffering than is the sufferer himself because he is able to view the sufferer as he suffers. As Eleni Coundouriotis points out, Bakhtin argues that "the person suffering does not experience the fullness of his own outward expressedness in being; he experiences this expressedness only partially, and then in the language of his inner sensations of himself. He does not see the agonizing tension of his own muscles" (2007:536). Bakhtin's argument in this early work is about how one writes suffering, not how one reads it. The return to the self is that which enables the spectator to turn into the author.

Bhunsare Chiraiya Kaay Boli? (What Did the Morning Bird Say?)

November 2007. Pipariya town, Madhya Pradesh, North India. One of the films shown in a Caravan performance at this town centered on a tragic road accident that took place less than five kilometers from town. Besides the high death toll, what struck audience members was the fact that all of the 30 dead belonged to the same village. As the story was researched, the filmmaking team discovered that the dead were all farm laborers from Rajjhar families that belonged to the twin villages of Dangarhai-Junheta in Hoshangabad district, Madhya Pradesh. The Rajjhars are one of the poorest communities in this region. It is so poor and numerically weak, in fact, that in the five decades from 1960 to 2010 the group lost its status as a Scheduled Tribe and then further lost its status as a Scheduled Caste, losing whatever chance the members had of accessing constitutionally guaranteed services and benefits for the weak.[2]

Like all farm laborers, they sell their labor power to farmers across the region, working long hours to maximize their earnings before the season ends. In a video that was screened during Caravan events in November 2007, a survivor gave the following account of an accident that had been reported in October 2007 in the Itarsi edition of *Dainik Bhaskar* (a newspaper): The harvest for the landlord of their village had been delayed, and in typical feudal, upper-caste high-handedness, the landlords had threatened the Rajjhar with dire consequences if they attempted to leave the village without harvesting their crops. Unable to resolve this deadlock, the Rajjhar laborers began to panic, believing they would not be able to leave their homes in time to find earnings outside. So 80 of them stole away in the dead of night to a waiting truck many kilometers down the road, and at 3:00 a.m., the truck drove off a bridge near Pipariya town. A Caravan songwriting team reworked the story of this ill-fated journey into a traditional Bundeli folk song: "*Bhunsare Chiraiya Kaay Boli?*" ("What Did the Morning Bird Say?"); and the accompanying nine-minute music video was a combination of song and interviews with the survivors and other members of the community. See the film here (Catapult Arts Caravan 2007).

During the Caravan performance of late November 2007, which I participated in and filmed, it became clear that this artistic rendition was troubling to some local people who were in the audience Its provocativeness was clearly disorienting and somewhat discomforting, especially for the local elites and middle-class audiences. However, the presence of a mixed audience in a public setting, which included members of the Rajjhar community and others from the farm-workers association (*sangathan*), proved invaluable for the resulting discussions.

These events illustrate the different layers of socioeconomic and political complexities that need to be understood and show how they can come into meaningful participation in public conversations around the social and political relations of art to power, culture, and democratic citizenship.

But most importantly for the locality, the public discussion boosted local demand for the film. Many copies of it were made on CD/DVD; the YouTube version received thousands of hits and generates ongoing discussion. Such public viewing of contested artworks clearly moves practitioners beyond modes of passive spectatorship and towards more generative and thoughtful forms of cultural production and resistance.

Tradition is imagined here as a public resource that the narrator, the subject, and the audience own equally, that is capable of being reoriented and remade. Such are the creative acts that define us as in some ways separate from others around us. As Debora Kodish points out, transformative narratives happen at moments when we recognize ourselves in different ways and reimagine ourselves in the context of larger struggles (2011:50).

Uncovering Narratives of Resistance and Resilience

By the 1970s, artists began to draw attention to the insight that the world was witnessing not new things but new relationships between what was already there (Paik 1984:67). Crucial in the context of dialogic experimentation in the arts is the understanding that radical works of art cannot be limited by visuality; instead, they are lived experiences based on contextual reciprocity (that is, the context of the experience is reciprocal; it enables one to take the initiative to interfere and alter the experience).

The visual dialogues of the Caravan, for example, imply the exchange and manipulation of images in real time. In this case, we concentrate on the moment of formation and transformation of the image, just as we do in speech. Removing distinctions between participants and performers (such as effacing the distinction between the subject and the object) eliminates much of the basis for the exercise of power and inequality. Collective stories are created this way, in that individual tales that are connected to an event or artifact are narrated by different voices so that, at the end, as people look at it in different ways, their minds and souls become important.

Folklore and history are often seen as living narratives, not as still, literary monuments from the past. A unique expression of such a living narrative was brought out during my visit in summer 2009 to a rock-painting site in the Pachmarhi Plateau. Overlooking valleys and forests, the many sites must have been important to local residents in times of strife and peace in bygone days. Among the visible motifs are expressions of secular relationships: hunting, dances, musical

instruments, dresses; as well as a record of human conflict: foot soldiers with bows and arrows, and horsemen with spears or swords.

The local guide for the video team, a Korku tribal activist, interpreted the motifs that portrayed conflicts as being between local tribal warriors and troops from outside the regions, maybe British or Mughal or even earlier. Justifying his interpretation, he reminded the team that his tribe had no history of horse ownership, whereas mounted cavalry had led every invading army. He reminded us that the region was the location of India's first wildlife preserve, which the British had established in 1862 by displacing forest tribals who helped the rebels in the Revolt of 1857. Whatever the date of the rock painting, it showed that different cultures had existed side by side in this region and that their coexistence had not always been peaceful.

Such narratives of resistance, carried in local lore, were new to most members of the Caravan team. In the same way, unexpected narratives of resilience, of challenges and their resolution, emerged from other places. In the dry-land farming belt of lower Madhya Pradesh, the Caravan video team discovered that a variety of rice – s*olah number* (Number 16) – was the seed of choice for food security in the erratic monsoon rains. The name made clear that the seed was not a traditional variety but had been obtained in some distant past from seed agencies that currently had no record of this variety.

Researchers were later able to identify the paddy seed (known as "Release No. 16") as a pre-Green Revolution variety, one grown and harvested by farmers "under the radar" for over half of a century and still maintaining its vigor. According to R. D. Rozario, of Bhopal, it was local to the dryland regions of Vidharbha and northern Andhra Pradesh (personal communication, 2005). It was first released in the 1920s and was officially available until 1970-1971. Its distribution, discontinued when the hybrid varieties of the Green Revolution appeared, dated to the days when locally successful varieties were collected and distributed in similar agro-ecological zones albeit with an official "name." Such community adaptation for food security in times of unexpected environmental and climate change draws attention to the need to integrate traditional, community-based knowledge into wider agricultural policy.

Promoting artistic expression is only part of the Caravan's story. The other part is to provoke discussion, to create a shared space for expressing what members of the surrounding communities think is important, and to show publicly that such negotiation of ideas and opinions can be both friendly and critical. With today's ubiquitous media technologies, the situated landscapes of the Caravan performances use the media image as the threshold—an interface to another world and another place—where equal negotiation is possible. As a tool for facilitation, the Caravan enables local villagers to see themselves on the screen during the performance; the recordings help to guide and frame discussion, ask questions, and make projections of the future. Control of the documentary process is with the people who participate, in the same way that the audience response to a folk performance tunes the singer's performance.

During the Caravan video-plus-folk-arts performance process, media technology provides an interface for social interaction and enables communities through their participation to create documentaries about themselves. Using the metaphor of broadcasting, this media interface offers an invitation to engage, interact, exchange, and have a dialogue within the interactive system. The digital media act as a mirror that provides a reflection of a community of participants. The

media image in this context acts as a liminal technology, a ritual interface, that enables participation and personal transformation and that empowers dialogue.

Conclusion

Within the landscape of globalization, the understanding of the identity of place is found in the context of its relations with the surrounding world. If we turn to the concept of place as a meeting place, its identity is no longer simply a bounded territory with essential characteristics. Rather, it is the product of its relations: global, local, historical, and social.

The Catapult Arts Caravan performances create a space for shared storytelling, viewing, and responding, of mythmaking that helps residents make sense of the local space. When video becomes a "mirror" for a community to see itself, public "variety" entertainment of the Caravan sort draws on community contributions of content to make the creators also the subject. Building on the public eagerness to see and be seen, the Caravan event uses the arts as a pedagogical strategy to challenge the empty formalism of public concern.

In retrospect, the *Karvaan*, as it is commonly known, uses art as a pedagogical strategy to move audiences into spaces of awareness and resistance. Hoping to challenge the empty formalism of public concern, many organizers believe that the shocks of awareness of Caravan performances leave audiences less immersed in the everyday and moved to wonder aloud and to question (for example, Momocha, a percussionist from Imphal, personal communication in 2004; and Monu, a videographer from Hoshangabad, personal communication in 2009). Making them somehow ill at ease, jolted beyond acquiescence, such collectives, however transient as an audience, may now and then move into spaces where we can envision other ways of being and ponder what it might signify to realize them.

It is clear that the folk narrative situated in its own language and context enhances the self-respect of the unjustly marginalized. Surviving despite generations of adverse conditions and tides of history, their diverse languages and narratives help to make sense of how such people survive, how they cope with the injustices done to them, and how knowledge is created, stored, and transmitted among them.

For the organizers of the Catapult Arts Caravan, moving into such spaces requires a willingness to resist the forces and techniques that press people into passivity and acquiescence time and again.

Notes

1. Catapult Arts Caravan is an informal, voluntary, unregistered collective that has been engaged in rural arts practice since 2004. The composition of the group has varied in different parts of the country, especially when its activities moved from North East to Central India. It has comprised at different times up to 25 individuals, drawn from performing and theater arts and ranging from singers and musicians to filmmakers and event organizers. Its performances usually are invited by a local organization that is looking for creative or innovative ways to use local arts and artists to engage publics and provoke discussions of local concern. The brief for the group is to create in a month or two a set of public events across a district that will engage audiences with specific

local issues. Conceived by Surajit Sarkar, a video designer for dance and theatre productions, and Anna Pinto, a social activist, the earliest Caravan performances were in Manipur, followed by ones in Upper Assam (North East India) and Madhya Pradesh (Central India).

2. The Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) are two groups of historically disadvantaged people that are recognized in the Constitution of India. They make up about 25 percent of the population. The Constitution lays down principles of affirmative action for SCs and STs.

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