

CHOTRO III, 11th to 16th September, 2010

Local Knowledge – Global Translations

Conference Report

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It was a homecoming, a return of sorts to the land of my fathers – India - and I was on the brink of something quite extraordinary. CHOTRO III, organized by the Bhasha Research and Publication Centre for Tribal Studies, the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies and the Developing Countries Research Centre of Delhi University, was held in Delhi and in Shimla from Sept. 11th to 16th this year. This proved to be a translocative experience in more ways than one. This conference gave me the impetus to visit the country that I had heard about from my parents while growing up in Singapore, that I had studied in the context of my own research on South Asian diasporic communities round the world. The myth of return for this Singaporean-Indian-German diasporic woman finally became reality - for a short time at least.

And what a return it was. CHOTRO III began on Saturday, Sept. 11 – one notes the date and ruminates on how this politically affirmative academic conference was set to begin on the 9th anniversary of one of the most tragic events in human history. I saw hope, friendly curiosity and conviviality when we first met each other on that Sept. 11th morning in the Conference Hall, at the North Campus of Delhi University. After coffee and registration, we repaired to the auditorium for the inaugural session, where Dr. Neera Chandhoke, the Director for the DCRC began with introductions of the conference organizers Prof. Ganesh Devy and Prof. Geoff Davis,

and the keynote speaker Prof. Linda Smith. The Vice-Chancellor of the National University of Education, Prof. R. Govinda and the Trustee of the Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, Dr. K.K. Chakravarty were also among the special guests, all of whom were ceremoniously escorted to the dais. After this charming gesture of welcome, we conference attendees, numbering about 95, were requested to personally introduce ourselves. There was a general air of cheeriness as well as a sense of being privileged to be part of something quite as unique as CHOTRO, which Prof. Devy describes as “‘a place where villagers gather’, ‘a public platform’, ‘a centre for dispute resolution’ and ‘a place for announcing news’” (Devy, 2009: xii).

Prof. Linda Smith, the pro vice-chancellor and dean of The School of Maori and Pacific Development, gave the keynote address which set the tone of the conference over the next few days. She spoke of the necessity for indigenous peoples to confront the pain and negativity of past subjugations, with a view to building up new imaginations that are enabling for the self, in order to transcend the messes caused by colonization and thus move forward. This entailed building active bridges to the mainstream, staking indigenous claims in nation building processes and sovereignty. With a view to the kind of social transformation envisioned by numerous indigenous and non-indigenous scholars engaged in indigenous studies, it was of import to recover epistemologies threatened by extinction through research and practice, where indigenous imaginations, imaginaries and languages are recognized as keeping people alive. Prof. Smith exhorted us as teachers to reflect on decontextualised approaches to education: does a homogenization of knowledge help at all? And if so, who does this benefit? Who decides to teach what, to whom and why? A further salient point was: in the light of what Foucault designated as a “uniformatization process” in the wake of

globalization, do we accept cultural diversity as natural or do we just tolerate it? How are economic survival, dignity and agency of indigenous peoples being negotiated with a view to social change, where balance between material, spiritual and environmental well-being is the goal? Can we envision and implement multi-lateral approaches for change agendas?

And indeed for six days, we gathered at this platform, spoke, listened, discussed and questioned the various issues pertaining to voices which had thus far been marginalized and often been silenced. Respect and critical reflection were evident in the papers presented about indigenous literatures, worldviews, arts and other cultural productions from the world over; the academics evinced a strong sense of their own positions as relatively privileged and articulate subjects and exhibited sensitivity towards the material they did their research in. There was a genuine curiosity and concern in the dialogues that ensued after the diverse panels, where perceptive and capable chairs drew connections between the presentations and instigated animated discussion among the panelists and the audience.

The presentations themselves were rich and varied, expounding on diverse indigenous concerns; here are a few examples:

- challenging academic and media stereotypes about Somalian clans (Geetha Ganga, Kerala),
- gendered readings of Botswanan crime fiction by Botswana's first female judge, Unity Dow, dealing with ritual murder (Geoffrey Davis, Germany),
- Performance and linguistic and cultural translation in contemporary Australian Aboriginal theatre (Helen Gilbert, UK),

- theatrical reimaginings of the historical symbolism of the Oba (king) of Benin in contemporary glocalised contexts (Israel Wepke, Benin),
- Lepcha cosmology in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, giving rise to reflections on the current situation of the Lepcha community (Jill Didur, Montreal),
- The relativity of cultural contexts in human rights concepts in the North-East Indian Vaiphei community (Lian VaihPei, Delhi)
- The implementation of mobile telephones in the changing healthcare communication systems of Ghana (Perpetua Crentsil, Finland)
- The treatment of illegal immigrants to Australia from Asia and the Middle East ("boat-people") by Aboriginal peoples, who reject mainstream "contamination" discourses (Emma Cox, UK)
- Interrogating political insights and social value systems in Khoekhoe (Northern Cape, South Africa) and Khasi (Meghalaya, Northeast India) short stories (Annie Gagiano, South Africa)
- The deconstruction of the western gaze in Zakes Mda's *Madonna of Excelsior* through Mda's own use of Claerhout's paintings, where art is read as a corrective to modernized consumeristic society (Gail Fincham, South Africa),
- Examining the uneasy co-existence of modernity and tradition in the North-East Indian border states, where the traditional perception of home as a secure space is defamiliarised, since the people of these states are considered "local foreigners" in mainstream India (Esther Narjinari, Delhi)

- Looking at the South African mythological (usually seductive female) figure of the Mamlambo as a manifestation of “the dark magicalities of modernity” while interrogating the enchantment of commodification and money in indigenous contexts (Felicity Wood, South Africa)
- Gendered articulations of African-American and Native American mixed race identities and histories in factual and fictional narratives (Christine Vogt-William, Germany),
- The performance of anxious masculinity through fertility metaphors at Babukusu funeral ritual performers in Western Kenya (Chris Wasike, South Africa)
- Reading Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* as a site of translation between diasporic modernity and subcontinental indigeneity (Sonia Singh Kushwah, Gwalior)
- Locating transcultural subtexts in Maori landscape paintings relating them to classical European landscape painting while interrogating cross-cultural translations of religious and secular symbols (Dieter Riemenschneider, Germany)

Thus CHOTRO III fulfilled its purpose for a third time, in addressing the heretofore little known stories, “narratives drawn from cultural memory and allegories based on contemporary social reality and conflict” (Devy, 2009: xii). The main aim of the conference was to address local knowledges and global translations – the gamut of presentations here brought into focus narratives which manifested a complex choreography and dialogue between various indigenous cultural perspectives. In my previously un-CHOTROfied eyes, this “public village forum” format brought together indigenous scholars of tribal arts and cultures from all over the world in order to engage in transnational and transcultural encounters. Thus for a time, cultural and status boundaries were rendered porous, permable, where

academic abstract erudition met with grassroots politics and lived realities. It was in these encounters that the extraordinariness of CHOTRO lay.

After the city tours in Delhi, where we were treated to the architectural magnificence of the Qutb Minar and Humayun's tomb (son of Babur and second Mughal Emperor of India), a remarkable facet of this conference was our sojourn to Chail, near Shimla, which served formerly as a hill-station for members of the British colonial administration during the hot summer months of the year. After a grueling overnight bus trip from Delhi to Chail, we reached our destination. We arrived at the Toshali resort hotel on the morning of Monday Sept. 13th, scrambled off the bus, delighting in the cool air and the amazing panoramic views, and relief that the tortuous bus journey on difficult roads was finally over. After a period of rest and refreshment, the second part of CHOTRO began, with an introduction to Himalayan cultures, where the Himalayas was described as a transcultural contact zone. The geographical entity was brought into dialogue with the region's religious, environmental and socio-political contexts – a space where local knowledges were transformed, where texts were translated into contexts. An important aspect here was the connection between ecology, languages and indigenous life perspectives – ruminations on the Himalayan microcosm offered food for thought on a more global scale.

Yet another notable feature of this conference was Prof. Ganesh Devy's invitation to all the conference attendees to brainstorming sessions on the future of CHOTRO, with an especial view to organize further CHOTROS in countries other than India. Thus the transnational, transcultural and translocative rationals underlying the principle of CHOTRO were to be put into practice. There were two such gatherings, the first of which was very informal, with participants from the two earlier CHOTROS describing their

experiences. There was a general consensus that the participants were moved to reflect on why we as scholars do what we do, to attempt to forge transparency between our inner motivations and greater public political narratives. Many agreed that the “homey”, “retreat-like and meditative” atmosphere – attributed in part to the hill setting in Chail – allowed for not just cerebral activity, but for a greater consciousness of, and openness to our personal responsibility as academics and disseminators of knowledge. Prof. Devy’s agenda here, besides allowing for reminiscing and reinforcing old bonds, was to instigate reflection on concrete and feasible initiatives of networking, which could then be consolidated at the second meeting.

The second more formal affair was chaired by Prof. Britta Olinder, accompanied by Profs. Devy and Davis. The latter’s succinct formulation of this meeting’s agenda was “What form would a future CHOTRO take and in what mode of transformation?” Here the aim was to collect pragmatic suggestions for the continuation of CHOTRO and networking among its members, as well as potential transnational cooperations with other institutions to shape forums for indigenous art forms and cultural and political articulations. Thus the question of indigeneity, with eloquent input from two academics – Shri Vikram Chaudhari and Shri Dhirubai Patel - whose expertise was in tribal literature from Gujerat and who were themselves of tribal background, was brought to the fore. Here while deploring the exploitation of the dispossessed, ideas were sought, with regard to better acquaintance with those who lived on the land before civilization and modernity as we know it today, took over, and to ascertain if they still existed and whether their lifeworlds were still part of ours. Despite the heavy going during this round – and believe me, dear reader, we waded through some viscous metaphoric swamp land, despite our attempts to “dare to dream” and let the “imagination run wild” as Prof. Devy would have us do! –

we cudgelled our brains trying to find interfaces between our academic preoccupations and the political agendas addressed. Some of the “old hands” rendered our rather amorphous ruminations more concrete, by pointing out that universities can serve as sites of linkage with CHOTRO in matters of reflection, sustenance and support.

Michael Wessels (South Africa) pointed out the complicity of universities as centres of environmental abuse in the consumption of paper and energy, as well as in the formation of class systems. Monika Reif-Huelser (Germany) called for both physical and cerebral engagement with the cultures studied on abstract levels, especially with a view to encouraging students to explore these cultural contexts through travel, work/study programs and other opportunities for active encounter. Graham Smith (New Zealand) called for an interrogation of the imagination constructed by one’s own socio- cultural frameworks, which engages with structural impediments that constrain activism. Is there a transformative praxis underlying our academic work, a potential for the enactment of moving forward from pathological descriptions of affected indigeneities to a logic of hope? Karlheinz Huelser (Germany) advocated new systems and guidelines for thinking practices which entailed transgressing boundaries to find commonalities, while explicating the value of local knowledges on global levels. In congruence with this, Mumia Osaaji (Kenya) posited that cultural expatriates should articulate their solidarity with disenfranchised communities, to ensure that their disempowered voices be heard; at the same time policy makers were to be engaged at operational levels.

The conference ended with a moving joint presentation by Australian Aboriginal artists Paola Balla (Wemba Wemba and Gunditjmara, Italian, Chinese) and Bindi Cole (Aboriginal, English

and Jewish), who interrogated meanings in contemporary Aboriginal identity, with a strong gender focus. Balla's art is her statement and reflection on the self and identity, how projected Otherness and exoticism work to shape her movement through and response to a world rife with racism, violence and oppression. Her art seeks to create new spaces and contexts where story, history, politics, cultural memory and maintenance are shaped in startlingly new permutations. Cole presented her recent documentary *Sistahgirls*, a series of stylized portraits of members of an Aboriginal transgender women's community on Tiwi Island. Here Cole asks uncomfortable questions about how self-perception is shaped by communities and how we negotiate prevailing cultural efforts at categorization and definition.

On this note, I left Chail and CHOTRO the next day with my husband for the rest of our own trip around north India. On our travels, the viewpoints and lessons of this remarkable group of people gave us much to reflect on in our own position as transcultural travelers, home-based in Germany. CHOTRO had made us stop, think and listen – a much-needed exercise in stillness in a world constantly on the move.