Ritual, Art and Language: Making Indigenous Polities in India

Wherever multiple communities live side by side in the modern world, popular notions concerning the character of one or another of the constituent populations are frequently tied to the idea that those populations originated somewhere else—a specific geographic locale, or a cultural or religious mileu associated conceptually with the "outside." The populations themselves, in ongoing interactions with their neighbors, co-construct these notions. A great deal of productive research has traced how "diasporic" and other immigrant communities, for example, create new cultural environments, often through the transformation and reinvigoration of ritual, music, visual arts, and language.

Although seldom recognized as such, indigenous communities around the world are a special case of this same process of socio-geographic distancing. Paradoxically though, indigenous people are considered "other" mainly because they are geographically local: they are presumed to be the oldest inhabitants of particular places in the nation state. Their otherness is not simply a function of their real place of origin, however—even though it may be disguised as such—but of the cultural practices that serve as a sign of their rootedness in place. In India, the geographic focus of our proposed workship, "tribals" are frequently called "sons of the soil" because of this rootedness—often seen as located in a knowledge of hunting and medicinal plants and a capability of controlling supernatural forces tied to the landscape.

Indigeneity, from the perspective of the workshop's participants, is not essential but emergent; it involves particular kinds of interaction in the context of the modern Indian nation state. Those who take on the appellation of "tribes" (adivasis) themselves interact with one another in a variety of forums in urban and country settings, often creating new forms of celebration and ritual while exploring new venues for the practices of music, dance, and other forms of technology they consider traditional. Members of these communities are socialized with a variety of peoples who, together with them, participate in the ongoing forms of discourse that perpetuate the idea that tribal peoples are essentially different from non-tribals.

India is a particularly fertile ground for studying the process of what we call "making indigenous polities" because characteristics of particular classes of persons singled out in some of the very early Sanskrit and Tamil sources (for example, dark-skinned, forest people, and colorfully clad hill people) continue to be deployed today—in several different ways. In modern times, the colonial process of classifying populations made the term "Scheduled Tribe" part of the current Indian administrative apparatus, giving the powerful impression that the administrative term applies to an ancient social reality.

Some 80 million Indian citizens bear the government designation "Scheduled Tribe." Although there is a long history of studies of particular tribal peoples, including missionary and travelers' descriptions, census reports, linguistic surveys, and professional anthropological books and articles, only recently has the issue of indigeneity itself been taken up as a topic of scholarly investigation in India. The most notable contribution in this regard is the excellent collected volume of essays, *Indigeneity in India*, edited by Bengt G. Karlsson and T. B. Subba (London: Kegan and Paul, 2006). Our approach enriches the perspectives offered in the volume by Karlsson and Subba by considering modes of action and expression: rituals, music, dance, language use, and so forth.

The point of departure for this workshop is the idea that those who retain, or put forward, claims to indigenous status do so, in part, through the creation, manipulation, and interpretation of their rituals, forms of art, and uses of language. Although some of the individual studies of tribal peoples in each of these cultural domains lends strong support to this point, this workshop is a forum to bring together researchers from different disciplines (anthropology, ethnomusicology, and linguistics) to work on this common theme. The participants have a special coherence because the regions of the Nilgiris and middle India present interesting parallels at a number of cultural and social levels (similar institutions, musical instruments) while differing in others (especially in their forms of political mobilization).

The study of indigenous polities in India today is particularly significant in light of growing political-religious movements that emphasize "Hinduism" as the quintessential marker of true belonging to the Indian nation—a state in which Muslims, Christians, and others are simultaneously embraced and held at a distance. Tribals have historically be given the choice, in the census, of indicating their religion, but the unmarked category, the religious practices of the tribe as locally defined, has always been assumed to be "Hindu." As the politics of belonging continue to play out at the national level, what the so-called indigenous people do with their own cultural resources merits special and renewed attention.

Program

Over the course of about three days in January, 2011, sixteen scholars will meet at the Institute for Ethnology, at the University of Munich, each with a twenty-five page paper that has been circulated in advance. Each participant will first briefly present the issues and problems he or she wishes to emphasize. For the remainder of

the one-hour time slot, participants will offer constructive feedback and comparative insights. At the end of the workshop, the participants will collectively discuss the shape of the edited volume. The contributions to this workshop and conference must be original, and not committed for publication elsewhere. Frank Heidemann and Richard Wolf will edit the volume and search for academic publishers with international circulation.

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