

**Visual Anthropology and Collaborative Ethnography:
Ways of safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage**

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The report reflects upon a collaborative project undertaken with a young and educated member of the rural community in an attempt to redefine ways of safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). The project was initially to audio-visually document the Bhojpuri folk songs that were to be sung by women during the initiation ceremony of Rahul Tiwari which took place in April 2014 at Bhadwar village in Bihar (India) and to make a film which can create the sonic landscape of the event. Strong friendships developed during the fieldwork which led me to think of ways we can together create a kind of shared knowledge and not just limit this project by creating an end product - the film. Rahul Tiwari is an undergraduate student (in his last semester) at the Department of Fine Arts in Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi (India). I approached him recently, after editing the field recordings, and discussed the idea to publish the folk songs with his illustrations depicting the ritual and/or his state of mind during the ritual. He watched the film with deep interest and I found him to be in a trance while watching his initiation ritual from our perspective. We decided that there will be some learning involved in publishing and distributing these initial copies, which will make more space for improvements. In this way, we hoped for our research to take the form of a collaborative ethnography.

I would like to discuss this process in detail in this report as well as to put forth a question: Can visual anthropology and collaborative ethnography prove to be an indispensable asset for ICH safeguarding?

Visual Anthropology and/as Intangible Cultural Heritage

UNESCO Intangible Heritage¹ means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural Heritage. This Intangible Heritage is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

In India, the idea of video documentation of the ICH is not so old. In fact, on the website of the Indian Ministry of Culture and other related organisations, one may see that there are archives of such records, but it is clear from these visual material that it has been done in a disrespectful way and secondly, in a manner which fails to bring the context of the cultural practice. In this respect,

¹ From the UNESCO ICH website. <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/>

the safeguarding of the ICH must not be limited to documentation and archival but the way it is being documented, how it is being documented, what are the issues that come up during the documentation, relationship between the community and the filmmaker, for whom is the documentation being done, and what are the objectives of this documentation, are some of the questions that must be given importance when such a task is being taken up. Živković (2011) explains that intangible heritage is on the one hand endangered by globalisation and homogenisation processes and, on the other, by safeguarding measures that can petrify it. The only inherent element of ICH is its changing nature. Intangible cultural heritage should be subject to interpretations and changes by its users and those who carry it from generation to generation and, thus, should be protected with regard to its changing nature and not merely preserved. In other words, “protection should ensure the life of the process not of the product”. Therefore, the two main issues which are at stake here are: methodology (visual ethnography) and safeguarding (collaborative ethnography).

Foremost, the foundation of such documentation, I argue, must be based in the methodology of visual ethnography: observation, participation and self-reflection. It's time that the Indian government and all other agencies working in this area realise that such work cannot be done by imposition: a man goes with a camera to a village and demands people to perform, he records and adds it to the national archive. Putting myself in the life of the community with no knowledge about the cultural practice not only allows for the community to treat me as a student interested in their culture but also makes sure that the documentation is done in a ‘natural’ context.

Visual ethnography opens a new way to study anthropology. Not only for it's visual content but also the way it is being received. The availability of new media technologies has further transcended anthropology. As I see it, it has given birth to two major studies, a) The New Anthropology of the Media, and b) Visual, as a medium of Ethnography. They are allowing us to construct knowledge not by ‘description’ but by a form of acquaintance. This acquaintance is enlightening for it's spectators in two ways. First, it allows for a way to break cultural boundaries and to see it all within their own cultural context. Their own cultural context, here, implies the presence of not only the anthropologist but also the media technology that is making this process possible. This media technology has been devised in the West and has for long been used by the State or the dominant culture to assert it's own hegemony. On the other hand, the skills and the ‘eye’ of an anthropologist share the same colonial roots. At the same time, the anthropologist shares his own experience of facing that situation, through the film. Therefore, the spectator truly experiences what it means to participate. The true meaning of participation is only revealed when participation leads to self-reflection. Secondly, they allow us to direct our attention towards a range

of domains, such as art history, that have long remained outside the 'eye' of an anthropologist but not of the 'camera'. Hence, visual anthropology may not only offer different ways of understanding, but also different things to understand.

This acquaintance is happening because the anthropologist intends to know the 'other' by participating within the cultural context of the 'other'. Jean Rouch in an interview to young French filmmakers, who asked him about the future of Visual Anthropology, says "but first it's within you". In his article, *Camera and Man* [1975], he revolutionizes anthropology by introducing us to a third parallel in addition to observation and participation, which is 'self reflection'. When looking into the viewfinder, he says, it is not only the other that you see but also yourself. Through my own experience of documenting the initiation ritual in Bhadwar village, I can say that, at such a moment, the camera itself becomes a participant in a way that it moves in the same rhythm, as it's subjects. Perhaps, Maurice Bloch's belief that anthropologists who dedicate much time to film have lost confidence in their own ideas (Houtman 1988:20) is correct. The camera takes over, in the sense that it produces a 'shared' anthropology (Rouch 1975). The other becomes a mirror to the self. It is for this reason that Jean Rouch, in the same interview, mentions that he is making these films primarily for himself. The idea is that the intention of any documentation of ICH must only be for the purpose of 'self-reflection' and not for the sole purpose of creating inactive archives.

While filming the initiation ritual, I could not understand what the songs meant, but experienced it with a sense of wonder. The repetitive sound structure of the folk songs began to enter not only our ears but our bodies as a whole. As the ritual began, the music kept changing its frequency ensuring a smooth rite of passage, which neither allows the text in the *mantras* to be taken too seriously nor permits itself to be seen higher and more important. These are creative expressions of the emotions being felt around that time by each member of the community, even the ancestors. Without them, the ritual would be dry and textual. From the viewfinder of my camera, hearing myself breathe, I was watching not only how the ritual unfolded (a young college going boy being clean shaven and made to beg) but also my own body, as it experienced a sensory overload and at the same time aware of being present within the perimeter of the stage set for the ritual, filming. The initiation rites lasted for about four hours and the women hardly stopped singing during that time. Rahul, by the end of the ritual, had transformed into a new being, he wore wooden slippers, wore a yellow cloth wrapped around his body, carried a slate in his arm and a plate in the other hand, walked to each member of the community and asked for money.

As everyone gives money, we are told "the boy will now study with an intention to serve the society and not only his individual family". Not only did Rahul, but even I felt like a 'twice born' after the ritual finished.



After 2 years, the film was released in June 2016 and was screened at UChicago Centre in Delhi. We invited Rahul Tiwari to join the screening and answer questions of the audience, if any. The intention was to make Rahul see what we are doing with the recordings that their community allowed us to make and how the film is being presented. Most importantly, to provide an experience to Rahul himself, after having gone through the initiation ritual, to stand on the stage and present his initiation ritual. One member of the audience wrote to me her experience of attending the film screening:

Having found a seat right next to him (Rahul Tiwari), I cannot miss this opportunity to recount my spurtive thoughts during the film-screening as I watched him in-between, perched on his seat, with eyes fixated upon twin screens (UChicago Hall), flashing scenes from his lived-experience in the dark, sharing a space with so many others watching keenly a ceremony which was only visceral to him a while back. Being outside the body and witnessing the performance from a distance, I kept wondering how did he feel watching himself on life-size screen, visually undergoing the same ceremony again... His friend Vivek, sitting at a distance, passed on teasing glances suggesting how funny he appeared given that he was to attend his sister's wedding the very next day, "imagine with shaved-head", he recollected later still chuckling. This friend not just had real time concerns but unknowingly questioned the relevance of this

Samsara (ritual). Janeu or donning the sacred thread (initiation) - a marker of rebirth, claims to bring intellectual birth nearer. As one embarks upon a journey of spiritual awakening, it is not his outward but his inward that gets recreated. Rahul, the protagonist's hair had regrown and he looked just as he did, before shearing. If what changes is inside him and what's inside him is invisible to Vivek, to me, to the audience, to the film-makers, then the pertinent question is what knowledge does the society hold within, that it deems as important and turns it ceremonial with songs (calling for attention) and other ritualistic behaviours.



Being aware that visual anthropology, at times, is equated more with “old-school” ethnography – with its perceived goal to document disappearing rituals, traits, etc. in a world that is drastically changing – than with scientific research. However, as Sorenson reminds us, “the change is inevitable”; he criticizes mimicking customs as a teaching tool to re-establish our heritage: “At its worst it encourages people to remain in the backwash of history; at its best it gives moments of nostalgia to the old folks” (1995: 495–496). It will not be true if I said that I completely disagree with these statements (“artificial revival of intangible customs”) and therefore practices such as redefining the ways of safeguarding should be encouraged. For example, by bringing Rahul Tiwari to the film screening in New Delhi, we were able to engage the rural youth in seeing his community’s cultural practices in an analytical environment. Rahul later wrote to me that he is very

interested to screen the film in the village, for he wants all the people there to watch the film. He believes that younger generation in his village are disinterested in these practices because they don't know how to ask the right questions. The film can bridge that gap. Although, I can only comment more on these hypotheses once we have an experience of screening films in a rural setting but one of the member of the audience who is also familiar with the initiation ritual said "I failed to understand the significance of *Janeu (initiation ritual)* by merely 'seeing it' when she was growing up".

Although visual anthropology is a young anthropological sub-discipline, it investigated ICH long before the term was coined. Thus, possible applications of visual anthropology and visual technologies in the field of ICH can be equated with the potential of visual anthropology in general, and these recommendations should be read in this light.

Collaborative Ethnography and/as Intangible Cultural Heritage

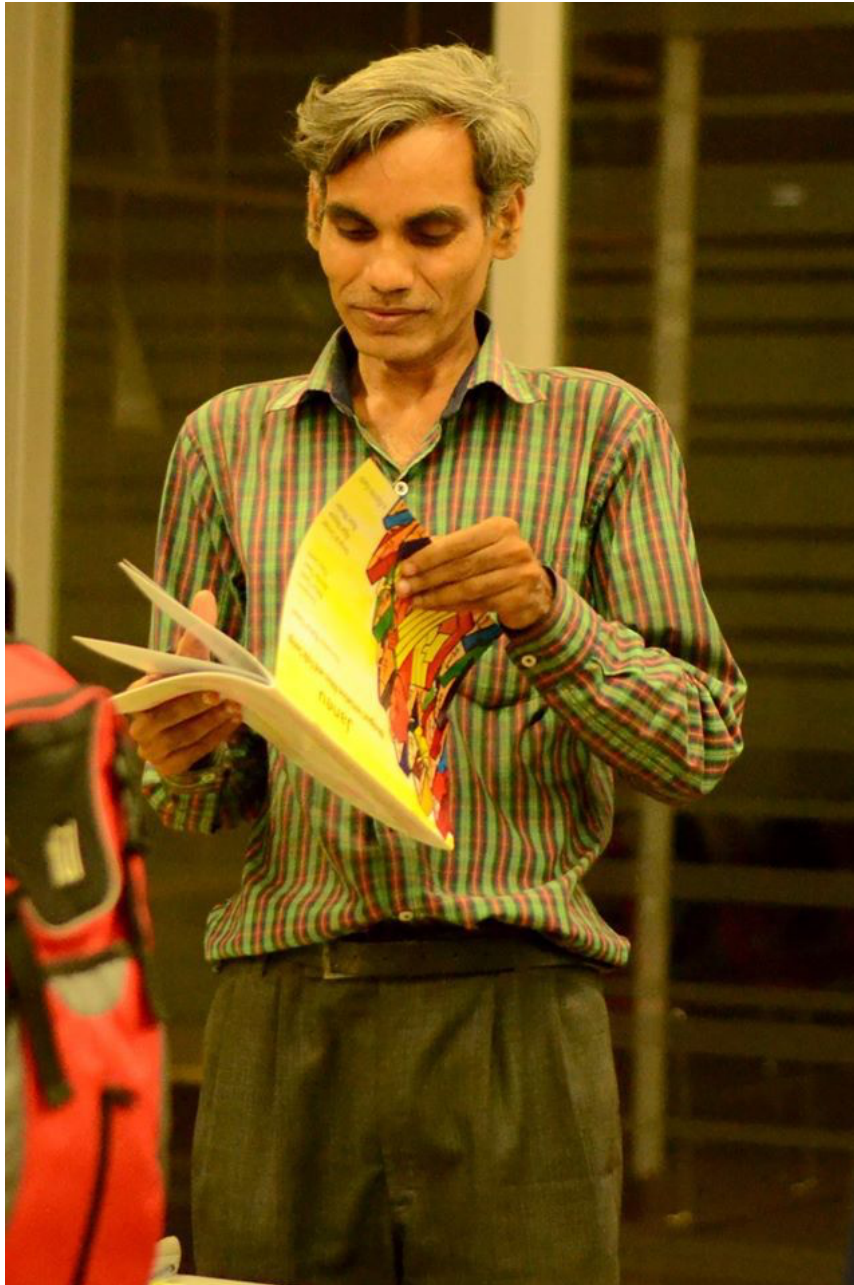
In the 1930s, one of Boas's students, Paul Radin, severely criticised his colleagues for their increasingly common practice of averaging out their informants' experience. "[Ethnography] can be accomplished only if we realise," Radin wrote in his *Method and Theory of Ethnology*, "once and for all, that we are dealing with specific, not generalised, men and women." A question thus began to echo throughout the discipline: "Ethnography for whom?" This question grew louder and more immediate as the so-called "natives" began responding to the texts that had been written about them, offering their own interpretations of outsiders' "expert" ethnographies, responding forcefully to representations they perceived, in some extreme cases, to be unfair, malicious, or just plain wrong (Lassiter 2004, 4).

Dr. Karin Polit, Assistant Professor at Department of Anthropology, University of Heidelberg in, 'The Performance of *Chakravyuh*: Aestheticizing Ancient Local Traditions in The Garhwal Himalayas', says that, "it is impossible to transmit cultural knowledge about ritual traditions simply by writing them down, by taking pictures or even by video or audio taping them. It is, therefore, important that the young and educated people of *Uttarakhand* should know about the embodied heritage of their home. The only way to transmit this knowledge is to engage people physically and mentally in the performance traditions". In order to expand the definition of safeguarding the ICH, a debate about its sustainability must be initiated. Therefore, it is important to engage with the rural youth when such projects are undertaken.

When I reached Bhadwar village, and entered the house where ceremony was to take place, I was welcomed by Rahul Tiwari himself, who was then painting a Banana tree on the entrance wall of his house. We exchanged greetings and he told me that he is a student of fine arts with an interest in creating illustrations. Once he watched the film and gave us his approval to release it, I asked him if he would be interested in illustrating chronologically his experiences and situations during the ritual. These illustrations, I suggested, could be published with our translations of folk songs that were sung during the ritual. The idea behind this post-fieldwork project was a feeling of incompleteness that had its root in ethical issues of representation. I wanted for Rahul Tiwari to be equally involved in creating knowledge about his community's cultural practice. The booklet was also released on the day of the film screening at UChicago Centre in Delhi. A member of the audience made an interesting comment about the booklet:

The release of a booklet carrying illustrations alongside the English translations of the folk song was new experiment with transmedia. More than reproducing the songs on different platform and format, it was a valuable step towards sustenance of these songs alongside 'thoughts' underscoring it, which are today sliding towards oblivion.

After the whole experience of attending the film screening and to publish (and sell) his first booklet brought immense joy to Rahul Tiwari. He communicated his interest to join me in our future research projects and would like to illustrate the 'acquaintance' of the anthropologist with the community. We are now planning to work together on creating 'ethnoGraphic' novels. When he revealed to me that publishing the booklet together was a big step in his career and he is now interested to work on theme projects (folklore and conceptual art) and might even look at higher studies in this field. That statement, for me, made all the challenges inherent in collaborative ethnography worthwhile. Moreover, together we are also discussing an idea to create an exhibition in an art gallery where we plan to create an atmosphere of the initiation ritual, using illustrations, sounds, videos and ritual materials. A non-governmental organisation, INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) had recently asked for a copy of the booklet and expressed an interest to publish the booklet and making it available to a larger audience. This is under negotiation.



At the heart of this fieldwork practice—which may be undertaken at home or abroad and may last many years—is collaboration, the practice of working closely with others because the issues of ethics and representation are becoming more and more central to the work of all ethnographers. It is no doubt, however, that collaborative ethnography is only possible in some ethnographic research projects (such as ICH safeguarding) and not always possible.

Conclusion

In this report, I have reflected on the UNESCO convention to safeguard the Intangible Cultural Heritage and made a case for visual ethnography to be the ideal research methodology which should be practiced for documentation of ICH. For, visual ethnography does not only end after the documentation of the cultural practice but also extends itself to the study of its reception. Further, safeguarding of ICH must also include ideas for its sustainability which can only be possible by engaging the rural youth. In this regard, the methodology of collaborative ethnography could prove to be beneficial.

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