

### **[3] Life Is Short, the Art Long: Reflections on Fieldwork and Interpretation**

**Joanna Kirkpatrick**

This article (revised and edited February, 2012. Re-edited 7/5/16) was first published in Kirkpatrick, 2003.

#### **Genesis of This Study**

While my previous field study had been in India in 1965-66, I first worked in Bangladesh ten years later, as a visiting scholar in the Institute of Bangladesh Studies at Rajshahi University. The Institute was funded by the Ford Foundation. Its aim was to enhance the training of young, future government employees in the history and culture of their own country. The innovative program of the Institute of Bangladesh Studies was to foster, by means of an integrated program, a deeper understanding of Bengali culture and history in the new nation of Bangladesh (founded 1971). The curriculum focused not only on its history, but also sociology, anthropology, economics, geography, and Bengali language and literature. The Institute awarded an MPhil degree.

My position entailed teaching a relevant anthropology course half-time, helping and advising students, and doing my own research—a study on the self-concepts and sense of place in society and history of educated working women (Kirkpatrick, 1979). During this time I noticed the hand-painted pictures on the cycle rickshas. Short visits to Dhaka revealed more ricksha art in the streets. Fascinated, I resolved to direct my attention to the study of this popular art, its makers and users. No one else, it appeared, had evinced any interest in this striking visual manifestation of popular spirit.

I returned to Bangladesh five times after my first visit, in order to observe, photograph, conduct interviews, and most recently, again in 1998 to shoot video for my multimedia CD-ROM. While in Bangladesh on a Senior Fulbright Research Grant in 1986-87, I purchased a collection of ricksha art panels and hoods. These are now in the collections of the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Over the years, friends and colleagues have graciously supplemented my photo collection with additional contributions.

#### **Doing the Work: Research and "The Other"**

There was a time in the early and mid-twentieth century, when anthropologists took to fields abroad in large numbers, when their work was usually undertaken at the behest of or under the direct or indirect support of home governments. In that regard their work sometimes leaned toward bias in favor of maintaining the imperial and administrative domination of the colonized. Such is not necessarily the case today. By the time I began my dissertation field research in 1965, however, many of the colonies of the then-called *third world* had achieved independence from former imperial rulers. Anthropological complicity as an "imperialist enterprise" was less evident, although it hung on in the fostering of area studies by the U.S. government in the fifties and early sixties, as Cold War strategy.

My work in India was, however, not government-financed. I chose south Asia as my research area primarily because of an early, personal interest in India which began in adolescence, and second, because my late ex-husband and father of my only child was from India. My long term interest in, curiosity, and desire for experience of India is in the spirit of the same interest, curiosity, and desire for experience of the USA of thousands of Indian immigrants living here today.

Post-colonial critiques tend to assert that the social science observer—even the act of observation—deprives subjects of agency. I disagree. Considering just the ethnographic work pursued in India, I would say from my own observations, supported by the field experience of others (see below), that South Asians since at least the 1950's were not passive subjects of the gaze of social scientists from abroad, as is alleged in some critiques. American ethnography at first tended to represent Indian subjects and cultures as somewhat undifferentiated, since at that time the concept of "culture" was reified and the search for "cultural models" was dominant. I did not escape that tendency. In my dissertation field report from India, conducted in 1965-66, I reacted against the hegemony in medical anthropology of the sociologist Talcott Parsons' model of the sick role. My study constructed a different model (Kirkpatrick, 1980). While generalizations are indispensable to many varieties of critical thought, they must occupy the space of the "more or less."

Meanwhile, India enthusiastically had begun to develop anthropological studies. Beginning in the fifties, anthropology had attained research status as a discipline in Indian universities while, simultaneously, foreign academics were in India studying villages and rural life, caste and kin, local-level politics, belief systems, and various other constructions of their subject (see, e.g., Mandelbaum, 1970, and his bibliography). What both foreign and Indian anthropologists learned was that south Asian research subjects maintained their own agency when interacting with academic researchers. Confirmation in this regard can be read in the many accounts of field experience written both by Indians (see, e.g., Srinivas, 1976, or Lal, 1996) and foreign anthropologists (see, e.g., Golde, ed., 1986; or more recently, Dresch, James, and Parkin, eds., 2000).

Despite an addiction to static "theoretical models," anthropologists and other social scientists were eventually forced to recognize the rapidity of socio-cultural change that was taking place all over the subcontinent, ongoing even in the seemingly stable fifties. The results of such rapid change today are seen all over the world in the continuing migration of thousands of NRIs—non-resident Indians (and Bangladeshis)—living outside the homeland. As residents abroad they prosper. In the United States (my homeland), they control substantial investments and businesses in, e.g., information technology and other industries; they build magnificent temples and mosques; and contribute their fashion and pop cultures—*bhangra* rock and Indian fusion music, the widespread popularity of yoga, for example—to American consumers. They are succeeding for the most part beyond the wildest dreams of any of the earlier waves of immigrants who preceded them.

## The Orientalism Challenge

Anthropological fieldwork, predominantly intended as "participant observation," has occasionally been labeled an Orientalist enterprise by some scholars. (See Edward W. Said's "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors," 1989. For the first blast of the Orientalism critique, see Said, 1978; then, a review of Said's thesis in the context of Indian Orientalism by the historian, David Kopf, 1978.) (1) On one hand, in response to the charge by post-colonialist historians that early Orientalism in India only represented social elites, subaltern historical studies were initiated in India which sought evidence and texts of the views and consciousness of the working poor (see, e.g., the series edited by Guha, 1998). On the other hand, with respect to anthropological field reports from India, it cannot be said that these represented mainly elite cultures when, more often than not, poor and middle-class villagers were the main respondents.

When leveling the Orientalist charge, critics tend to assume three postulated characteristics of the ethnographic fieldworker. First, she or he is unconsciously if not consciously ethnocentric about her own culture; second, she is condescending toward her subjects of study in believing that they are incapable of the insights available to the academic professional observer; and third, she is persuaded that her work will benefit the subjects under study, whether they had been consulted or not. This critique asserts that the formulation of the research program, its viewpoints, and the process of making observations, doing interviews, and recording data are complicit in objectifying and essentializing the research subjects, referred to in Orientalist critique as the "Other." One might ask, however: is constructing "the Other" category also not essentialist?

A crucial error of Orientalism is said to be the privileging of the observer's position as "expert." In the instance of south Asia studies, however, Orientalism is not limited to the foreign observer. The same stance has also been adopted by the professional academic class in Bangladesh, for example, who tend to assume "expert" status of anyone with an advanced degree, native or foreign. This type of Orientalism has been characteristic of the economic development literature, a tendency that is currently under revision as more "development" organizations begin to understand the crucial value of soliciting participation and planning by their respondents. I do not subscribe to the Orientalist critique. What I have come to understand about views or critiques cross-culturally—about critical hermeneutic action—is that the process *is perpetual* and tends to *be universal*, from all perspectives.

Just as I formulate my critique of the culture under study, so, too, do the Asian immigrants and professionals in my country formulate their own critiques of my culture and our life-ways. Everything in the world today is under scrutiny from multiple perspectives, especially since the dominance of the internet in social communication. To cite just one example: In the sixties an American anthropologist was criticized in the Lok Sabha (lower house of the Indian parliament) for publishing research on polyandry among Pahari peoples. He was accused of sullyng the moral reputations of their women. The Pahari woman MP/accuser called for his expulsion from

India. (It didn't happen.) A decade later, on U.S. television, an elderly Sikh Californian woman complained (in English) about American women's sex mores. She was expressing fears about the danger of young Sikh-American girls succumbing to U.S. immorality, as she saw it. She asserted that they would produce illegitimate children (a paraphrase of the coarse noun which actually expressed her opinion). While she was not an anthropologist, her views on U.S. sex mores probably achieved greater circulation in the USA by means of television than the American anthropologist's scholarly work on Pahari kinship and marriage had achieved in India.

The critical circle has closed. Today the forces of a global economy and rapidly increasing migration have produced critiques of culture which cut all ways more obviously than in the past. Some critiques achieve temporary ascendancy because of political and other conditions, only to fail as some other perspective becomes fashionable or finds the limelight.<sup>(2)</sup> My view is that this critical process has been going on since the beginnings of culture and of the "us-them" binary. While I hesitate to say "all," most peoples, no matter where located, produce their own critiques of culture. These critiques were probably always available, if only social scientists had sought them out. In the present climate of expansive information dispersal, critiques from different social levels, sections, and cultures proliferate in the various media and in the consciousness of anyone willing to pay heed.

### **Internal and External Critiques**

I postulate at least two basic kinds of critique: differential *external critiques* made by outsiders, and differential *internal critiques* spun by insiders responding to their life experiences. The subjects of such critiques are usually versions of selves and versions of non-selves. This concept is for me the critical basis of my work in the study of ricksha arts. My interpretive stances—my external critiques—are my own. I do not pose myself as an expert. My views have been contingent so far as possible on the emic reports of my respondents—the artists, mistris, rickshawalas, bystanders, friends and colleagues I encountered in Bangladesh.

I discovered and reported on much, but there is much left to be done. The internal critique in regard to ricksha art, especially of the artists themselves, is still opaque. Getting them to talk about their work, their aesthetic views, their sense of self and place in the culture, the authority of their art productions, among the Muslim artists in Bangladesh, was difficult. My queries were faced with the hadith-ic prohibitions on figural images, and also often their felt spiritual peril as makers of art. The more pious artists would justify following their craft as necessary to provide for their families. Unless they fancy themselves as theorists, which Bangladeshi ricksha artists probably do not (they never gave any signs of it), they prefer to be left alone to get on with it. As part of the commercial aspect of their work, ricksha artists also have deadlines that can be impeded by a visiting researcher.

I do not claim that my readings of ricksha art are only emically based. I suggest that since cultural critiques are plurivocal and cross cultural, as well as internal and external (as proposed

above), emics are not exclusively applicable in the study and interpretation of culture. (For a concise, if programmatic review, of issues in this regard, see Babcock, 1992; and Glassie, 1973.) Roland Barthes (1972) deemed his readings of popular culture as "mythologies." What he did in that collection, and what I have done with my conveyance arts studies, are the same process. Neither of us privileged our interpretations over others; they are simply our versions among other possible readings.

Popular arts worldwide have entered a mainstream of global art signs and commercial expressions which allow the invocation of interpretations originating outside the culture. Yet they also share interpretive sense with much that is Bangladeshi in that both I (an outsider), and a Bangladeshi journalist (Chaudhuri, 1979, an insider), independently understood ricksha art images as expressing deep desires (*icche puron* in Bangla), or "wish fulfillment" as some translators construe the Bangla phrase. So, even if the artist does not say in so many words that her or his pictures are about *icche puron*, it is still legitimate to read them as such. Let us not forget that John Berger (1972) reads almost all art as varieties of desire.

Despite postulating a universal psychological motive, desire, I also sought and reported on the relative particulars of history and change. While desire remains more or less constant over time, its masks, needs, and expressions change. In their study of *National Geographic* magazine, for example, Lutz and Collins wrote: ". . . photographic practice at [the magazine] is geared to a classic form of humanism, drawing readers' attention through its portrayal of difference, and then showing that under the colorful dress and skin, as it were, we are all more or less the same" (1993:61). Thus, my readings of the ricksha art culture in general, contrary to Lutz and Collins, indicate that the people who make and enjoy the art are not timelessly the same: the man of 1976, when I first began looking at such favorites as the waterhole scene, for example, and the man of 1998 looking toward London and red sports cars, are distinctly not the same in the ways that they read culture, or form their cultural critiques through making ricksha art.

### **The Paradox of Muslim Iconophobia in a Rampantly Iconophilic Subcontinent**

My first long published article on ricksha arts (1984) proposed both diachronic and synchronic analyses, subsuming them under the concept of theatricality. I then saw ricksha art as theatrical in the sense of Yeats, who wrote, "virtue is theatrical...the wearing of a mask."\* This concept applied more particularly to the animal fables and bird extravaganzas that flourished when people pictures (*manusher chitra*) had been temporarily suppressed in order to pacify the radical Islamites. In periods of expressive freedom, however, when movie scenes surged to the fore again, they were theatrical in the different sense that films are theatrical, featuring exaggeration and larger-than-life heroes, heroines, and stories. Here the point is obvious.

But I would now suggest that, while thinking about Bangladeshi ricksha art and also about the elaborate, complexly decorated Pakistani trucks, the element of theatricality can be extended beyond its construction as a "mask of virtue" as designs and colors proliferate into sheer totalized excess, seemingly for its own sake. As Joanna Williams put it, contrary to the Western dictum of less is more, "...often in India [i.e., south Asia], 'more is more'" (1978:14). Instances

of "more is more" in the popular Muslim arts, however, also suggest that the persistence of this ancient attitude toward decorative pleasure, in contemporary surroundings of the absence of public imagery, may also be reinforced by the repression associated with the socialization of children in religiously conservative, anti-iconic norms.

There is a history of argumentation about Islamic attitudes toward art that has often included the assertion that the Koran itself does not deal with images qua art, but only inveighs against them as idolatry (Grabar, 1977). Grabar writes: "...the Koran is totally silent on images except insofar as they were used as idols which are most forcefully condemned; to the extent that ... [iconoclasm] was a debate, it was hardly a significant one, and our evidence for it is far more tangible in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries or, even more so, in the twentieth, than in the seventh or eighth" (p. 45). The recent amplifications of this debate no doubt reflect the strong influence of Wahhabism in south Asia, begun in the mid-eighteenth century, then revived and promoted starting roughly in the 1970's until today, with generous financial support for all Muslim majority nations from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The most popular scriptural source for prohibition of graven images in Pakistan and Bangladesh derives from the hadith, or sayings of the Prophet, rather than from the Koran. As Nasser Rabbat wrote: "...quotations vary and many are dug out recently with the polarization of opinion on figural representation...The most famous hadith is from the Sahih al-Bukhari (the most widely used collection of hadith) and it says: 'Among those who will be most punished by God in the Judgment Day are the *musawyrun*', which today means painters but could have also meant sculptors" (personal communication, 1999). The Dhaka artist Alauddin, referring to this hadith, voiced his fear of Judgment Day to my photographer colleague, Kevin Bubriski, when Kevin was interviewing him about his choices of art subject matter (personal communication, 1992).

Besides the generally known prohibition inscribed in the hadith just noted, another linguistic consideration of the relevant Koranic verses surfaced in an article from an online Pakistani journal, in which Khaled Ahmed wrote (in the Pakistani newspaper, *The Friday Times*, 2000):

"In the June issue of *Ishraq* [an Urdu monthly journal], an excellent research article has been contributed by Muhammad Rafi Mufti, [in which he asks]: Is the creation and display of [the] human image expressly forbidden by the Quran? In Surah Al-Anbia (52-54), the Quran narrates the story of Prophet Abraham in which he condemns the worship of *tamaseel* (statues) by his tribesmen, including his father. This verse has been at the root of the rejection of the human image by the jurists. Tamaseel means both pictures and statues. The rejection is meant to forestall the setting up of any gods other than Allah. The said verse, according to the author [Mufti], referred to tamaseel of Abraham's father as [a] 'proper' noun (*nakra*), meaning that pictures and statues made for the express purpose of worshipping are banned by the Quran."

I would add that there are many verses in the Koran condemning worship of graven images.

Continuing from Ahmed: "There is another verse in the Quran, in Surah Saba (13) which refers to the tamaseel created for Prophet Solomon by his jinns, differently interpreted by commentators as supernatural beings or forest-dwelling tribes. Solomon got the pictures and statues made for his palaces as well as the Temple as part of the new architecture he introduced in his kingdom as a great builder. The Quran, after referring to these tamaseel, actually asks the Children of David to be grateful to the Lord for them. It clearly means that the Quran is not opposed to pictures and statues in general. The author [Mufti] makes it clear that in this verse tamaseel is a common noun (*tama*), meaning that any tamaseel not meant for worshipping are not only not banned but appreciated. Pictures and statues can therefore be a part of Islamic culture if they are not meant for worshipping in lieu of Allah."

Ahmed concludes his article on the status of human figural images in Islam, as follows:

"Pictures and statues of the prophets are common in the Christian West, but the Islamic civilisation has stayed clear of depicting them as well as the Companions of Prophet Muhammad PBUH, barring Iran where the tradition of depicting the latter has always been in vogue. The ban on tamaseel has thus been selectively applied. If Sura Saba allowed both pictures and statues, the Muslims have themselves decided voluntarily not to make statues." (ibid.)

In light of Mufti's interpretation, published in a Pakistani journal devoted to clarification of scripture, I suggest that the frequently asserted across-the-board Koranic proscription of graven images in Islam is clearly unambiguous in the hadith, but ambiguous in the holy book itself. The issue is therefore in part a matter of the reception and reading of sacred texts. Although the attraction of images because they are beautiful or aesthetically satisfying and not made for "worship" could, as noted above, be legitimated by reference to some Koranic verses, I do not suggest that Pakistani truck or ricksha artists are acquainted with such refined interpretations. Thus, the issue of "presumably prescribed" iconophobia in Muslim cultures is both central to the making of any kinds of art within those cultures, including popular art, as well as contested in various ways and means because of what Freedberg suggests is an innate human iconophilia, or attraction to, the depiction of desired objects.

Figuration appears in odd places. Freedberg (1989) cites "the myth of aniconism...the myth that certain cultures, usually monotheistic..., have no images at all, or no figurative imagery...." But purportedly aniconic script writers in iconophobic cultures sometimes took liberties. Take, for instance, the fact that some Muslim Iranians embedded little human faces within elaborate calligraphy. Shown here is a detail of thirteenth century calligraphy with both human and animal faces (Baer, 1998:67). Note the cobras in the register above the human faces:

## Anthropomorphic Calligraphy



Shadhi pen box (detail). © Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: Purchase, F1936.7

Freedberg also cites the example of the "...late fifteenth century [Jewish] Kennicot bible, [in which]...animals and naked humans reveal themselves in the very letters and as their armature" (54-56). The aniconism myth according to Freedberg ignores anthropomorphic implications or possibilities; it insists that the images and ornaments of so-called aniconic decoration "can...safely be regarded as 'merely decorative.'" Thus "we deny to ourselves the possibility of their functioning on any other than the "'purely' decorative level" (60). Another example which demonstrates his point is offered in the "Comparisons and Precedents" file of my CD-ROM, where we find a mosaic image drawn from the Umayyad Muslim Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem—a vase or pot sprouting vegetation, ostensibly merely decorative, within which are nestled royal jewels—which, if we recall the simile of the pot for the human body in folklore and in Persian poetry, practically shouts to the discerning viewer, "I am a prince."

Combining Freedberg's postulate of the "impulse to image" with his assertion of the intentionality and appropriativity of the gaze, what implications do we find for the intense figurative activity found on conveyances in Bangladesh and Pakistan? I suggest that because of eighteenth to twentieth century Wahhabist conservative religious influences in both Bangladesh and Pakistan, which continue under Saudi Arabian sponsorship to this day, and considering that Bengalis have been iconophilic for centuries (as were the ancient Buddhists and Hindus of northern Pakistan) until conversion to Islam, there is a starvation of the cognitive/apprehensive functions of the gaze in both Bangladesh and in Pakistan—a starvation of the "impulse to image"—which finds its outlet in the development of ricksha and truck arts.

These genres are part of the lower middle and working classes' male culture, the male *doxa* (to use Barthes's term). The gaze implicated in conveyance arts is gendered as male. In Bangladesh and more definitely in Pakistan, women tend by custom and religious code to be secluded from public domains, which are gendered as male. Their physical appearance is denied as part of the



public scenery, either when clad in the all-covering *borka* (*burqa* in Pakistan), or, as in Bangladesh, when not clad in a borka but accompanied in the streets by male or female kin, signifying their *civil invisibility* in the street. But women reappear as *signs*, as painted film stars in ricksha arts or on movie banners, only occasionally as conventional beauties on Pakistani trucks. And, together with these people pictures, there also appear representations of other desirable objects: animals, flowers, gardens, mansions, war weapons, fancy cars, distant cities, and the like. These objects visually feed the fantasies of desire based on scarcity—in the material and sexual economies—as well as scarcity about figuration itself as embedded in the culture codes.

They provide aesthetic pleasure, in contrast to the unexciting surroundings of drab streets and monotonous commercial signage. To fully appreciate the difference between visually ascetic street facades in Bangladesh or Pakistan as compared to (mostly Hindu) India, for example, see the exuberance of Indian street colors and signage in Dawson's *Street Graphics India* (1999). Indian conveyances—sometimes rickshas or three-wheeled taxis, more so trucks, as in areas like Kerala—are often decorated, but not nearly to the totalized complexity of the Pakistani trucks or the Bangladeshi cycle rickshas because, I think, the impulse to visually appropriate objects of pleasure and desire is not so rigorously suppressed in the Hindu cultures of India.

In addition to the general absence of visible (“un-borkaed”) women in the public domain of streets, the moral pressure of Islamic hegemonic religious interpretation censures as sin whatever figurative images might surface. One is tempted to suggest that figuration itself, especially *the face*—because forbidden according to some receptions of the Muslim codes—is subliminally conflated with the other great public prohibition, *the female*. (Compare, e.g., the views found in Mazharul Khan (1972), who wrote against Maudoodi (1972); and the subjectivities and critiques of the Bengali educator and writer Begam Rokeya, translated in Jahan, 1981.) Thus, *figuration itself becomes subliminally gendered as female*.

### **On the Elaboration of Art on Conveyances**

A question that has often been asked is, why the elaboration of art on conveyances in Muslim countries, such as Bangladesh and Pakistan? Does India also not have conveyance arts? Yes, India does have them, but never to the degree of decorative exuberance, or “overcoding,” found in her neighbor Muslim-majority countries. The conditions of figurative imagery in Pakistan are more stringent, in terms of starvation of the impulse to image, than in Bangladesh, because religion and its interpretations have always been more conservative there. Pakistan has been longer under the spiritual influence of Wahhabist religious reform (“purification”) movements than Bangladesh, and its governance has become more Islamized with every passing decade. Not surprising, then, that Pakistani trucks have come increasingly to avoid human figures while geometric, animal, war conveyances and rockets, and floral decoration (along with pious texts and streaming banners more recently; see also Elias, 2011), have proliferated to a rococo degree greater than in Bangladesh. The photos of contemporary Pakistani trucks viewable in Elias or earlier on my CD-ROM, reveal almost obsessively intricate decoration and virtually total coverage of the truck surface, evidence perhaps of the well-known psychological assertion that what is forbidden is all the more tempting, and so desire finds expression where not easily

challenged. Oleg Grabar says that decoration or ornamentation itself pleases. One might even read the richness of Islamic decoration as the *return of the repressed*.

I will try to arrive at some interpretive responses to the question. Looking at Pakistan, I see two possible angles: the property/economic angle, and the private/public domain/ritual angle. One has to do with the segregation of material value which has been customary in this part of the world. Homes—mansions, houses, and so on—if their owners can afford it—are segregated from public view by being set far back from roads and/or surrounded by bare, blank high walls as a means of avoiding both the perils of envy and attack by thieves. Homes are also virtually sacred spaces in which protected women, who embody the ritual respectability (the honor) of the family, reside. Unlike in some parts of India, glorious folk art is not painted on Pakistani outside house walls.

The truck does not suffer from such limitations. Houses are fixed abodes, trucks move. Moreover, the truck driver moves with the truck. Trucks are heavy, not easily purloined or destroyed. Truck drivers travel with assistants. The driver may not be rich, but truck drivers are known to be macho and fierce, dangerous to mess with. The truck owner can afford to attract attention by colorful decoration in the way that a householder may not because there is little danger. Few know the owner or about his material worth. Such is not the case for houses in various parts of a town. "Everybody" knows who owns them and approximately the owner's financial worth. The perils of envy and mystical danger to blatantly decorated trucks (and rickshas) are handled by decorating with apotropaic eyes and pious slogans. The house, on the other hand, must be staged as bland and opaque; its appearance is meant not to attract attention. Its blank public surfaces neither offend religious respectability nor attract the evil eye. Public conveyances by contrast, whether rickshas or trucks, move in the profane public domain of the streets, unconnected to the ritually sacred and vulnerable private domain of house and home.

Signage and other commercial imagery of streets are also lacking in flamboyant color and design in Pakistan or Bangladesh, and they are also stationary. As such, they are vulnerable to attack by image haters while also requiring an ambiance of public respectability in relation to their owners, whereas trucks are prime targets for expressing the image impulse because they are not fixed and stationary. They do not nor can they maintain "respectability" in the same manner as does a fixed abode or business house. Respectability means being "settled," *so that one is potentially observable* by others who can enforce collective mores of ritual and social control. Indeed, the personas of truck drivers, always on the move, are not considered "respectable."

Bangladeshi rickshas are more vulnerable than Pakistani trucks. Their flaunting of imagery is less protected because of their small size, slowness, and short distance travel. They are often stationary for hours, waiting for customers. At times they have been attacked and destroyed by image haters. The defacing of rickshas became more prevalent right after the accession to rule of General Husain Muhammad Ershad in Spring, 1982, when Dhaka newspaper accounts wrote of mobs attacking and tearing the artwork from the rickshas. The Islamite political factions had hopes at that time that he would declare Bangladesh to be an Islamic Republic, like Saudi

Arabia and Pakistan. In 1987, I was still finding defacements of ricksha image decor. (See Kirkpatrick 2003, the "Piety" file, for photographic and news clip evidence.) The iconoclasts were kept at bay in Bangladesh whenever the secularist Awami League Party was in power, as they are today. As long as they are not suppressed by force of arms, hand-painted ricksha art décor may survive, until it becomes obliterated by the mechanically reproduced prints of the global marketplace, or entirely ruled out as it has been on the natural gas-run, three-wheel motor taxis (otherwise known as *baby-taxis*) in Dhaka. I suggest, therefore, that the generally accepted prohibition on imagery in Islam *inevitably constructs voyeurism*. By repression and suppression, it energizes the "image impulse" that Freedberg describes, the impulse to look, to look for. It is a powerful human need that motivates the riotous imagery of conveyance arts in south Asian Muslim majority countries.

Let me end this account by addressing my title. I have sought the views of ricksha artists and other respondents whom I consulted, as well as injecting my own views into the mix. As I noted how art images change, both against the forces of conservatism but also along the cleavages of globalization, I prefer to understand the famous adage of Hippocrates—that "Life is short, the art long"—as a reflection that the interpretive, as well as the technical or creative process (*techne*), is probably endless.

---

## End Notes

\*As quoted in Susan Dick, Declan Kiberd, Dougald McMillan, Joseph Ronsley. *Essays for Richard Ellman : Omnium Gatherum*. Montreal, CA: McGill Queens University Press, 1989: 269.

1) As Kopf wrote in this review: "[Said] has misunderstood the nature and function of Orientalism...in South Asia. Orientalism was the polar opposite of Eurocentric imperialism as viewed by the Asians themselves" (p. 505).

2) See Anspach (1991) for a review of interactions between ethnographers (e.g., writing culture), views of culture as text or vice versa, and the problematics of self-refuting argument.

3) For the gaze and visibility in Hindu religious contexts, see Eck, 1996. For an indigenous concept of the gaze in classical Tamil literature, strikingly identical to Freedberg's concept, compare the language of first visual encounter between Rama and Sita in Kampan's *Ramayana*, as follows (translated by George Hart; personal e-mail 11 Nov. 2001, in reply to my query):

"As she who was of unimaginable beauty stood there like that,  
Their eyes snatched one another, and devoured one another,  
And, as their awareness united without ever stopping,  
The lord (Rama) looked (at her), and she looked (at him). 1.10.35.4 #598

[Hart added:] This doesn't really get it—the second line is literally, 'the pair of eyes snatched with the eye, and they (the eyes) devoured one another.'"

My query on gaze to the Indology list also provided this additional insight from John Brockington (e-mail, 22 Jan. 2002): "The Valmiki Ramayana does not describe any meeting between Rama and Sita before (or indeed immediately after) the breaking of the bow by which Rama wins her. Indeed, Sita herself really does not figure at all in this episode. Thus Kampan's description is probably the first record of this motif that was to become so popular in subsequent versions of the Ramayana."

---

## References

Ahmed, Khaled

2000 Compulsory Beard, Banned Human Image, and Allah Instead of Khuda. *The Friday Times* XII:21, July 21-27, online newspaper, not archived. (Available as print or on microfilm in libraries.)

Anspach, Mark Rogin

1991 When American Anthropologists Go "Postmodern." *Stanford French Review* 15: 1-2, pp. 81-102.

Babcock, Barbara A.

1992 Artifact. In, Richard Bauman, ed. *Folklore, Cultural Performances and Popular Entertainments*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Baer, Eva

1998 *Islamic Ornament*. New York: New York University Press.

Barthes, Roland

1972 *Mythologies*. New York: Hill & Wang.

Berger, John

1972 *Ways of Seeing*. London: BBC and Penguin Books.

Chaudhuri, Asad

1979 Abdul Mia Chitrakarma. *Robbar* 2:18, December, 42-45.

Dawson, Barry

1999 *Street Graphics India*. London and New York: Thames and Hudson.

Dresch, Paul, Wendy James, and David Parkin, eds.

2000 *Anthropologists in a Wider World: Essays on Field Research*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Eck, Diana L.

1996 *Darshan, Seeing the Divine Image in India*. 2nd rev. and enl. ed. New York: Columbia University Press.

Elias, Jamal J. *On Wings of Diesel: Trucks, Identity and Culture in Pakistan*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.

Freedberg, David

1989 *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gallagher, Rob

1992 *The Rickshaws of Bangladesh*. Dhaka: University Press Ltd.

Glassie, Henry

1973 Structure and Function, Folklore and the Artifact. *Semiotica* 7: 313-351.

Golde, Peggy, ed.

1986 *Women in the Field: Anthropological Experiences*. 2nd ed., expanded and updated. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Grabar, Oleg.

1977 *Muqarnas: An Annual on Islamic Art and Architecture*.

Guha, Ranajit, ed.

1998 *A Subaltern Studies Reader: 1986-1995*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Jahan, Raushan, ed and trans.

1981 *Inside Seclusion: The Avarodhbasini of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain*. Dacca: Women For Women.

Khan, Mazhar-ul-Haq

1972 *Purdah and Polygamy : A Study in the Social Pathology of the Muslim Society*. Peshawar: Nashriyat ilm-o-taraqqiat, 1972.

Kirkpatrick, Joanna

1979 Themes of Consciousness among Some Educated Working Women of Bangladesh. In, Richard L. Park, ed., *Patterns of Change in Modern Bengal*. E. Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

1980 *The Sociology of an Indian Hospital Ward*. Columbia, Mo.: South Asia Books.

1984 Ricksha Art as Culture Theater. *Studies in Visual Communication* 10:3, Summer, 73-85.

2003 *Transports of Delight : The Ricksha Arts of Bangladesh*. A CD-ROM. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; multimedia.

2012 Review of Jamal J. Elias, *On Wings of Diesel: Trucks, Identity and Culture in Pakistan*. *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 71:01, 287-288.

Kopf, David

1978 Hermeneutics versus History. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 39: 495-506. (Review article of E. W. Said's *Orientalism*.)

Lal, Jayati

1996 Situating Locations: The Politics of Self, Identity, and the "Other" in Living and Writing the Text. In, Diane L. Wolf, ed. *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Lutz, Caroline A., and Jane L. Collins

1993 *Reading National Geographic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mandelbaum, David G.

1970 *Society in India*, 2 vols. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Maudoodi, Syed Abul'Ala

1972 *Purdah and the Status of Woman in Islam*. Trans. and ed. by al-Ash'ari. 1st ed. Lahore, Islamic Publications.

Said, Edward W.

1989 Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors. *Critical Inquiry*, 15:2, Winter.

Smith, Barbara Herrnstein

2005 *Scandalous Knowledge : Science, Truth and the Human*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Srinivas, M. N.

1976 *The Remembered Village*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Williams, Joanna.

1978 Criticizing and Evaluating the Visual Arts in India: A Preliminary Example. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 47:1, February, 3-28.