

“I FIND I HAVE MUSIC IN ME”: One’s Man’s Approach to Festivity

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This paper focusses on one man’s participation in two forms of festivity as a direct response to change in his environment.¹ It is based on a recorded interview with the main informant, K., an Asian immigrant from Kenya, as well as interviews with other members of the Asian Indian community in St. John’s, Newfoundland. In addition I observed two public celebrations in which K. played an active part. For a short period of time I also attended the Chinmaya Mission where one of the celebrations took place.

K., who came to Canada in September, 1968, works as an instructional assistant at Memorial University and finds increasing pleasure in his skills as an amateur musician. He plays the harmonium and *tablas* and describes himself as “strumming the sitar.” He is married to another Kenyan Indian and has two small children. K. is highly articulate, reflecting his university training in both Kenya and Canada. In keeping with his tradition he has close family ties with his cousins who maintain a large communal home in St. John’s. As a member of the extended family K. expects and is expected to support other family members in their activities.

Two possible courses of action are open to the individual when faced with change in his surrounding world, as John Szwed points out in his study of the people of the Codroy Valley in Newfoundland.² He or she can re-arrange and re-order the elements of his private culture to accord with external changes, which is the most common response, or he can take in new elements. Victor Turner puts it this way:

. . . the besetting quality of human society . . . is the capacity of individuals to stand at times aside from the models, patterns, and paradigms of behavior and thinking, which as children they are conditioned into accepting, and . . . to innovate new patterns themselves or to assent to innovation.³

Szwed’s remarks are made with reference to Newfoundlanders in a Newfoundland setting; Turner’s preface is a study of the ways in which social actions of various kinds acquire form through metaphors and paradigms.

The re-ordering of the individual cognitive map to meet the needs of a new society or culture is central to the immigrant experience as no group is more beset with a need for social action in response to a changing world than the immigrant ethnic group. A newcomer or, in Newfoundland terms, “a come from away,” is faced with change in his surrounding world, often of a very radical

nature, and he must choose to re-order and re-arrange elements of his private culture and/or take on new changes. He may also innovate new patterns. As a "come from away" myself, I am personally concerned with re-ordering and re-arranging elements of private culture and it is natural, therefore, to have more than a passing interest when other immigrants are involved. A number of folklorists have studied the way in which particular groups have manipulated or re-arranged traditional celebrations to suit the needs of a new situation: the work of Linda Dègh among Hungarians; R.B. Klymasz among Ukrainians, and Bruce Giuliano's account of festivals among Italians in Toronto immediately comes to mind.⁴ However, little attention to date has been given to this process at the individual level in the ethnic immigrant experience in Newfoundland.

Public celebration is designed to demonstrate to participants and observers important statements about their social organization, interpersonal and personal behaviour.⁵ Public genres, we are told, are forms of metacommunication.⁶ Institutionalized forms of symbolic action such as parades as well as sports spectacles and mass entertainment should be seen as ". . . metasocial commentary made from a particular cultural perspective."⁷ It follows that an individual's account of his part in public celebration may give considerable insight as to the nature of the re-ordering process and his response to innovative action. Indeed we may derive something of the individual's perception of himself, his place in the community, and the interaction of that particular ethnic enclave within the larger society of the city.

Both of the celebrations I studied were organised by sections of St. John's Asian Indian community which is comprised of individuals from the Indian sub-continent as well as those from Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. The first event was the festival of Navarantri, and the second was the Cultural Evening. Both events may be deemed "public" in the sense that the celebrant is part of a group which celebrates and is seen to celebrate by others, but it is clear that the principal informant does not regard the two in the same way. Superficially both events may be regarded simply as expressions of the informant's ethnicity. At another level they represent two different approaches to festivity which may be characterised as "secular" as opposed to "sacred" or "public" as opposed to "private."

The festival of Navarantri as observed in October 1978 was sponsored by the Chinmaya Mission which exists to promote religious and cultural values in the Hindu community. The original movement was founded by Swami Chinmayananda in India in the 1950s. It has a large organisation in Bombay and runs hospitals, youth hostels, universities, and seminaries, among other activities. The St. John's section was set up in 1975 and maintains its own

Temple, dedicated to the god *Vishnu*, preserver of life, in a converted suburban house in the town of Mount Pearl, adjacent to St. John's. The Mission and its Temple serve the spiritual needs of the Hindu community, emphasizing the instruction of children, as well as promoting other cultural events, including classes in Sanskrit, Indian classical dance, and music. Though the Mission maintains contact with similar organisations elsewhere — there is another Chinmaya Mission in Napa, California — it has no resident spiritual leader.

K.'s attitude to the founding of the Mission is interesting. As a family member he was expected to support his cousin's wife when she invited the *swami* or holy man to St. John's. K. had only heard negative reports of such teachers and was sceptical of being involved as: "they come here and come to Western society and they teach something . . . they have big jet planes some of them and they also make a lot of money and they don't know anything."⁸ This view of the *swami* in general stems from his clouded perception of India: "you can promote anyone, you know, in India especially religion . . . in India you see this mystical aspect is very, very strong and you get more exposure of that than anything else . . . throwing spells and these magical aspects."⁹ Ultimately K's fears about the *swami* proved unfounded and the Mission was established. Clearly K. wanted to dissociate himself from any stereotype which might automatically link him, in my mind, to a traditional religious figure — an example of the esoteric-exoteric factor in action.¹⁰

The festival of Navarantri is the celebration of the incarnation of *Amba*, the goddess of power and insight. It is celebrated in various ways in different parts of India. On this occasion the festivities took the form of an evening of chants and dances, celebrating the different re-incarnations of *Amba*. Though the festival is sometimes celebrated for ten nights, the festivities lasted for nine nights only on this occasion. These took place at the Mission's Temple. Decorations contributed to the relaxed atmosphere which prevailed, in contrast to the markedly more restrained and reverential mood characterising the regular Sunday morning gatherings at the Chinmaya Mission which are primarily intended for instruction and worship. The festivities began with a series of chants, accompanied by K. on the harmonium. Other members of the Mission also played the harmonium and the *tablas*. These chants were to other manifestations of the goddess *Amba*. Dances followed involving all members of the group at different stages. The first series of dances, *garba*, involved only the female members of the group.¹¹ My own small daughters were encouraged to join in while the other small girls were being shown how to dance. The second group of dances, *dandia*, included both men and women and each dancer carried two wooden batons which were rhythmically struck against those of the other dancers as they progressed round the circle. The evening

ended with *araati*, which is the consecration of food, before the god *Vishnu*, prior to its distribution among the assembled company. *Araati* is the concluding sequence of the Temple religious ritual known as *pooja*.¹²

K.'s role in the festivities was to play the harmonium to accompany both the singing and the dancing. However he did dance briefly in the *dandia*. At the beginning of the evening he had shown interest in the video equipment which I used to film the proceedings and at the end of the celebration he commented that he felt this kind of activity in the Temple brought him closer to his own small daughter who had been encouraged to chant and dance. It was this spontaneous comment and his interest in the video recording which prompted me to interview him some six months later following the Cultural Evening organised by the Friends of India Association.

The Cultural Evening was held on March 4, 1979, organised by the Friends of India Association which aims at "fostering friendship between the people of Indian origin and those of other countries."¹³ It draws heavily on the university community for its support as well as that of the Asian members of the medical profession in St. John's. It encourages non-Asians to join and selects a non-Indian chairman every second year. The format of the evening was a multi-cultural programme of entertainment on university premises followed by dinner in a large dining hall on campus.¹⁴ The official programme for the event carried messages from local dignitaries including the Premier of the Province. The guest of honour was the Mayor of St. John's and another prominent guest was the head of the Chinese community.

The programme was introduced by a local Anglo disc jockey and opened with the "Ode to Newfoundland" rendered à la Roger Doucet by a member of the Indian community. In addition to traditional Indian dances and songs there were performances by local St. John's Anglo groups as well as the Chinese community. Two formal Indian temple dances were performed and the songs included classical love-songs and a political satire in song, *kwali*. Non-Indian items included a Chinese candle dance, two Caribbean calypsos, Newfoundland step dances and a ballet solo. An item of particular interest was a skit by a local Anglo medical student who satirised three ethnic stereotypes — the "dumb Newf" being diagnosed by the immigrant Indian doctor and the mainland Torontonion. This skit was particularly appreciated for its humour.

Following the singing of the Indian national anthem and "O Canada" the entire group of some five hundred people ate a specially prepared curry dinner in the Main Dining Hall of the University. The curries catered to all dietary tastes and observances, and alcohol was sold to accommodate the tastes of Western guests, the proceeds going to an Indian charitable organisation. At the end of the dinner Western-style dance music was piped in to encourage the guests to dance.

K.'s part in the Cultural Evening was that of stage managing the entertainment, co-ordinating the acts, and ensuring that the pauses between them did not go on too long. On stage he again played the harmonium to accompany the couple who sang an Indian love-song. His final appearance on-stage, at the end of the proceedings, was to lead a group of children in singing the Indian national anthem and "O Canada."

There was a delay in interviewing K. about his involvement in these two events because much of his spare time had been taken up in helping to prepare a programme of Indian songs and music for the Community Channel of Cable Television in St. John's. By the time I interviewed him in May, 1979, he had completely forgotten about his comment that participation in events at the Temple brought him closer to his daughter.

K. is partly motivated by family connections in organising cultural programmes. He described his and his cousins' early efforts to put together an evening of entertainment based on their cultural background. He now looks back with amusement at their earnestness in organising the initial programmes and laughs at their mistakes; he now realizes that everything will not always automatically fall into place. K. accepts the challenge of organisation but sees another reason for being involved: "More important it gives us an excuse to get together."¹⁵ He takes pride in this because "you did something which helped everyone get together . . . the Indian community and even the community at large."¹⁶ Further incentive derives from his perception of St. John's as a place lacking in festivities and activities, in contrast to his native city of Nairobi. There the larger Asian community sponsored more functions, to the extent that the individual could choose his activities, and K. admitted that he remained a spectator rather than an instigator. In his description of festivities in his original community it is apparent that Hindu religious observances provided an opportunity for public celebration:

. . . Socials, I don't think we have any social nights or we don't have any cultural nights or things like that. They were all sort of semi-combined into one, so for example if you were going to celebrate a particular day, say the birthday of Rama or Krishna or something like that you would . . . people would organise little children to perform dramas and stuff with respect to the birth of Rama and so on and act a play or things like that. So it would be a double thing, it would be part of your arts, the dramatic and the abilities of the children to communicate, to act, to play act and so on . . . those are developed, and number two also you are celebrating the day, the auspicious day of the birth of Rama or Krishna or whatever you want to celebrate.¹⁷

Clearly this informant sees at least two functions in any one given festivity. In this case the celebration of Krishna's birthday, a religious observance, would involve the whole community through the use of traditional cultural forms. The religious celebrations also involve the next generation, encouraging them to become tradition-bearers, thus adding a didactic quality to the event.

K. sees a dearth of activities among the Indian community because it is too small — about 50 to 60 families. The remedy for this, he feels, is "to organise more and more so that the community overall will get wider."¹⁸ K.'s comments on organising the entertainment and his pride in a job well done indicate a personal sense of community spirit and satisfaction — of making his contribution to his immediate community, and to the larger mixed community of the Friends of India Association.

The arts are often viewed as sources of intercultural harmony which link people of different times and cultures.¹⁹ This statement clearly holds true for the Cultural Evening described herein. A sense of community among several ethnic groups is fostered by the official political body in the form of Federal government funding for multi-cultural projects, through the public performance of vastly differing cultural items. As a symbolic action the meal following the entertainment re-inforces the shared sense of community. Any religious element is absent, consciously omitted in deference to the requirements of the mixed religious group and the dictates of federal government, which will not fund overt religious functions.

Ethnic structures again serve as the essential link between ecclesiastical and civic structures in the festival of Navarantri.²⁰ Though the federal government refuses to fund religious functions it sanctions money for language teaching and musical instruction. In reality the divisions between religious observances and language teaching are not easily maintained, as one informant pointed out. Funds may be available to teach young people Sanskrit but the most likely occasion on which they use the language is in the chants at the Temple, which, as a religious institution, the government may not fund. Cultural symbols such as dance and music are funded, but again one major area for their expression is in the celebration of religious observances at the Temple. Thus the official political body, again in the form of funding for traditional cultural items, is linked to an ecclesiastical body, celebrating the glorification of the goddess of power and insight, via the performance of traditional cultural items. The sense of community which is fostered is further re-inforced by the distribution of the shared food, *prasad*. A didactic quality is also found in the instruction of the children.

The common factor for K. is his music. It is the thread which runs through both these functions and his other activities. His interest in the sitar is new. Though he remembers itinerant musicians at his parents' parties in his youth, K. himself has only been prompted

to play the sitar since his arrival in Canada. His brother brought the instrument to Canada and suggested that K. set it up. This interest in a traditional instrument suggests a re-affirmation of his background, on K.'s part, and is clearly part of his re-ordering process. It has needed the impact of a new environment to stimulate him. His interest is obviously growing as shown in his participation in a recent television programme.

K. was asked to comment on his involvement in the Temple organisation and the Cultural Evening entertainment. He agrees that there is a difference in the events: "O.K. there is definitely a difference . . . it's public, it's meant to get people of communities and everybody locally and have a good time culturally . . . Rather the Temple is more of a personal thing . . . It's very personal, although it is partly cultural as well."²¹ Though K. sees his role in Temple functions as much more personal and private, it is apparent that there is also another aspect. Participation in Temple activities forges a bond with his five-year-old daughter whom he regularly brings to the Sunday morning meetings along with other children living in the near vicinity. The weekly meetings include ritual chants before the porcelain figure of the deity. These are followed by a discussion of the various moral points arising from stories drawn from classical Indian literature, often taken from the *Ramayana*. The meeting always ends with the ritual consecration and sharing of food. K., who describes himself as a poor storyteller, sees himself as "sitting at par" with his daughter: "not just a father/daughter type thing . . . actually at her level and you talk about the story which was told and what you got out of it."²² Religious observances are a motivation for attending the Temple but he also sees participation as a means of maintaining and perpetuating his cultural background as well as strengthening his immediate family ties.

The key to K.'s involvement in both types of celebration outlined in this paper lies in one of his concluding remarks. It was made with direct respect to his daughter and their conversations but it is equally applicable to his role in organising the Cultural Evening entertainment and as a participating member of the Chinmaya Mission. It also reflects his interests as an amateur musician and may well have a bearing on his reasons for moving to Canada: "Most of us work within paradigms not recognizing the paradigm and therefore we don't know our limitations."²³ Change for this individual has prompted him to re-consider his cultural background, forcing him, for example, to question acceptance of a traditional figure, the *swami*, yet allowing him to select and emphasize those elements which re-inforce his sense of ethnic identity. Re-ordering elements of his private culture to accord with external change has stimulated his interest in traditional music and musical instruments. External change has caused him to innovate a new pattern for himself in his stage management of the Cultural Even-

ing entertainment which in turn draws on traditional elements in his culture. Strong family ties both promote new patterns and are strengthened by his re-ordering of existing cultural elements so that a cyclic movement may be discerned. Support of his cousin to help found the Temple in turn establishes a firm bond in his own family. In the larger society change in his environment has encouraged him to become a participator rather than a spectator, prompting him to innovate and initiate.

Finally there can be no clearer re-affirmation of Turner's comments cited at the outset of this paper than K.'s statement: "You cannot be creative unless you break your paradigm and run."²⁴

FOOTNOTES

- 1 I am indebted to Dr. Neil V. Rosenberg for his helpful criticism in the preparation of this paper. This was first presented in a slightly different form at the Folklore Studies Association of Canada in Montreal, June, 1980.
- 2 John Szwed, *Private Cultures and Public Imagery*. (St. John's, Newfoundland: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1966), p. 178.
- 3 Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1974), pp. 14-15.
- 4 Robert Blumstock, ed., *Bekevar: Working Papers on a Canadian Prairie Community*. Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, Mercury Series No. 31 (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1979); Linda Degh, *People in the Tobacco Belt: Four Lives*. Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, Mercury Series No. 13 (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1975); Bruce B. Giuliano, *Sacro o Profano? A Consideration of Four Italian-Canadian Religious Festivals*. Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, Mercury Series No. 17 (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1976); R.B. Klymasz, "From Immigrant to Ethnic Folklore: A Canadian View of Process and Transition," *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 10 (1973), 131-39.
- 5 Mac Swackhammer, "May Processions at Roman Catholic Parochial Schools at Didactic Drama," *Lore and Language*, in press; Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *Reader in Comparative Religion*, eds. William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 167-78; Geertz, "Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example," in *Reader in Comparative Religion*, eds. Lessa and Vogt, pp. 531-43.
- 6 Victor Turner, foreword to Ronald L. Grimes' *Symbol and Conquest* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1976), p. 9.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 8 Excerpt of tape-recorded interview with K., May, 1979.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Wm. Hugh Jansen, "The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore," in *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1965), pp. 43-51.
- 11 The *garba* is traditionally danced around a garbo — a pot containing a lighted candle. The pot has ten apertures through which the light shines. The ten apertures are symbolic of the ten manifestations of life in the body — the five senses and the five organs of action. This group does not use the *gaabo* because of the fire hazard in a wooden building.
- 12 *Pooja* is defined as follows: the object of the *pooja* ritual is to create and set up thoughts of spiritual forces in and around us. This is best achieved by singing or chanting of some mantras, performing certain actions, and making offering in three defined stages. Each mantra is a powerful magazine of vast spiritual forces. My Prayers, Central Chinmaya Mission Trust. pp.
- 13 Quotation from official programme of The Cultural Evening organised by the Friends of India Association on March 4, 1979.
- 14 In some respects the Cultural Evening had many parallels with a dinner held to celebrate the 29th Republic Day of India in January, 1978.
- 15-18 Excerpts of tape-recorded interview with K., May, 1979.
- 19 Ronald Grimes, *Symbol and Conquest* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1976), p. 35.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- 21-24 Excerpts of tape-recorded interview with K., May, 1979.

For Résumé see p. 39.