Encountering India
A Study in Cross-Cultural relearning

-short presentation of a research project

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Why do we call the spot on the forehead of an Indian woman a "caste mark" when this is not a mark of caste? Why do we believe that all cows in India are holy for everyone? And read in the newspaper that the export of beef from India is a growing and important enterprise. Where did we learn these things? More importantly, <u>why</u> have we learnt this? What more preconceptions of the "Oriental Other" do we harbor, perhaps not consciously? How are these preconceptions reproduced and how can we deconstruct and reconstruct our orientalist conceptualizations? Can these preconceptions and attitudes be made visible through a close encounter? These are the questions I am working with in my research project Encountering India.

Orientalismen as a Starting Point

When we take passage to India, we have a lot in our baggage. For we carry with us the burden of White Man's knowledge of the East. The "we" are those of us who have been formed by Europe and North America. Our luggage is made of a massive body of concepts, preconceptions, definitions and erudition. This body is not just opinion or trend but something embedded in our learning and hence our minds. This form of thought permeates the cultures of the West and provides a self-evident frame of reference, explanatory model and <u>leitmotif</u> for the way the West/North treats the rest of the world. A specialization within the academic tradition of orientalism deals with India, the "Jewel in the Crown". This is known as Indology.

Using Edward W. Said, Ziauddin Sardar and Ronald Indén as a base, some of the basic tenets of Orientalism and Indology can be put forward in summary form.

-In the choice between an ancient, "original" source on the Other and actual contemporary practice, always opt for the ancient. The reasoning behind this is that the Orient is basically unchanging. Therefore, it is best to look at the original sources in order to explain phenomena.

-The Others are not agents of their own history, which is made in the West. This lack of agency

explains the passive, effeminate nature of the Indian Other.

-The Others cannot represent themselves. When they do, faults occur. One reason is that scientific reasoning, as we understand it, is something best done by people in the West/North. It is here that the scientific revolutions have taken place and here that scientific knowledge accumulates. When there is a choice, always rely on knowledge produced in the West.

-The Others are exotic. Hence, much cannot be explained, only observed, commented and perhaps enjoyed. The dreamy, exotic East provides backdrop for Western adventure, romance and escape, even therapy.

Orientalism Reproduces Itself

In their respective books, Ziauddin Sardar and Magnus Berg describe how orientalism is reproduced in and through popular culture, especially the cinema. Why is Indiana Jones named Indiana Jones? Ronald Inden has pointed out that this is hardly coincidence, especially when one considers that Steven Spielberg and George Lukacs never leave detail to chance. The first "India Jones" was Sir William Jones who founded the West Bengal Society in 1784 and with this Indology as an orientalist discipline with an initial agenda of propagating the theory of the Indo-European languages with a common root and assumed common racial source. This was in clear opposition to the prevailing theory of Semitic roots for European languages. In the short space of ten minutes in the widely seen movie Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom (1984), Spielberg and Lukacs present the basic tenets of orientalism, and also provide something of a basis for a critique. Many other movies past and present are not as knowledgeable but merely reproduce stereotypes of "The Other" and those ideas that maintain differences between "We" and "Them" – especially of the "Evil Moslem".

Making Orientalist Values Visible

Preconceptions that have become part of own culture become visible first when they are challenged in a close, cross-cultural encounter. This is one of the points of departure in my research project Encountering India. I have been travelling to south India with teacher trainees since 1994. This is in my course "The Changing South". The point of entry is to put these students in close contact with Indians who are working for social change. Through close encounters with these activists, the orientalist idea that "the Others" are passive victims of history is wiped out. By observing and documenting some 450 encounters with "India" I have collected a rather large empirical database concerning cross-cultural encounters. The empirical material consists of my own notebooks, evaluations, several hundred "critical incidents" written by course participants, interviews and 37 hours videotape. The processing and analysis of this information displays a number of interesting things.

*Orientalist preconceptions can be made visible. Orientalism is not a matter of ignorance or prejudice but of well-prepared conceptualizations (the collective subjectivity of the North) that have become part of individual, often tacit understanding of the world. I

present these "visualizations" through exemplary stories and explain their connections to the large orientalist scheme of thought. Here is just one such example from a phone booth in Jaipur.

Believing is seeing

In early 1996 I arranged a study tour for a group of college colleagues. First, we did the usual "Golden Triangle" in the North (Delhi - Jaipur – Agra) and then a mini-run of the route I take my students along. We bumped forward in the chartered bus, crossing into Rajastan. We drove past a new Eriksson plant for the manufacture of telecommunications equipment. Once in Jaipur, two of my colleagues wanted to phone home, so I promised to help them. Since the hotel phone was not hooked up to an international line just then, I took them down the road to a phone booth. This was in a rather pleasant, open and plush area of the city, by the big park and the university. The phone booth was also a tea and samosa stall, a good place for college students to mix. I felt right at home – these could have been my students, in jeans and sweatshirts, girls giggling at boy's jokes….discussions of the latest pop group… Serving the intellectual clientele was a newsstand. Well, the magazine-wallah had laid out about twenty yards of multi-colored magazines, mostly the whole gambit of newspapers and journals you would find at an international airport shop. Time, Newsweek, the Economist, McCall's, Der Spiegel,….

Here, under two Coleman lanterns spreading hissing light into the Indian night, I tried to take a closer look at all the magazines, but had to go into the booth to help my colleague get the dialing right.

"Hello! This is Lars! We're in Jaipur now, just got in an hour ago. Can you hear me?"

"Hey! This is a great connection; sounds like you're right here! Can you imagine it? The phones actually work. Here we are in the middle of nowhere, standing among people who can hardly read and write and talk like we were at home. …"

I couldn't help myself eavesdropping on this strange conversation. I looked around at the students and all the magazines I needed to buy, wondering if we were really in the same place. But I guess believing is seeing and looking down a tunnel is easier than looking around. This is an example of essentialism: one trait of a society/culture, for example illiteracy, is taken as a stereotyped generalization.

*Close encounters increase understanding of the other and change self-perceptions. A categorization and analysis of several hundred "critical incidents" (renamed as "significant encounters") shows that the encounters made possible by the course are distributed rather evenly over seven different types. These are:

"Traffic" - This is, usually, the very first meeting with India. Here one's own personal reaction is most important.

Children – many have their most significant encounter with, or through, children.

Gender Contract – meeting Indian women, both strong and oppressed, is experienced as the most significant encounter.

Injustice – poverty and oppression and even more, meeting those who struggle against this, is experienced most strongly in this category.

"The Indian way of life" – many are strongly impressed by the generosity, warmth and joy they meet in India. And wonder what is missing back home.

> Near and far – many students experience a strong nearness, a unique presence, in the middle of a necessary distance in their encounters and start to reflect on this.

> Seeing oneself – in this set of encounters, the student sees him/herself in a larger cross-cultural learning situation and starts to use educational narrative as a way of conveying and generalizing h(is)er own experience.

*The degree of proximity in the cross-cultural encounter is dependent on the degree of social security in the learning group. The categorization presented above is something of a scale, moving from a very personal experience to a more generalized, reflective position. An analysis of all the "significant encounters" shows, with somewhat surprising clarity, that those groups that had the best group climate and security among themselves, enabled individuals in the learning group to move toward a more reflective cross-cultural learning.

Research as Action

My research project Encountering India lies close to my teaching practice. Lessons from the scientific analysis and reflections interact with my teaching. In other words, this project is well within the tradition of action research. Besides this, theoretical and methodological impulses have been gathered from (1) the school of orientalist deconstruction, lead by people such as Said, Inden, Sardar, Halbfass and Dallmyr, as well as those in and around Subaltern Studies; (2) that branch of feminist sociology dealing with the deconstruction and reconstruction of collective subjectivity, and (3) intercultural communications theory.

Close Cross-cultural Encounters Can Be Organized

The course "The Changing South" proceeds from the view that it is possible to organize meaningful intercultural encounters. The quality of this is an ongoing masala of experimentation, experience and evaluation. The research project described briefly here is a deepening of teaching experience that hopefully will generate new educational knowledge, useable by others. More specifically in the following areas:

*Course progression. Learning something new means relating to the known. What is "just enough distance" in a cross-cultural learning process?

*The context of learning. In organized and structured educational environments, such as schools and colleges, teaching and learning is primarily done in groups. Group climate in a broader sense is a framing factor for cross-cultural learning.

*Partners in learning. By this is meant the obvious: that in a cross-cultural learning context, there is another subject. We are learning not so much about something or someone as with and through others.