

Productive (Dis)orientation

Society for Humanistic Anthropology
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Being Made and Unmade in the Field

How and why do doctoral students become attracted to a particular topic? Part of developing an anthropological lens is being self-reflexive. Some doctoral students have a clear idea of why they are attracted to a particular topic and some discover their reasons well into the writing-up phase. This essay focuses on the ways in which moments of (dis)orientation in the field can shape unfolding research interests. These moments create an emotional impact on the anthropologist and cannot be framed analytically until much later. In particular, I describe experiences in which I was both made and un-made by the field, and how it is the combination of the two that constituted my moments of epistemological clarity.



Devotee embroidering a skirt for a female deity. Photo by author.

The field, in my case was in West Bengal, India, at the headquarters of an international, missionizing Hindu sect that is known for its publications and scriptural discourses. My research dealt with devotional practices and focused on dressmaking for the deities. With my previous experience in art, working with materials came easily to me and it seemed practical to base my research in the temple's production room. Looking back, I realize how generous the community was in allowing me to watch, learn and participate in projects. With the help of some key people in the community, I was also allowed to work on garments that would end up on the bodies of sacred deities. This was something that people called "direct service," considered to be one of the greatest honours that a devotee could have. The trope of service had a power of its own and I met people who had dedicated their lives to making garments for the deities. One devotee said that without such a service she might not have stayed with the group this long. Working with materials felt familiar, something that my body could do even if my mind was burdened with the (seemingly more important) task of discerning what somebody said in an interview. I relished my time in the production room as an opportunity for access to people and spaces but could not connect the subjective process of making to analytical insights. That came much later and via a detour.

My project was based on the hypothesis that everyday processes of making and material manipulation created an alternate register of devotional experience, one that could not be completely circumscribed or controlled by rational, discursive means. I was interested in what properties and qualities of artifacts and

bodies *do* to perpetuate devotional agendas and not just their symbolism or high-level intellectual value. So far, I had not been put in a situation where I experienced the difference between these two registers of knowledge—discursive and non-discursive—for myself. This happened about six months later as I observed students learn how to embroider in the temple's sewing room.

By then, I had acquired a degree of familiarity with the site and was following a batch of initiated students as they took various courses in a deity worship program run by the temple. At the time, the students were engaged in a two week course in deity dressmaking. Surprisingly, I found that classroom exercises were not just about the techniques of embroidery. One day, the students were asked to write a letter to a deity, declaring their loyalty and hopes of meeting him in heaven. I had so far avoided taking part in such declarative exercises but the teacher was insistent that I do so.

Suddenly, I balked. It was a visceral reaction. Something within me would not allow me to participate in the exercise and the thought of writing a letter to a god whom I did not believe in, or have any affection for, seemed dishonest. One part of me was fearful that my lack of devotion would be blatantly apparent if I went through the motions of the exercise and another part was worried that, if I did go ahead, it would be taken as a sign of spiritual affiliation. I refused to write the letter. Looking back, I think I made the right decision but at the time, I was conflicted about my role as participant and to what degree one must be willing to participate. Making decorations and garments seemed a different and more natural way of developing relationships with people rather than immediately engaging in philosophical discussions, and it was through these relationships that I developed an intellectual appreciation for the faith.

In the meantime, I energetically made mistakes in other areas. I smelled a flower intended for a deity bouquet, complimented a devotee on the fragrance of her cooking and collected fabric scraps from a dress that had not yet been offered to the deities. In each of these cases, respectively, the flower was discarded, the food was salvaged with holy water and I was advised not to take any fabric pieces. I learned that nothing intended for the deity could be relished or consumed before it was offered. These were truly awkward moments but none of them shook me up as much as (the prospect of) a failed letter.

I am now in the advanced stages of writing my dissertation on dressing and garment-production as devotion. The experiences of being made and un-made in the sewing

room invoked something that I had been investigating, i.e., the different ways of approaching the deity but of which I had no direct experience until then. Clothing had always been an interest but this event motivated me to more deeply consider the sensorial and physiological effects of material interactions, the ways in which they were engaged through practice in a highly rationalized religiosphere and the kinds of tensions that ensue in balancing discursive and non-discursive modalities of devotion. This analytical framework would not have had as powerful a resonance were it not for my moments of (dis)orientation in the field.

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