

Indian cultural research: an Auckland reflection

Alison Booth



The author at Britannia & Co.

My research portfolio includes studies that focus on event management, cultural performance and issues of cultural sustainability. I am interested in networks as the relationship between people, resources and events are key for viability. I strongly believe that ethnography depends on respect, honesty and love for people and their cultural expressions. In my PhD thesis *Performance networks: Indian cultural production in Aotearoa/New Zealand*, I wrote "It comes down to the trust you have in people and that people have in you" (2016, p.160).

Because of my San Franciscan heritage, I view the world quite differently than those identifying as 'New Zealand Europeans' in an Auckland context. My PhD at the University of Otago required me to position myself in my research not just as an ethnographer, but also as a member of one diaspora gazing into cultural performances through the eyes of another diaspora. My networks include close family friends of South Indian heritage in California, India and New Zealand; my husband, who is an ethnomusicologist focusing on the music and culture of India, as well as an experienced performer of classical Indian music; students at the

University of Auckland; and local Indian musicians and touring musicians in New Zealand. Without these networks, I would not be working on a Diwali project with Henry Johnson at the University of Otago's Centre for Global Migration, a Parsi food study, an event project in Rotorua, or a palliative care project with a local charity.

One of the projects that I am currently working on is with an Auckland-based Mumbai Parsi woman. We are looking at the potential of food in the cultural survival of the dwindling global Parsi population. When I was in Mumbai in early February 2020, I attended the Kala Ghoda Festival and participated in a heritage walking tour that focussed on Parsi culture from the perspective of food. I also jumped at the chance to meet a Parsi friend for lunch. We shared a meal at Britannia,

the well-known Parsi restaurant in Fort, in memory of her late father, who was a Bollywood musician and composer and a close family friend. I have found that many Parsis, in Mumbai and Auckland, have opinions about Britannia; too expensive, not the most delicious, not authentic, the owner was a royalist who admired the Queen as well as a publicity hound. As an ethnographer, I just listened and reflected on the quite emotive statements about quite a modest restaurant. In fact, my personal experience at Britannia, was a meal filled with reminiscences, laughter and delight, with my dear friend, who was sharing her heart with me; through recollections of love and grief. We indulged in her father's favourite dishes and lamented that he was not with us anymore. The Britannia staff wanted to know if I was also Parsi as I was adept at eating with my right hand and totally at ease at the table. This multi-generational and multi-cultural story frames my research profiles and my family experiences with performers and producing events over decades.

As I write, New Zealand is in a four-week Covid-19 lockdown, prohibiting any public events or family gatherings. With this in mind, I am reflecting on the impacts on the visibility of Indian popular culture in our current closed environment and from my personal family 'bubble'. Global conferences that were planned are cancelled. In New Zealand, Indian food stores have not been included in the essential services category of supermarkets, dairies, hospitals and banks. Places of worship and community gatherings are no longer accessible, a situation in strong contrast to only a couple of weeks ago, when we hosted a *sarangi* (bowed zither) player from Mumbai and a *tabla* (set of two hand drums) player from Australia, performing

at community events in New Zealand. They asked to stay with us, as we share performance experiences, friends and lineages that span the global musician networks and the Indian musical diaspora. Although both classically trained musicians, they have found the only formula for their survival has been to collaborate with western musicians on global tours. With India's borders closing on 20 March, the *tabla* player headed home to Australia and to a 14-day quarantine. The *sarangi* player cut short his New Zealand tour schedule, catching the last plane back to Mumbai before the Indian borders closure and further restrictions.

There will be no more live performances for the foreseeable future, as all venues and borders have been closed. What has appeared are more virtual performances, as online communities reform creative spaces for musicians. For instance, Shashank Subramanyam, a Carnatic flautist in Chennai, announced a free workshop through his Facebook site. The global challenge will be to manage the immense broadband connections to keep our networks and creative works alive.

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particular localities in China, the Pacific Islands and New Zealand were connected through Cantonese migration and business networks.

One example of this is the business enterprise of Chew Chong (circa 1828-1920). Arriving in New Zealand in 1866, Chong initially exploited a fungus (Wood Ear) growing in abundance in the forests of northwestern New Zealand that was prized in Chinese cuisine and medicine. Chong arranged to have vast quantities of the fungus dried locally and then shipped to Chinese consumers in Sydney and Qing China. Other Chinese merchants also took part in the enterprise, and from 1880 to 1920 New Zealand fungus exports reaped £401,551. While still sending fungus offshore, Chew Chong invested funds from this enterprise and his trading stores into pioneering the dairy industry in southern Taranaki. He bought the latest equipment, innovated several designs himself, and came up with the concept of share-milking.

In sum, Chinese resource demand and then Chinese people contributed to a great acceleration of environmental change in the seas and countries of the nineteenth-century Pacific. This project is one that gives back Chinese individuals their agency, and places them back into the narrative of the Pacific, its exploitation and integration. Their story is one that politicians and policymakers need to hear when they assess contemporary China's activities and resource use in the Pacific.

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Notes

- 1 Ward, R.G. 1972. 'The Pacific Bêche-de-mer Trade with Special Reference to Fiji', in Ward, R.G. (ed.) *Man in the Pacific: Essays on Geographical Change in the Pacific Islands*. Clarendon Press, pp.107-108.
- 2 Quote and information from: Sinn, E. 2013. *Pacific Crossing: California Gold, Chinese Migration, and the Making of Hong Kong*. Hong Kong University Press, p.2.
- 3 Beattie, J., Melillo, E.D. & O'Gorman, E. (eds) *Eco-Cultural Networks and the British Empire: New Views on Environmental History*. Bloomsbury.

An absence of dissent. New Zealand's Asia-Pacific engagement, 1989-2020

Malcolm McKinnon

In 1989, led by Japan and Australia, several countries set up Asia Pacific economic cooperation – APEC. A slew of other regional institutions followed, in the security as well as the economic sphere, and 'regional architecture' became a catch phrase. New Zealand strongly supported, and fully participated in, these endeavours. At a time when the Commonwealth had frayed, and New Zealand had been demoted from 'ally' to 'friend' by the United States, the country found a new diplomatic home in a region (Australia included) that has come to account for 60% of its trade in goods and services and remained the focus of most of its security policies.

But where security and trade have developed, critical debate or dissent have not followed. At their most recent bilateral meeting in April 2019, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and Chinese President Xi Jinping "discussed a range of topics central to our bilateral relationship, and both welcomed the significant growth in recent years of trade, cultural and social ties, and other connections ..."¹ However, no mention was made of difficult issues such as human rights.

The recent ASEAN-New Zealand dialogue meeting was equally bland; it welcomed "the drafting of a new five-year Plan of Action next year to focus on strengthening the partnership through focused areas of cooperation such as, trade through the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area (AANZFTA), food and agriculture, renewable energy, and governance and public sector leadership".² Tellingly perhaps, the ASEAN co-chair was the Permanent Representative of Cambodia to ASEAN, Yeap Samnang, the representative of one of the least democratic governments in Southeast Asia.

It is true that governments, in dealing with other governments, face diplomatic constraints. Moreover, since 1990 protest over global issues in New Zealand has waned, as it has in other Western countries. But two reasons for this absence of dissent are more specific, the first arising from New Zealand circumstances, the second, from the nature of the Asia-Pacific community itself.

First, where there has been dissent in New Zealand, it has not 'Asianized' or has been confined to an 'Asian' space. A New Zealand civil society campaign against the Trans-Pacific Partnership (2010-16) was directed primarily against the United States, taking no account of analogous protest in Asian countries (or for that matter the massive support for TPP in some, notably Vietnam). The West Papua movement has strong supporters among Maori and Pakeha (non-Maori) New Zealanders, but arguably this is a function of Papua's place in Oceania rather than testimony to strength of feeling on an 'Asian' issue. Conversely, recent disputes on NZ campuses over the Hong Kong protests arose primarily between Mainland and Hong Kong students. Moreover, while there are several Chinese-language media outlets, voicing dissent in them can be problematic.³ For its part, the English-language media tends to foreground US and UK news in international coverage and rely on UK and US-based news sources for reportage of Asian events.⁴ The contrast with a newspaper like the *Straits Times* (Singapore) is striking.

Second, the 'dissentscape' in Pacific Asia is harsh. History provides insights. Pacific Asia in the later 20th and early 21st centuries was shaped by three mid-century victories – the US victory over Japan in 1945; the Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War in 1949 and – not quite a victory but significant nonetheless – the triumph of anti-colonial nationalists in Southeast Asia. ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations), at its outset in 1967 straddled the pro-American/anti-colonial non-aligned divide and overcame the other divide when Communist states joined the grouping between 1995 and 1999. For most ASEAN states, anti-colonial or anti-imperial struggles have remained benchmarks for state authority and challenges to that authority, however crafted, are met with scepticism. Communist China's joining of APEC (1991) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (1994), in no way indicated a readiness to tolerate domestic dissent, as the suppression of student protest in Tiananmen Square in 1989, and many subsequent events, have made clear.

What next?

Nonetheless, change may be more likely in Pacific Asia than in New Zealand. The New Zealand government has supported some low-key initiatives in support of civil society activity in Southeast Asia.⁵ But recent surveys disclose minimal awareness on the part of the New Zealand public of, for example, APEC. There have been episodes of anti-Asian prejudice since the advent of Covid-19 and majority support for an ongoing blanket ban on travellers from China, first imposed at the outbreak of the epidemic, despite the extreme disruption this has caused many New Zealanders with family ties to China.

Democratic transformations took place in South Korea and Taiwan, the Philippines and Indonesia in the 1980s and 1990s. Are others likely? In February 2019 Malaysia hosted a 'democracy festival' that attracted 400 participants from eight ASEAN countries. And in November 2019 Malaysian MPs from both government and opposition parties openly met Cambodia opposition leader Sam Rainsy despite his being barred from entering Cambodia, a ban that governments in both Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur complied with.⁶ The most recent communique of the ASEAN heads of government had one of the lengthiest-ever statements about human rights.⁷ Hopefully, as the dissentscape matures in Pacific Asia, New Zealanders will be prepared to contribute to it and support it more than is evident at present.

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Notes

- 1 <https://tinyurl.com/beeive-1april2019>
- 2 <https://tinyurl.com/asean-8july2019>
- 3 <https://tinyurl.com/NR-30sept2019>
- 4 For a scholarly analysis of this phenomenon, though from some years back, see Mathison, D. 2012. 'People like us: the cultural geography of New Zealand's international news', in Hirst, M. et al. (eds) *Scooped: The Politics and Power of Journalism in Aotearoa New Zealand*. Auckland: AUT Media, pp.128-140.
- 5 See <https://unionaid.org.nz>
- 6 <https://forsea.co/human-rights-for-all>
- 7 <https://tinyurl.com/asean-35summit-pdf>, see section 22.