

India



Mariangela Giusti and Urmila Chakraborty, eds., *Immagini, storie, parole: Dialoghi di formazione coi dipinti cantati delle donne Chitrakar del West Bengal* [Images, stories, words: Formative dialogues through the painted scrolls of female Chitrakars from West Bengal]

Mantova: Universitas Studiorum, 2014. 98 pages. Paperback, €18,00. ISBN 978-88-97683-39-1.

CHITRAKAR (*citrakār*) is the name of professional performers, commonly known as Patua (*paṭujā*) in West Bengal, whose handmade, colorful painted scrolls are accompanied by stories, sung while the scroll is unrolled, scene after scene. The painted scrolls, known as *paṭs*, narrated through the verses of the Bengali storytellers, are carriers of an interactive and multimedia traditional folk-art form. Their beauty and their unique narrative structure were highlighted in the urban environment of Kolkata as early as 1932 by the Bengali collector Gurusaday Dutta; since then, the charm and popularity of the *paṭs* has spread far across the Indian Ocean. Displayed in several world-famous museums, such as the Museum of International Folk Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Fowler Museum at UCLA in the U.S., and at the British Museum in Europe, the Patuas eventually found their way to entertain the aesthetic taste of Italian audiences too. After the pioneering effort of the Italo-Bengali “Milòn Mèla” theater troupe, who invited the aged and experienced Dukhashyam Chitrakar (41) to perform in Italy, the most important event that quenched the Italian thirst for the exotic through the Chitrakars’ paintings was held in Milan in 2012. Several *paṭs* were exhibited at the Museo del Fumetto (Museum of Comics) of Milan in September/October 2012. One of the curators, Urmila Chakraborty, a professor at the Department of Cultural Mediation in Milan, gave a lecture and asked students and participants to contribute with their reflections, poems, and thoughts (collected and published at the end of the book, 81–89). Following the exhibition, a workshop inspired by the Patuas’ art was held with students and teachers of the Department of Intercultural Pedagogy at

the University of Milan. Its outcome was a didactic exhibition called “*Immagini, suoni, parole*.” That is where this book, and its title, come from.

If the reader expects to learn anything new about the Chitrakar occupational group and its cultural context, he or she could be easily embittered and disappointed. The book is a compendium of short articles written by students, researchers, school teachers, pedagogues, and cultural mediators, who were superficially exposed to the folk art of the female Chitrakars of Naya village (West Bengal). None of the contributors are trained in the study of oral traditions and verbal arts and none of the articles are based on previous scholarship on the subject or on fieldwork. The only contribution that shows a vague awareness of the cultural background of the Patuas is the one written by Urmila Chakraborty; she visited Naya village under the guidance of the NGO *Banglanatak.com*, a Bengali organization that promotes cultural tourism and folklore as a means to diffuse social progress and rural development (in more or less unsuccessful ways, as examined by KOROM 2011).

The book offers an interesting perspective on how a storytelling/visual oral art tradition is exported and received out of context, and it interrogates its contributors on how female Chitrakars’ scrolls can be used, thanks to their universal expressive power, for promoting intercultural bridges. The agenda of the editors is certainly related to the relatively recent phenomenon of long-term immigration, and with the dramatic situation of contemporary Italian society, entangled in “pluriculturalism,” without the analytical instruments that allow for a harmonious and integrated multiethnic culture to arise.

Immagini, storie, parole has the big flaw of not being based at all on the previous literature on the topic it is supposed to be exploring, thus tacitly discouraging the intercultural understanding that it explicitly declares as its objective. The reader should not expect to find even the slightest effort to understand the tradition in its local background, for this is considered only in the way that it can be functional, entertaining, or didactic in a global perspective.

The number of typing and punctuation mistakes communicate a sense of carelessness that a good editor could have easily avoided with a more accurate revision. Editing by someone at least familiar with Bengali language and culture would have been welcome in order to avoid misspellings (such as Goddess Khali instead of Kali, 74) and overly creative translations (for example, *paṭer gān*, songs that accompany the unrolling of the *paṭ*, is translated as “songs of the road” [16], which would be *paṭher gān*).

The focus on the genuine reaction of spectators unaware of the traditional background of female Chitrakars makes the book at times overly poetic and dominated by an overall sentiment of pathos derived from assumed cultural superiority; this represents an annoying tone for a reader concerned with the deontological premises of anthropology, ethnology, and folkloristics. For example, Chakraborty describes the *paṭ* produced for the commemoration of Rabindranath Tagore’s 105th anniversary as a non-folkloric painting, since the artist prepared the scroll only after an intense and attentive study on the poet’s life (20); this transmits a very old-fashioned idea of folklore as something spontaneous, irrational, and lacking formation and accurate training. Apart from this, Chakraborty provides useful and

concise background information for readers who are not familiar with this oral/visual art form, and offers an interesting comparative perspective describing other storytelling traditions of South Asia (for example, painted scrolls from Gujarat and Rajasthan, Chitrakars of Maharashtra, 22–23).

A perceivable “*bon sauvage* syndrome” also transpires from the article by Mirella Caumo (27–28), where Patuas’ paintings are described as “simple,” “naïve,” “ingenuous,” and the women storytellers are depicted as “simple but mysterious” and “strong.” Mariangela Giusti’s article equally shows a lack of preliminary study of Bengali culture and traditions. The Patuas’ verbal art is described in comparison with scenes, portraits, and commonplaces drawn from YUNUS (2003) and ROY (2008), as if these popular publications could be the only two sources of shared imagery about rural South Asia, or about Bengal’s flora and village landscapes, to make the region accessible to an Italian readership (37–38). Murshidabad, a district of seven million inhabitants, is described as “a little town” (47) and female Chitrakars are said to address their songs to “women of archaic societies” (48), paradoxically reinforcing Eurocentric clichés and evolutionist stereotypes that a book on intercultural pedagogy is expected to uproot. Nevertheless, Giusti’s contribution offers an interesting reflection on the pedagogical use of *paṭ*: she investigates the modalities by which painted scrolls “teach” their social messages (for example, about HIV prevention, anti-pollution, domestic violence, and so on) and points out the strategies that Patuas use in order to emphasize the values that the *paṭ* aims to communicate; that is, the autobiographical point of view, the activation of retrospective thought, and then of introspective thought (44–46).

Many among the contributors who were asked for a cross-border understanding of the Bengali painted scrolls looked for familiar equivalents in order to process historical and cultural differences: in the effort to understand a folk art that they have never been exposed to, some authors compared the style of the Patuas to Fauvism (50), some compared the *paṭ* on the tsunami tragedy of 2004 to Picasso’s “Guernica” (81), and others compared the *paṭ* about the dangers of illegal abortion to Frida Kahlo’s “Henry Ford Hospital” (82). Although based on unsubstantiated comparativism, all of them remarked that the *paṭ*s privilege expression over realism.

Authors like Franca Zuccoli (49–53) and Marta Franchi (55–58) tried to find a familiar comparison in order to reframe the female storyteller into a known cultural context. They thus decoded the role of the female Chitrakars through the similes of the West African *griots* and the songs of the North Italian *mondines* as possible intercultural readings.

The pedagogue Giovanni Colombo presents an interesting perspective on the didactic function of visual metaphors. He supports the intercultural value of Patua art with semiotic arguments by suggesting that symbols have the power to renovate themselves continuously and build new signifiers; in other words, their message is open to new meanings. Contrary to reading, visual communication through painted scrolls is not linear, and it is free from following the rules of cause and effect. The spectator/listener’s eyes are encouraged to move and connect different elements of the same scene. As he writes, “the meanings are built *in fieri*” (my translation, 73).

Paṭs representing the attack on the twin towers seem to be particularly attractive for European tastes. They are repeatedly mentioned in the course of the book as an indigenous, creative representation of a far away Other, a distant land, a foreign country. In this respect, *paṭs* are compared to the illustrated book of Bhajju SHYAM (2005), the Gond painter who reproduced London through his own eyes.

The scrolls of the Chitrakars were popularized among Italian Indophiles and folk-art aficionados thanks to two previous publications: MOHANTY et al. 2008, illustrated by Orissi scroll-painters, and CHITRAKAR et al. 2010, an illustrated life story of Martin Luther King, resulting from the collaboration of an African-American writer, a Chitrakar painter from West Bengal, and the Italian designer Guglielmo Rossi.

Joining the ranks of the increasing non-academic literature on Chitrakars, this book is a tribute to folk art in a transnational environment. It adds little to the historical and cultural understanding of Patua art in its context, but it can be valuable as a sample of a reader-response study. The authors uncover the ways in which *paṭs* are transculturally received, understood, and appreciated. In this sense, *Immagini, storie, parole* could be a precious source for the semiotics of reception of Patua art, for it provides a number of testimonials concerning how Bengali painted scrolls are received in an alien milieu. Why are they attractive? How are they represented? What is the meaning attached to them by European audiences? Offering possible solutions to these questions, the book contributes to the understanding of why more and more *paṭs* are entering Western museums, prestigious collections, children's books, and library shelves.

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