

## Patronage, Commodification, and the Dissemination of Performance Art: The Shared Benefits of Web Archiving

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### Introduction

This essay addresses the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of documenting oral performance on film, the evolution of a polymodal form of archival documentation leading to online monographs, and the question of how performers may benefit from the archival process—specifically with reference to performances of the epic of Pabuji in Rajasthan, India.<sup>1</sup>

Owing to digital technology and the emergence of the Internet as a broadcasting forum and marketing agent, a phenomenon has occurred which we might term the “commodification” of expressive culture. In this technological universe where sounds and images are sold for the benefit of some (but not others), issues of copyright, intellectual property rights, and the commercialization and marketing of expressive culture on the web have become paramount.<sup>2</sup> Video excerpts are being broadcast around the world in free and open formats.<sup>3</sup> Whereas documentation of oral performance traditions *by* scholars and *for* scholars was once the norm, I propose that we—as ethnographers, linguists, and folklorists—must ensure that such performers can also benefit from the process of academic study and documentation, with support for the perpetuation of their livelihood as well as their cultural and artistic legacy. How do we as scholars and ethnographic filmmakers respond to these challenges and use these media to the performers’ benefit?

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<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to the Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research for their funding of the filming and archival documentation of four performances of the oral epic of *Pabuji ki par* across Rajasthan in 2008 and its production as five films in 2009 (Wickett 2009). I am also indebted to the World Oral Literature Project at the University of Cambridge for publishing my monograph that analyzes the epic and results of this research (Wickett 2010b). Thanks also to the World Oral Literature Project for undertaking the archiving of the filmed epic performances, interviews, photographs, and texts in the archive DSpace@Cambridge with online access available to researchers via their website (Wickett 2011).

<sup>2</sup> In fact, as recently as on January 18, 2012, the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the Protect IP Act or PIPA (Preventing Real Online Threats to Economic Creativity and Theft of Intellectual Property Act) were both thrown out, according to the Guardian’s Dominic Rushe (2012), as governments around the world refused to sign up to these legislative instruments on the grounds that they endangered freedom of speech and privacy.

<sup>3</sup> These forms of broadcast range from YouTube snippets to instant “I am here” picture and video messaging via mobile phones and the Internet.

## The Project

As a folklorist and student of Dan Ben-Amos, Dell Hymes, and Henry Glassie, I have always turned in my scholarly interests to the study of performance in context. In this particular instance, I set out to film traditional performances of the folk epic known as *Pabuji ki par/phad* (meaning “Pabuji with the scroll”).<sup>4</sup> This genre has survived in oral form for six hundred years, but it had not yet been documented digitally. The project was to document performances and



Fig. 1: The *phad* belonging to Patashi Devi, Mohan Bhopa, and family, filmed during the performance of the epic by Patashi Devi and Bhanwar Lal Bhopa at Pabusar, District Churu, Tehsil Ratangarh, Shekawati, Rajasthan, May 6, 2009. All photographs accompanying this essay were taken by Elizabeth Wickett.

texts for an archive funded by the Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research and dedicated to the recording of linguistic and anthropological traditions under threat of extinction. My intention was to film a random series of performances by noted singers of the epic from Pabusar—a hamlet near Ratangarh, Jodhpur, and Jaisalmer—in the contexts determined by the performers,<sup>5</sup> transcribe and translate these performances *in situ*, and publish them as a series of videos and texts. The project culminated in the production of four DVDs featuring the entire performances (as sung without editing) plus transcripts and a final film, *To Earn Our Bread*,

<sup>4</sup> The terms *par* and *phad* are synonymous. The particular genre of performance of the epic of Pabuji in which a *bhopi* and *bhopa* perform has been described in the literature as “*Pabuji ki par*,” meaning “the performance of the epic of Pabuji with the “*par*.” However, during filming in Rajasthan, I observed that the pronunciation of the word used to describe this cotton screen tended to be “*phad*” rather than “*par*,” so I have used this throughout the paper.

<sup>5</sup> The Jaipur performance with musicians from Pabusar was filmed on the grounds of the Meghniwas Hotel, Jaipur; the Pabusar performance was filmed in the musicians’ home village with a local audience; the Jodhpur performance occurred in the courtyard of Sugana Ram Bhopa and his wife, Man Bhari Devi Bhopi; and the Jaisalmer performance was in the village of Manopia, courtesy of Jethu Singh Bhatti.

comprising excerpts from what are clearly among the audience's favourite episodes: the tale of the snake-god Gogaji who bites his future bride Kelam (Pabuji's niece and a higher caste Rajput) to secure their marriage and the celebratory account of Pabuji's gala wedding that is interrupted by the theft of cows by his evil stepbrother (Wickett 2010a).



Fig. 2: Gogaji transformed into a cobra bites Kelam (with Parvati Devi and Hari Ram).  
[http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/27ii/wickett#myGallery-picture\(2\)](http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/27ii/wickett#myGallery-picture(2))



Fig. 3: Harmal Devasi is propelled across the salty sea to Lanka by the blessing of Pabuji (with Patashi Devi and Bhanwar Lal (Pabusar)).  
[http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/27ii/wickett#myGallery-picture\(3\)](http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/27ii/wickett#myGallery-picture(3))

Folklore was long ago defined by Dan Ben-Amos (1972:13) as “artistic communication in small groups,” and in this epic genre the definition is particularly apt. The epic of Pabuji is performed, on request, for small audiences across Rajasthan by professional musicians of the Bhopa caste. Patrons request performances when they wish to invoke the blessing and intercession of their revered saint and intercessor, Pabuji.<sup>6</sup> For this project, I decided that I would emulate this tradition and become a patron.<sup>7</sup>

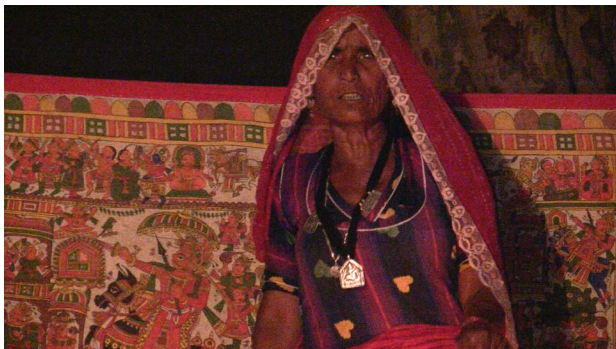


Fig. 4: Patashi Devi Bhopi in Pabusar.

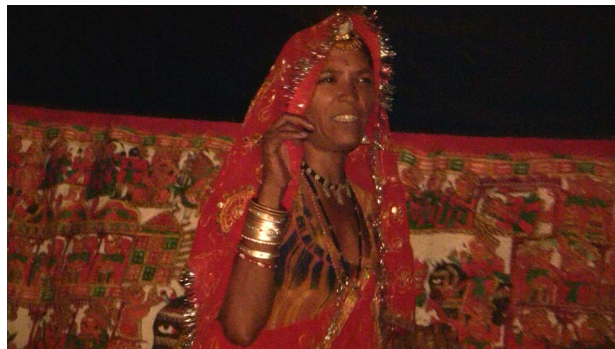


Fig. 5: Man Bhari Devi Bhopi in Jodhpur.

<sup>6</sup> Patashi Devi informed us that performances are enacted for marriage, to bring the rain, and to protect cows and fields from pestilence.

<sup>7</sup> The transcription process was conducted immediately following the filming over several days with a Marwari translator and transcriber, Dr. Suraj Rao, and a Hindi/English interpreter, Dr. Priyanka Mathur. As a team, we undertook to transcribe and translate the complete written texts of the performances *in situ*. (Suraj Rao worked on the Marwari and the Hindi translation; Priyanka and I produced the English translation.) The Marwari texts were later retyped on a computer and the English translations polished (with the help of a colleague, Puneet Sharma); these texts, along with the four finished films, were then deposited in the Firebird Foundation Archive in Maine in 2009.





Fig. 6: Parvati Devi Bhopi in Jaisalmer.



Fig. 7: Santosh Devi Bhopi in Jaisalmer.

The epic of Pabuji is noteworthy in that its principal singers are women. Known as *bhopis*, these women sing this visually and musically complex epic, accompanied by their husband *bhopas* on the single-stringed viol known as the *ravanhatta*. Trained to sing in a high-pitched operatic voice, *bhopis* achieve fame within their communities as famous vocalists. They also gain enhanced social status and respect within the family as “earners of their own bread.” Whereas Rajasthani women normally remain silent, veiled, and deferential in front of their husbands and elders, in this case, when faced by two female interlocutors—Priyanka Mathur and myself with a camera—these *bhopis* (Patashi Devi, in particular) felt able to unveil and speak confidently about their lives, “empowered by the blessing of Pabuji.”



Fig. 8: Hari Ram Bhopa performing in Jaisalmer on the *ravanhatta*.



Fig. 9: Sugana Ram Bhopa performing in Jodhpur on the *ravanhatta* during the performance of the epic.

The main protagonist of the epic, Pabuji, is a fourteenth-century folk hero who is also regarded as a local deity by herdsmen, some traditional castes of Rajasthan (Rajputs, Jat, and Meghwal), and certain sects of nomads<sup>8</sup> who eke out a livelihood through animal husbandry and *bajra*<sup>9</sup> cultivation in the harsh terrain of the Thar desert. Pabuji’s reputation as a divine intercessor is based on his miraculous feats and extraordinary ability to protect cows from theft and illness. As I discovered over the course of this project, the significance of this epic extends far beyond the moment of performance. This particular caste of performers belongs to the *adivasi* Bhil tribe; they regard their life’s work and act of performance as a sacred vocation. They derive

<sup>8</sup> There are several distinct communities of nomads acting as healers in Rajasthan who are also known as *bhopas* or *bhomiya*s. Unlike the *bhopas* who sing the epic and regard Pabuji as their patron, these *bhopas* may act as religious priests, undertaking healing rituals within their own communities. They do not sing the epic of Pabuji.

<sup>9</sup> Pearl millet, a crop requiring minimal rainfall.

their livelihood and prestige from their proficiency as musicians and Pabuji's enduring legacy as a divine healer who saved cows. During performances, devotees (and occasionally but not often *bhopas* as well) become possessed by the spirit of Pabuji and pronounce healing remedies.<sup>10</sup> *Bhopis* are never possessed because, as Hari Ram Bhopa says (Wickett 2010a), "Pabuji would never possess women;" their counterpart deity is the female goddess, Mataji.

### **Film As an "Archival" Medium: Issues and Constraints**

The first conundrum I encountered during filming was the issue of how to "document" an artistic performance for the purposes of an archive. The inclination to create a "personal composition"—determined by framing of the subject, camera angles, use of close-ups, non-chronological editing, and so on—is natural to any filmmaker. Additionally, in recognition of the fact that the interrelationship between filmmaker and performer in ethnographic filmmaking necessarily impinges on the nature of the performance record and creation of the final "product," it still should be acknowledged that no visual and aural document is neutral, nor even a "document." It is an individual work by the ethnographer, and it will become an object of analysis and interpretation not only by film viewers and fellow anthropologists, but also by the performers themselves. I was ever-conscious of this conflict between the analytic gaze and the subjectivity of the filmmaker, the task of providing an objective document for archival purposes and the desire to make a film from which the performers could benefit. In executing this difficult balancing act, I wondered if the performers would agree in the end that the film had portrayed them in a way in which they would take pride.

### **Evolution of a Poly-modal Form of Archival Documentation**

In the case of the musically intriguing and visually stunning epic of Pabuji, several issues present themselves to any ethnographer: the performance is captivating but relatively static and logocentric,<sup>11</sup> devoid of dramatic gesture, and therefore incomprehensible except to Marwari speakers, and even then only to those familiar with the language and archaic diction of the epic of Pabuji. In fact, this particular artful form of language—derived from Dimgal, an ancient form of the Rajasthani language known to the Charan poets, traditional reciters of the Pabuji epic, and former scribes of the epic—is the epitome of what Richard Bauman (1977) described as the essence of verbal art in performance: a shared communicative register and linguistic code that only the devotees and those familiar with the language understand. The comprehensibility of an epic performance such as this one depends also not only on the words, but on the devotees' belief in the spiritual epiphanies that take place during the performance. Each dramatization in front of the *phad* is a re-creation of those historic events in which Pabuji enacted miraculous deeds. The

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<sup>10</sup> The healing process is described in detail by Hari Ram and Santosh Devi in Wickett 2010a.

<sup>11</sup> "Logocentric" has several meanings, but in this case I use the word to mean "centered on language."

deity, Pabuji, becomes incarnate *in* the performance, and his acts of beneficence, it is believed, are revived and re-invoked in performance. In a sense, the singing of the “words,” the eloquent descriptors, is part of the pageant that is inherently musical, but it is only one of several factors contributing to the ritual and ethos of the performance. My act of filming could only capture a two-dimensional representation of that far more profound, three-dimensional process. I would never be able to capture on film the way in which a living god, Pabuji, becomes present and works acts of healing. Therefore, how best to communicate these aspects of epic performance in a film, while at the same time conveying the simultaneity of image, voice, instrumental accompaniment, and poetry? How important, finally, are the words?

The translation of oral poetry for an unfamiliar audience is problematic because the language of performance in an epic like Pabuji is redolent of invested meanings, prior contexts, and recondite echoes of poetic phrases and formulae known to the performers but not to others. The ability of an ethnographer like myself to comprehend the nuances of meaning—especially those involving irony—during performance (as the transcripts of the epic of Pabuji reveal)<sup>12</sup> is almost always constrained unless many long years have been spent in the field before filming or recording, which, of course, is desirable but not always achievable. Had I presented the visual and aural aspects of performance only as “the film,” it might have passed muster, but it would not have stood up to scrutiny as an academic study of oral tradition: it would not have been able to communicate the significance and meaning of the epic to its patrons and performers. I concluded, therefore, that a visual or aural document alone would not, and could not, suffice as a mode of documentation of the epic genre. Such an expressive genre as epic requires a poly-modal approach to penetrate and convey the spectrum of understandings that the *cognoscenti* of a tradition have imbibed over many hearings and a lifetime of oral performances, and which they now comprehend in their various contemporary, evolving forms. It required a finely honed translation and analysis to unpack the layers of meanings inherent in the “text.”

Ethnographers traditionally deploy a variety of tactics to bridge the comprehension divide. Subtitles could have been added to each scene—as is the norm in anthropological documentary—but had I added subtitles to all four performances (a very expensive and difficult process), the performers’ actual words would have appeared to be largely meaningless. In some cases, the “text” relates to a historical and cosmological context that cannot be condensed into a few words. Moreover, subtitles cannot be strung continuously along an entire performance without distracting the eye of the viewer from the visual impact of the epic and the performers themselves. As opera companies have learned, subtitles cannot be placed along the stage, and as a result are often accommodated elsewhere. This is a problem not particular to epic, but it is one found in all poetic performance requiring translation. I felt that all information relating to the epic, its history, the scenographic and dramaturgical requirements for performance (the unwrapping of the *phad* at dusk), its function as a healing medium, and synopses of the plot as performed was needed to show the comparative emphases and inflections of meaning in the performers’ individual renderings. Translations of the full texts were also, I felt, important to provide this vital cosmological context and ethos of belief. Consequently, this rationale was the

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<sup>12</sup> In Appendices A and B, synopses of three performances are provided that show the way in which the musicians invest the story with contemporary ironies.

one underlying my monograph published by the World Oral Literature Project in 2010 (Wickett 2010b). By that time, I had come to envisage the archiving of the performances of the epic of Pabuji as necessarily poly-modal, requiring the creation of a set of films, music, photographs, texts, and translations, amplified and unpacked through literary and contextual analysis.<sup>13</sup>

### Ritual Contexts of Power

In most performance contexts, the ethnographer is generally required to respect the ritual setting and not interfere with a performance as it evolves. In this form of performance of the epic of Pabuji, known as *Pabuji ki par* (or *phad*),<sup>14</sup> the *bhopa* begins by setting up the scene and ambiance with the unfurling of the *phad* at dusk (Bharucha 2003).<sup>15</sup> The *phad* is a spectacular multi-colored scroll, believed by performers to be invested with the power and blessing of the *bhopa*'s god, Pabuji. Offerings of *pan* (betel nut) and corn flour are made to the god, vials of coconut oil are burned, and the devotional prayer—known as *arthi*—is sung by the *bhopa* priest in front of the *phad* to invite the god to become present and infuse the performance with his

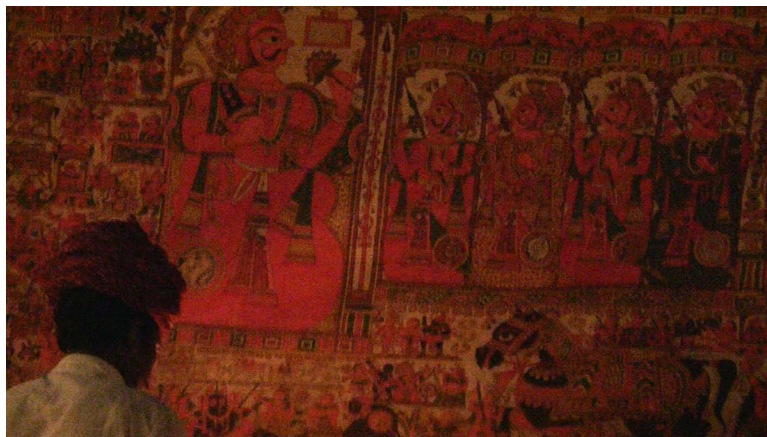


Fig. 10: Priest at Pabusar performing the rituals before the *phad*.

beneficent and healing grace.<sup>16</sup> In an extraordinary reversal of the norm, however, I did decide to resort to a form of interference in the course of filming the epic performances: although the *bhopis* were veiled during the first part of the filmed performances, for the second part I asked them if they would agree to remove their veils so that we could see their faces. Earlier, the first performance I had seen of the epic featured a *bhopi*,

accompanied by her husband in Amber Palace in Jaipur, in which she was unveiled. Now behind the camera lens, I was disconcerted when I saw the women perform with completely obscured

<sup>13</sup> The full texts of the epic performances have been published in English in booklets and integrated into the cases of the four individual performance DVDs, currently being sold by the performers at local festivals and fairs, and by the author to university libraries. Editing and publication of the full texts plus analysis remain a work in progress.

<sup>14</sup> Most information about the epic of Pabuji I derived before embarking on the archiving project was from notes and analyses done by the famous Rajasthani folklorist, Komal Kothari, published posthumously by Rustom Bharucha (2003).

<sup>15</sup> Another form of the epic performance of Pabuji is known as *Pabuji ki mata*. Unlike *Pabuji ki par*, this genre involves men only chanting the epic and playing drums.

<sup>16</sup> A short excerpt presenting the litany of prayers to Pabuji against a backdrop of the *phad* and performed at the beginning of a recitation may be viewed in the DSpace@Cambridge online archive's Pabuji collection (Wickett 2011) as sung by Parvati Devi with accompaniment by Hari Ram in Jaisalmer.



faces. I was afraid that such performances would not be easily viewed by audiences unfamiliar with the epic. Moreover, having already seen the constrained economic circumstances in which these musicians lived, I was concerned that the veiling would allow for no empathy with the audience through visual contact, in turn making it difficult for an audience to comprehend the emotional thrust of the epic or film. Only later was I informed of the logic of the veiling in ritual performances of the epic. I was told by Patashi (Wickett 2010a) that “the god Pabuji is a high caste Rajput and women must show respect to his esteemed presence in the *phad* by veiling both before him and before other elders in the audience.” When women perform unveiled, it may be construed as dishonoring Pabuji and the elders. I pursued the question afterwards and was told that in an instance such as this—filming the epic performance for an archive—women do perform without veils and justify this breach of traditional male protocols by defining what they do as engaging in “tourist performances.”<sup>17</sup>



Fig. 11: Santosh Devi Bhopi describes healing rituals during performance of the epic in Jaisalmer.



Fig. 12: Bhanwar Lal reads the *phad* in Jaipur.

As professional singers, *bhopis* are sometimes required to perform in many types of circumstances to survive, including invitations by local or even foreign patrons to perform at folk music festivals or venues such as the University of Pennsylvania (as Patashi Devi and her husband Mohan Bhopa were), and this increased performance variability may require a new configuration of tradition in order for them to be able to communicate their art to new audiences.<sup>18</sup>

Other filmmakers and documentarists will need to make similar decisions if the aim is to make archives of performances for posterity. Such decisions admittedly challenge the traditional and sacrosanct rules about context. Other scholars/filmmakers might have decided otherwise; I justified my decision at that point by thinking not only of the function of the archive as a “repository” of a record of the tradition, but also of the receptivity of the epic and its music in the public arena. I do not think that I transgressed the rules of contextual analysis, but I instead believe I adapted them to a format that would allow the perception of the contemporary tradition to be as it currently is: in transition. Dell Hymes (1975) observed that tradition is a matter of “re-creation” and rests on perceived notions of situation, creativity, and performance. For performers

<sup>17</sup> This information was conveyed to me by my colleague and translator, Dr. Priyanka Mathur, after informal discussions with the *bhopis* off-camera during the filming of Wickett 2010a.

<sup>18</sup> Patashi Devi is very well-traveled. My folklorist colleague, Joe Miller, recently informed me that he had invited Patashi Devi to perform at the University of Pennsylvania as part of her tour of the United States.



of the epic of Pabuji, I would suggest that the tradition is in constant flux and that this transformational process is one that is being modulated according to the diverse types of audiences encountered by the musicians.

### **Technical Constraints and Issues of Authenticity and Receptivity**

Technical issues may also intrude into decision-making processes while filming, and with the epic I was faced with a major technical hurdle that appeared only during shooting. A sole plug on my non-professional Canon HF11 (AVCHD) camera was available for both the external professional stereo mike and the video light. Few venues of performance of the epic were furnished even with electric light, and filming in total darkness meant that the image would be captured with considerable image blur, technically called “noise.”<sup>19</sup> Had I been properly prepared, I might have found an alternative arrangement, but in the end I decided to use the light and boost the sound quality later during the editing, an achievement that fortunately I was indeed able to accomplish. In any case, most ethnographers would disapprove of the use of too much artificial lighting in filming “a night wake” such as the epic of Pabuji, which is only performed between dusk and dawn. These issues impact adversely the quality of the final documentary film and its replicability (for commercial sales) and so should be dealt with, preferably in advance.

A second technical obstacle arose, which was both a consequence of a constrained budget and the fact that as the sole ethnographer/filmmaker I was attempting to film a performance tradition in which audience participation was the norm. It would have been detrimental to the ethos of documentation to exclude this participation, but with a single camera the challenge existed to balance the attention given to the movements and singing of the performers (and for musical continuity the camera should never stop recording) with the filming of audience reactions and asides through well-focused cutaways. Such a dilemma is not easily resolved. Ideally, one should have two cameras and two filmmakers, but for budgetary reasons this arrangement is seldom possible, especially in such remote environments. Yet how determinist and prescriptive can an archivist/documentarist or a folklorist be in formulating the boundaries of a work of art and its dissemination? Probably not very, since the very essence of a digital recording reproduced on a DVD is its replicability without loss of quality, either as a DVD image or as a disc. This positive facet of digital media production needs to be much more exploited by scholars if these performers are to continue to earn their livelihoods through singing, even in a changed form.

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<sup>19</sup> In an interview by Michael Sullivan (2012) on National Public Radio with Ashotosh Sharma, a creator of a distribution network (entitled Amarass) of music by traditional Rajasthani musicians, Ashotosh described a similar situation in which his field recordings had to be made by candlelight in an area of total darkness in the desert outside Jaisalmer.

### Promotion and Commercialization of Traditional Performance Art

The commercialization of artistic performances by traditional artists themselves is not, of course, new. One epic poet I recorded singing Egyptian epic in Upper Egypt, ʿAwaḍallah ʿAbd al-Jalil from Edfu, actually referred to himself as a *tājir al-fann*, “merchant of art,” a phrase that my colleague Susan Slyomovics (1988) used as the title in her dissertation and subsequent book on his performance of the Egyptian *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* epic. ʿAwaḍallah was aware of his role as purveyor of his talents. Perhaps it is even more crucial now as “folklorismus”<sup>20</sup> becomes more prevalent. Current trends influencing the form and content of traditional performance in India also appear to be influencing the transformation of the traditional repertoire of songs and dances into more and more flamboyant “entertainment.” Musicians in Rajasthan, in particular, are being urged to add drums to “spice up” epic recitation (which is more usually sonorous and sober) and encouraged to “modernize” their music in studio recordings so that it becomes what foreign musicians and impresarios (and even the nomadic Jogi Nath singing community of Rajasthan) now call *jermatīyya*, or “fusion.” Such modifications correspond well to Henry Glassie’s view of what we call “tradition” as a dynamic process that “flows into and from the process of convergence” (1995:409). Adaptation to new contexts is a facet of cultural production and one to which traditional musicians, attempting to survive in the twenty-first century, are becoming well attuned. Accordingly, while ethnographers may seek to retain the “traditional” and authentic context of performance in ethnographic recording (particularly for archives) as closely as possible, it is not always feasible to do so, particularly for technical and logistical reasons. To ensure the quality of recording and image, folklorists and documentary filmmakers recording such events may need to resort to what Kenneth Goldstein (1967) referred to as “induced natural context.” This could mean deliberately filming a public event such as the performance of an epic in an isolated stretch of desert or inside a house in order to preserve sound quality. For example, in the 1980s I made recordings of laments while accompanied by my infant son. On occasion, my son would start caterwauling, a noise that was distracting to the lamenters and unfortunate, but I had no choice. I was recording alone, without assistants.

When I filmed the epic of Pabuji, it became clear that the musicians identified two distinct genres of performance: “ritual performance” and “tourist performance.” The latter, I conclude, is an innovative or hybrid form in which perceptions of how the true epic should be performed are still being retained but with significant transformations and inclusions. I also experienced another form of innovation: the integration of popular folk song into the dramatic environment of the epic. The singers from Jodhpur, Man Bhari Devi and Sugana Ram, asked if they could sing “Banjari Nomad,” a song recently incorporated into the repertoires of several

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<sup>20</sup> The term refers to the adaptation and transformation of folk tradition into new and modern permutations and (sometimes) unrelated and bowdlerized versions of what once were meaningful rituals and genres. Venetia Newall (1987:131) offers a complete translation of the definition first proposed by Hans Moser (1962) in the German publication *Magazine for Volkskunde*, namely: “the performance of folk culture away from its original, local context, a playful imitation of popular motifs by another social class and thirdly, creation of folklore for different purposes outside any known tradition.”

epic singers we met during that stint of fieldwork, as a finale to their epic performance.<sup>21</sup> I agreed, and in response they sat down in front of the *phad* and sang, using the visually stunning, sacred scroll of Pabuji as a backdrop. In this re-secularized context the musicians gave no hint that this combination of secular and sacred might be considered a violation of traditional mores. In my view, this was a performance feature that they had developed individually for “tourist audiences” as an interlude between episodes of the epic, and they were anxious that it should be included in the film document.

The transformation of performance domains from sacred to secular is not peculiar to epic. In Rajasthan, where tourism is pivotal to their livelihoods, artists belonging to certain castes who sing as part of their religious vocation have allowed the trend of “Bollywoodization” to permeate their folk genres. This incorporation seems almost inevitable, traditional singers complain, as the sound of famous Bollywood songs rings out from all streets and markets. Seeking to earn money and survive in an increasingly cash-based economy, and in response to popular taste, younger *Jogin* who would traditionally “sing for their supper” in the tradition known as *feri* (“roaming and singing for alms”) are abandoning their distinctive folk repertoire. They are choosing to sing fast, percussive, and occasionally racy Bollywood songs, deemed to be “what the audience prefers, occasionally with *punghi* (flute) accompaniment.”<sup>22</sup> *Jogin* dancers employed in desert camps outside Jaisalmer also feel compelled to gyrate to melodies of widely disseminated Bollywood songs. The incursion of foreign songs into the repertoire is strongly rejected by older women but unquestionably accepted by the younger generation of performers. Foreign tourists in India may have prompted these waves of popularization, but the youth also seem to be responding to the challenge of urban culture with willful transformations to the style of dance and epic performance through innovations that will inevitably impact over time the performers’ perceptions of their own artistic skill and repertoire.

### **Ethical Issues and the Future**

As ethnographers and scholars of oral tradition, we have recognized the palpable threat to traditional oral performance genres and performers from commercial television, tourism and the perceptions of tour guides as to “what tourists like,” and environmental factors. As I learned in Rajasthan, desertification is affecting the livelihoods of many performers who were formerly peripatetic and dependent on animal husbandry to survive. Performers are being forced to adapt to the whims of the tourist market while retaining their knowledge of increasingly archaic sung traditions. We must recognize, accordingly, the value of the performers as conservators of the traditions that we, as ethnographers, wish to document and place at the center of our projects. Our efforts should be directed towards enabling the performers to pursue their skills. To a certain extent, their survival as performers depends on us. We cannot continue to record and film these

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<sup>21</sup> Santosh Devi in Jaisalmer defended this introduction of songs into the repertoire by saying, “We cannot sing only epic.”

<sup>22</sup> Personal communication from *Jogin* singer, Bayli, who comes from Jawar Nath ki *dhani* in Jaisalmer.



exceptional performers whose traditional shows are being supplanted in the popular imagination with American-inspired television and soap opera, without taking action. As I learned in the Thar desert of Rajasthan, we must give traditional performers, such as *bhopas* and *bhopis*, a financial lifeline if their performances are to survive and they are not to lose their livelihoods and become professional manual labourers. This has already been the fate of the Jogi Nath snake charmers of Rajasthan.<sup>23</sup> We must give them back the tools for their survival as musicians and performers. To accomplish this goal, I propose that we need to shift the way we film, publish, and publicize our filmed documents and recognize the fact that the copyright of an artistic work rests with the artists. They do not have the means to produce their own works for sale, and it is incumbent on us as audience and ethnographers to instigate the process.

This task is less easy if one's intent is to record secret or religious texts in private performances. In all cases, however, performer and scholar should agree concerning the appropriate performance context prior to recording (fully cognizant of the ramifications and consequences of web archival reproduction), and when the film is finished, view and approve the final product together. This process is expensive, as it inevitably involves returning again to the field (a facet that budgets presented for grant funding seldom include), but it is an increasingly vital element in any such research project.<sup>24</sup> Good sound and image quality (as I learned) is vital if the resultant DVD is to be sold. As recognized earlier, technical quality may be compromised if performances are spontaneously enacted and filmed in remote, non-electrified environments. Filming and audio recording need to be done as closely as possible in conformity with professional standards to ensure a good product; DVDs are more easily reproduced and copied for profit by the performer if these standards are respected. In adopting this new methodology, the ethnographer then becomes both patron and marketeer, acting in partnership with the performance artist. The archive, once a passive repository, becomes a dual-purpose facility: a potential launching pad for sales and a site of comparative research. If the performer is to be assisted in earning money from the sales, then uploading of the films to the Internet should be held in abeyance until at least a high proportion of DVDs have been sold for performers' profits.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, just as the process of determining the shape and content of the final film version should be agreed upon with the performers, reproduction rights and the contexts for such reproduction also need to be negotiated and determined for each party prior to web broadcast.

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<sup>23</sup> The Jogi Nath of Jaisalmer who formerly practiced snake charming are also known as the Jogi Nath Kalbelia.

<sup>24</sup> In my first subsequent trip to Rajasthan, I screened the video for Sugana Ram Bhopa and Man Bhari Bhopi in Jaipur. I was unable to go again to Pabusar, but fortunately DVDs sent by the very competent Indian postal service arrive even in the most remote destinations.

<sup>25</sup> Since its placement on YouTube in 2010, a trailer for the film, "*To Earn Our Bread: Performing for Pabuji*," featuring music by Sugana Ram Bhopa from Jodhpur has been downloaded onto more than ten different Indian websites, an indicator of its potential commercial viability, but also of the tendency of agencies to copy and download without attention to intellectual copyright or attribution. Publication of the full performances and the film that comprises both interviews and performances on DSpace@Cambridge (Wickett 2011) has been delayed for this reason, though excerpts are currently available for viewing via this Internet archive. In July 2013 even greater access to these materials (videos, photographs, and transcripts of interviews and performance texts) will become available via DSpace.

Issues of copyright, propriety (in the case of Rajasthan, the traditional veiling of women performers in deference to Pabuji and male elders), and disclosure are always involved in such situations.

Artifacts (digital or material, but in this particular case the performance of the epic in digital form) are invested with power, and when they become separated from their original context, they acquire new meanings. Words, like artifacts, are similarly embodied in the context of performance and may become “dangerous” in the eyes of the performers if uttered in inappropriate performance domains and contexts. This is especially true for genres of oral performance that are vehicles for recondite political critique. It is thus important to agree upon the form of the final version of DVDs involving performers. Once, after recording a session of funerary lament with women in Upper Egypt in which they deplored the rise in the price of bread, one of the women came to me the next day and asked me to erase the tape. She believed that she and her friends might be tracked down by the secret police for criticizing the government during their lament. I agreed to omit the overtly political critique from the transcript but not to erase the tape itself, which I kept for my own private records.

## Conclusion

In light of all these considerations, during the course of the project I determined that my own approach to ethnographic film would have to change: I would have to weigh my scholarly approach to archiving of epic performances against the acceptability of the film to the performers. Moreover, I would have to balance these factors with the design and marketability of the final “product,” if the musicians were to gain financially from their participation. I also realized that I would need to create a source of livelihood for the performers through the filming and documentation process.

Accordingly, I invested in the production of several hundred copies of the four individual performance DVDs that the performers could sell. I saw this investment as a first step towards sustaining the ancient but dynamic tradition of the epic of Pabuji while also confirming artists’ perceptions of the value of this epic and promoting its proliferation. To make these DVDs attractive, I commissioned a hardboard cover to be made in India for the final film, and I designed and produced DVD covers and booklets (with full English translation) for each of the performance DVDs. These DVDs were then sent to the performers in bulk via the Indian post. I also encouraged scholars and libraries with holdings in South Asian materials to purchase both the DVDs and the final film in order to help publicize the epic and offset the additional costs.<sup>26</sup>

The continued production of DVDs in the future may become difficult, but let us hope that the artistry and skill of the *bhopas/bhopis* will be recognized and that they will ultimately benefit through an increased numbers of gigs, sales, and recording sessions.<sup>27</sup> If we can use the

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<sup>26</sup> This was done via a web network established for scholars working in Rajasthan.

<sup>27</sup> As of 2012, it appeared that sales of the original copies have been successful and are continuing to take place, and on a recent trip to Jaisalmer, Hari Ram Bhopa requested an additional 50 DVDs to purvey at festivals, having sold the previous lots.

Internet as a promotional tool and the epic can become digitally replicable and accessible, I believe that it is more probable that the epic of *Pabuji ki par* will survive the globalization process and continue to be performed by the truly remarkable traditional musicians who sing the epic, albeit in a new, hybrid form.

*Anghiari, Italy*

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## Appendix A: "The Wedding of Gogaji"

### *A Summary of the Performance at Jaisalmer by Parvati Devi and Hari Ram*

Pabuji is standing on the *ghat* at Pushkar Lake, and Gogaji, the snake god, is watching. Pabuji slips on the steps into the water (but before this happens, the *bhopi* asks Gogaji what he is contemplating, suspecting that the snake god has plotted to make him fall, only in order to be able to save him and receive a reward).

Pabuji is rescued by Gogaji. In gratitude, Pabuji promises his niece, Kelam, to him in marriage. But her family objects to the marriage on the ground that he is not of the right social class, and therefore Gogaji decides to play a trick on them.

Kelam and other young maidens are sitting in the garden, dressed in wedding ornaments for the festival of Tij. Gogaji has transformed himself into the sacred Vasu *nag*, and as Kelam

swings on the swings blissfully unaware, Gogaji bites Kelam. The poison spreads through her body; Kelam's body stiffens, and she falls into a deep coma.

Kelam's family is urged to tie a *tantti* (a magical thread) seven times around her finger in the name of Gogaji. The family is warned: if they do this and she survives, they must marry her to king Gogaji; if not, they will have only "a heap of ashes" to show her beloved uncle Pabuji!

## Appendix B: "The Wedding of Gogaji"

### *Part I: A Summary of the Performance at Jaipur by Santera Devi and Bhanwar Lal*

Kelam has been "saved" by Gogaji and is to marry Gogaji. Pabuji promises Kelam a dowry gift of she-camels. But Kelam is dubious and enquires of Pabuji where such she-camels could be found. Pabuji replies that he will invoke the aid of Kesar Kalmi (the magic mare, his nymph mother) and with her help, he will be able to find herds of she-camels.

Kelam weds Gogaji, and the wedding procession departs for his home, a clutch of *Nagas* and snakes trailing behind their patron.

Later on, Kelam and her friends are sitting under a tree spinning, when Kelam is teased mercilessly. She has not received the promised she-camels. Upset by this teasing, she starts to weep. Her mother-in-law asks why she has gone pale, and Kelam reveals that she is being taunted by her friends. The mother-in-law suggests that she write to her uncle, Pabuji, and ask him to fulfill his promise, even if he has to give her baby camels made of silver or gold.

She asks a Brahman to come and write a letter to her uncle, asking him to provide the she-camels. The messenger dispatches the letter to Pabuji, who asks his aide, Chandoji, to read it "by the gleam of his sword." Pabuji dismisses her letter initially but then decides that one of his Bhil courtiers should go off and reconnoiter the promised she-camels. They pass around a tray of *pan* (betel nut), the traditional way of drawing lots, hoping that one of the courtiers will accept the challenge. No one takes it until finally his aide, Harmal Devasi, takes up the gauntlet and sets off for Lanka.

At home, Harmal's mother asks him why his face has gone pale. He replies that dealing with Rajputs (such as Pabuji) is tricky but that he has volunteered to make the dangerous journey to Lanka. She suggests that he leave Pabuji's employ and work for Buddho Rao, Pabuji's rival. But Buddho Rao's offer of employment is absurdly low, so Harmal decides to fulfill his vow to go to Lanka.

Disguising himself as a *sadhu* with necklaces of pearl, clothes, and a *dhumri* pot, Harmal goes to the banks of the river where he dyes his clothes with saffron-colored mud. At the same time, a *jogi* and his devotees pass by. Devasi offers the *jogi* a hairy coconut and begs to become his devotee. Baba Balinath, the guru, refuses, saying that he has hundreds of thousands of devotees already. Nevertheless, he advises him, "You are going to the dangerous land of Lanka to bring back she-camels. If you give me just one, you could become my devotee." Devasi offers him a whole herd, so he is accepted. Baba Balinath gives him another begging bowl and a finger ring to act as an antidote to poison. He warns him not to drink milk from she-camels since, if he does, his neck will stretch into the sky, his ears will expand, and he will start grazing on the grass

of Lanka. He also asks him to check to see if his own mother recognizes him, despite his disguise.

Harmal Devasi gathers up his saffron clothes and goes home. His mother fails to recognize him and urges her daughter-in-law to give alms to the “*jogi*.” When his wife sees him, she drops her veil. Her mother-in-law chastises her: ‘Why have you dropped your veil? Are you attracted to this man?’ ‘Certainly not,’ she replies. ‘I thought I saw in him some features of your son.’ The mother says, ‘Ridiculous! Beat him with a stick, instead!’ Harmal Devasi reflects on his bad luck. His mother does not recognize him, and his wife wants to flog him. But at this point, his mother realizes her mistake and sees that it is, in fact, her son. . . . (*The story is continued in the next segment.*)

*Part II: A Summary of the Performance at Pabusar with Patashi Devi and Bhanwar Lal*

In his guise as a *jogi*, Harmal Devasi ventures forward. On meeting two she-devils on the path, he invokes Baba Balinath, his guru, to quell their attack. He escapes, but on reaching the huge ocean he must cross to reach Lanka, he shivers with fear. As a last resort, he murmurs the name of Pabuji and miraculously awakens in Lanka, at the place the she-camels reside.

Feigning the pose of the *jogi*, he sits cross-legged on the ground. The Lankans eye him suspiciously and rush off to consult the Goddess of Prophecy, Sicotha Mata, as to his real identity. She reveals that his credentials as a *jogi* are suspect. He is not who he says he is. He is a spy and will overstay his welcome. . . . (*And the story continues on from there.*)



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