Reflections on Studying Lived Experience in Another Culture

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Abstract

This paper is a reflection on my participation in one international research project of viewing Asia by Asian scholars. It will include accounts of the complexity and fascination of one Indonesian researcher when examining popular theatres in Sri Lanka. The underlying assumption is that Asian people have rich and diverse forms of cultural heritage that can provide resources for cultivating a culture of peace. However, despite the similar history and geopolitics between Indonesia and Sri Lanka, the task was not made any easier, given, first, the politico-economic implications and, second, psychosocial repercussion of the project. This paper argues that both factors as well as the researcher's own cultural baggage need to be attuned to the contextual condition in order to address adequately issues of war, reconciliation, and ethnicity that this lived experience research seeks to explore.

Keywords: lived experience, critical contextual research

This paper is based on my own reflections on conducting a research on people theatres for peace in Sri Lanka under the ASIA Fellows Award, a funding body for research in Asia by Asian scholars. My research seeks to examine the roles of peace theatres in dealing with conflicts in the divided country of Sri Lanka. It aims to explore how the theatre communities understand and make meaning of the three main issues inherent in the conflict, i.e. war, reconciliation, and ethnicity. It is worth noting that two major events took place in the global peace (and/or war) calendar of 2008 that coincided with the closing stages of my research project. The first was the Sri Lankan government's withdrawal from the 2002 Cease Fire Agreement signed with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) by January 2008, with which spiralling violence unleashed by both sides continued to rage. The other peace-related event at the turn of the year was the nomination of the Brazilian theatre guru and activist Augusto Boal, who is also a household name among Sri Lankan theatre makers, for the 2008 Nobel Peace Prize. Indeed, these two milestones and the whole series of events throughout my Ceylon stint have not only tied in with the goal of this study, but they also helped shape my perception of the overall project.

Given that the focus of a qualitative research like this is the perception and experience of the research participant(s) as well as the manner in which they make sense of the continually shifting realities, I shall spend at length in the next section of this paper describing my presence in the research setting as well as my relationship with the participants. Notes on methodology are presented next. And the paper will conclude with some lessons learned.

How the Study Came to Be: Confession of a Novice Researcher

One of the questions first asked to me by the grantor was the reason why I chose Sri Lanka as my research setting. My answer was plain, i.e. the country has long occupied spiritual home in the Indonesian imagination. The Alengka of the wayang world is one of much-loved myths in Indonesia. But more importantly, the Sri Lankan history of the yet unresolved conflict has a meaningful comparison to Indonesian story of conflicts.

As a novice researcher whose primary pride experience was years, if unexamined, of teaching literature and whose scant knowledge of Sri Lanka was scrapped off mostly from the on-line sources, I had preconceived ideas that turned out to be unproven as I arrived at the research site. As such, I had to alter the research method, which I shall explain later. Before entering Sri Lanka, little did I know that there was no such a thing as "Sri Lankan" without further qualified by either "Sinhala" or "Tamil"; and that the two-decade long bitter civil war in the country is but multifaceted.

As such, it was not until I embarked on the project and attached myself to my hosting institution the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) in Colombo that I discovered how crude and shallow my intellectual and cultural grasps of Sri Lanka were as to necessitate amendment. A few words about the centre, not only was the ICES a fine research institution with excellent collection of books maintained by an admirably dedicated librarian and his staffs, it was also an intellectual cauldron where I met, discussed and exchanged ideas with different scholars from different parts of the world with different interests. Added to this academically stimulating atmosphere I was fortunate to find at the Centre was my interaction with various people I encountered on daily bases that helped me question and subsequently reconstruct the social worlds. Coming from a multiethnic society myself, I thereby unlearned my ethnicity and reflected

on the now tattered nationalism at home through my casual acquaintance as well as close friendship with the Sinhalese and the Tamils alike. I understood their mutual distrust and fear of each other, thanks to the promulgation of the antiquated myths, the state polity, the education system, to say nothing of the media conspiracy that have persistently separated people along the ethnic lines. At the same time, being a foreigner, I had the advantage to play a detached observer who was able to recognize that the two communities have in fact secretly admired each other. Here, I was blessed with the learning opportunity to also understand ourselves when we interpret the phenomena outside of our own experience. I could not agree more with Saukko (2003) about the dialogic shifting involving the Self of the researcher and the participants' perspective.

This is not to say, however, that I was immune to the so-called "prejudice and suspicion of the foreign other", as it will be clear in the following account. I was denied accommodation at one Buddhist centre off Colombo for the whole duration of my research, except for the seven-day temporary stay as I set foot in Sri Lanka on 30 August 2007. The proprietor said that the centre was reserved only for students learning meditation, Buddhist students, and Buddhist nuns to none of which I qualify. Later, he made it clear to me that the present government was wary of the evangelization attempts by some foreign, notably Korean, NGOs targeting the poor people of the country by means of lavish gifts. His suspicion of me was well founded: First is my oriental appearance, and secondly, I arrived at the venue accompanied by a Thai Jesuit whose classmate is one of the Buddhist nuns at the centre. Here, my uneasy entrance to Sri Lanka contributed to my understanding of the country's apprehension and caution of foreign infiltration. Access to outsiders was reportedly avoided as it may erode Sri Lanka sloganised as "a Buddhist country belonging to the Sinhalese." As for my early departure, upon some professional advice, I left Sri Lanka one month earlier than the grant period due to the deteriorating political situation in the country at the beginning of 2008.

It is clear by now that my personal experiences –be they inside or outside the hosting institution– helped me see the complexity of the Sri Lankan conflict irreducible by cacophony of chorus sung in different churches. The interpretations, for instance, run as varied as this: "It is language, not ethnicity nor religion that divides the nation", "There's no ethnic problem but terrorist problem", "Above all is class and caste

problem", and many others. Here, following the argument of Locke and others (2000) on the role of a researcher, I believe that my understanding of the social setting, personal experiences, assumptions, and biases can be treated as being positive and useful rather than harmful. Besides, as Holliday (2002) reminds us, the researcher had always brought her own cultural baggage and discourse when she entered the research setting. Thus, it was my interpretation and construction of the social worlds through my presence and entanglement with various people in the research setting that affected the study in a way unimaginable had I otherwise stayed comfortably back home.

Having said that, this novice researcher has now another confession to make as follows. After reconstructing the social worlds throughout the fieldwork as aforementioned, I departed from my original research proposal in terms of coverage by confining my topic only to exploration of the world of theatre for social change. My initial design was to explore the literary-based cultural movement in Sri Lanka. Such cultural community may consist of poets, novelists, and dramatists writing in English. However, reality on the ground has shown that such authors have fewer readerships as each respective ethnic group mostly opts to either Sinhala or Tamil writings. I therefore narrowed my topic into researching the theatre world. To justify my research focus, first, theatres flourish in the country. Secondly, one characteristic advantage of theatre is that, unlike other genres of literature, theatre allows direct interaction and dialogue with the audience; hence it leads to awareness, which in the long run may possibly lead to social change. Next, in view of their constant, durable disposition, the theatre community is considered influential in articulating their own field of cultural production. Thus, what had begun in its conception as researching as broad as literary-based cultural movement then shrank into a phenomenological study of the specific cultural producers, i.e. theatre communities. As such, I had to alter my research method. It is to the discussion of the adjusted methodology that I now turn.

Research Method Revisited

I have said at the outset that the nature of this paper is of a reflection note. What follows therefore are mostly the "soft" side of the story on how I went about doing the research, in the hope that readers can learn from the trial and error made throughout the study. As noted, I used a qualitative research paradigm for this six-month phenomenological study to understand a particular social practice, events, roles, interactions, etc. of such cultural movement as people theatres, entailing as it does, immersion in their everyday experiences. I found the hermeneutic phenomenological approach by Max van Manen (1990) useful. Such approach offers pedagogic reflection on how the theatre communities under study live and make meaning of their cultural engagement with which they have tried to come to terms with the reality of war. In times of revolution/war, performing arts are often more powerful as proven by the existence of numerous theatre groups in the country. Yet, considering the relatively short duration of the research, this study narrowed its scope to studying the (major) theatre groups that have appeared and performed since 2002 as follows: (1)Jana Karaliya, (2)TrikonE Arts Centre, (3)Wayside Theatre Troupe, (4)Lanka Children's and Youth Theatre Organisation, (5)Pahura, (6)Third Eye Local Knowledge and Skills Activist Group, (7)Butterfly Peace Garden, and (8)Theatre Action Group.

How did I find my research participants? As a foreign researcher, did I immediately realize that the first five groups are Sinhala-led and the rest are of predominantly Tamil members, and why were these groups so chosen? Speaking of research procedure, my intention is, first and foremost, to explore the research participants' own perceptions of their works, creative process, socio-political awareness, and political economy of their artistic pursuit. However, I would also like to make use of this opportunity to learn about another culture. Thus, in addition to Van Manen's method of researching lived experience, I adopted what Paula Saukko conceptualizes as "new ethnography" to understand the other (2003).

As such, I began with collecting the first type of data, i.e. the sociological map of the existing theatre groups in Sri Lanka to help locate precisely the country's literati. The data were accumulated mostly from secondary sources such as previous research on these

groups, scholastic papers, reports, anthology of Sri Lankan Dramas, etc. Beside the secondary sources, I collected this type of "directory" data on the Sri Lankan theatre world vista through interviews and consultation with fellow researchers in ICES and few pertinent scholars. What I would like to share here is this interesting and anecdotal note: most sources recommended the respective theatre group(s) according to their respective ethnicity. Only a few Sinhalese, for example, talked to me about the potential Tamil theatres in vice-versa.

Further, guided Data Type One, I looked for the second type of data, i.e. the sociological information concerning the research participants, namely the eight individuals/groups mentioned above, by looking at the consistency and depth of their engagement in the world of theatre. Unlike the first type of data, which was general and can be amassed through secondary sources, this present type of data was specific and primary in nature. To gather such data, interviews with limited participants were conducted to put together descriptive notes on their formal, demographic encounter with the country's conflict. This second type of data was necessary to assess the movements' struggle for legitimacy through their respective artistic *fields* (borrowing from Bourdieu) when talking about war, reconciliation, and ethnicity.

Interestingly, many of the interviewees were reluctant to talk about ethnicity although all of them agreed in unison about the futility of war. The Colombo-based groups were quite frank about ending the war and optimistic about the positive impact of cultural activities. The groups in the Eastern part of Sri Lanka including Jaffna –being of Tamil minority– seemed to avoid talking frankly about the war and they were more concerned about self-development when engaging themselves with cultural activities. I must mention here that signs of war were obvious in this part of the country, unlike in Colombo where I semi-permanently stayed. Thus, my trip to Batticaloa and visit to these Tamil-led theaters was made possible by the kind arrangement of a Tamil Jesuit and ex-president of the Eastern University of Sri Lanka. Indeed, travelling 'with a vicar in a vicar car' was the best way to avoid the hassle of check points in the Eastern province.

At this stage, I began to become even more convinced by the statement of Correll (1995), that is, qualitative research potentially produces rich data to help us study in-depth "the interplay between real people, processes, and settings" (via Merriam et al.

2002, 260). I could sense the tension between the conflicting parties. I could also feel that very often they tried to hide their true feelings at the presence of others, notably foreigner; hence making data collection far from simple and trouble-free at times.

Further still, guided by the descriptive notes obtained from Data Type 2, I collected the third type of data via in-depth interviews and participatory observation to explore the lived experience of the groups' members. Such reflective notes helped me find thorough information about the participants' *habitus* concerning their background, influences, and social outlook, which were then used to analyse their *social praxis* in dealing with the Sri Lankan continuing conflict. Here, the participants' empirical experiences with war, reconciliation, and ethnicity can be revealed through their personal thoughts, speculation, ideas, hunches, impression, prejudices, etc. Vignette presented at the very end of this paper is one example that may be helpful to use as an illustration.

Here, I should add in haste that language was hardly a barrier, because all conversation was conducted in English. I was accompanied by Sinhalese and Tamil assistants or friends when talking to some participants/interviewees who only speak the respective languages. It is interesting to note here that the Sri Lankan government's "Sinhala Only" language policy has created further ethnic divide. My field notes show that (1) The low-educated Sinhalese hardly speak English, (2) Most Tamils speak English, passable English, and even passable Sinhala. I took into account the linguistic phenomena here as part of the data to be validated later.

It would seem, however, that my living in with the 3 out of 8 selected groups and their respective milieu was useful in the data analysing process. Here, as far as possible, I consulted various sources of information from the newspapers, journals, archival materials, and other public documents before interpreting the thick-description of the findings. I also made repeated conversation and closer observation to enhance the "truthfulness" of the participants' accounts. Admittedly, the delimitation of choosing 3 groups only (given the circumstances) is a weakness in this project not to be repeated for further research.

In sum, the social acts of these theatre workers can be read through what Pierre Bourdieu postulates as the process of *distinction*, in order to see in what (symbolic) ways they mark their identity in expressing cultural values as different as others. Here, the

triangular design of analyzing concurrently the three types of data may look like a prism with three sides breaking up light into each other. It is through this prism that war, reconciliation, and ethnicity in Sri Lanka can be glimpsed at. What follows is a brief note on the challenges (included herein joys and sorrows) I met when processing the data.

On Data Analysis: Expecting the Unexpected

In normal practice the funding body usually allows grantees 4 to 6 weeks to write up the research report. In my case, I left the research site a month earlier soon after the data collection was completed. As a result, this situation brought about some positive and negative consequences as follows.

I did my data processing after I returned to Indonesia, only to find that there were still many holes to fill up. Since proper "peer debriefing" with my research assistants and some participants were not possible to make, I contacted them through e-mails and telephone conversation. The drawback of this method was the inevitable loss of the mood, atmosphere, and emotions. But, unexpectedly, the otherwise untold stories sometimes became clearer or visible through the above means of communication. For example, one participant wrote me an e-mail saying that in fact he could have told me a lot more, had he not been ashamed or felt awkward with others. "I don't like to show off, Mam… I tell you this through email," he said.

From the eight groups under study, two have been discussed almost extensively by other researchers. I therefore made use of the seemingly trivia obtained throughout the observation and/or interview to discuss my theme. For example, many scholars, newspapers, research reports, and working notes discuss Jana Karaliya in terms of its history, presence and position, theatrical aspects, etc. I chose instead to explore the narrative of one Tamil member, Ajanthan, whom I came to know most personally throughout this research about his experience in this known Sinhala-led theatre. It is from this contextual analysis that I knew more about war, peace, and ethnicity. Similarly, Third-Eye Local Knowledge Group and its founder Jeyasankar are featured in James Thompson's *Digging Up Stories* (2004). Since I had become a good friend to Jeyasankar and his wife Kemala Vasuki, I was more interested to elaborate further in my analysis

about their unswerving commitment to arts for peace and social change. It is at this point that I felt this research beneficial for them and for me as well.

As it is, I treated the two examples above as part of my emergent themes. For this, when writing my research report, I used the model offered by Polkinghorne (1989), that is, moving from the specific experience to the general followed by its psychological implications to the researcher and participant(s) alike.

To sum up, the advantage of doing a qualitative research of this kind is that we can always redesign to suit the setting and available data. My project thus has the emergent design rather than prefigured with which adjustment is also needed in data analysing process. Consequently, I also found some unexpected results. Nonetheless, the results are surprisingly quite rewarding, as they may possibly direct future research on war, reconciliation, and ethnicity.

Concluding Remarks

My six-month research in Sri Lanka was like the country so-named "serendipity". I met people from different ethnic, class, and religious backgrounds from different walks of life. Thus, besides knowing more about people theatre for peace, my research has allowed me to know also about the inevitability of war and its implications from which people of my own country Indonesia can learn.

Sri Lanka's long-drawn-out war is replete with layers of problems: politicization of public life, deteriorating economy, distrust of government institutions and people's representatives, forceful militarization of society, the taken-for-granted attitude towards violence, as well as international players' interventions. I have seen through my research that the complexity of the ethnic problem has forced each ethnic group grapple with identity and, in relation to cultural expression, with preservation of each ethnic tradition. At this particular juncture, Indonesia shares similar situation.

I have seen, however, that in this war-torn country, like in Indonesia, there are still people who are committed to peace making through their artistic pursuits so that the fear of each other's dominance can slowly diminish. These are people who take proactive work by making use of arts and culture to create equality for all, support co-existence,

and oppose denial of any ethnic groups of their rights. These are the very people or group of people I met in my research and subsequently made friends for life.

Coming from Indonesia, I felt the sheer similarity in geopolitical and socio-cultural aspects between Indonesia and Sri Lanka more palpable as I immersed with the participants and lived in the country relatively with ease, in a way that might be harder for a Westerner, for example. As such, the knowledge that Asian people share intimate historical experience should be nurtured and developed in accordance to the specific needs of the country. Hence, research under the vision of "knowing your Asian neighbours" that has become the theme of this present conference should be further encouraged. The time is now for Asian scholars (1) to talk about Asia, (2) to talk to each other in international forum, and (3) to become the talk of the international academic community.

Vignette: "Sorry, I speak no Sinhala"

My Sinhalese friend and I walked in a fine Indian restaurant at the seaside of the Gale Road when I quickly noticed that the young Tamil waiters looked a little frightened. Unwelcoming look was clear in their faces although some gave us their forced smile and bow their heads with respect. We were seated and the waiter step back after politely presented the menu, pen, and notebook instead of waiting near the table to take our order. It was so hot a day and I felt too lethargic to do anything and let my friend choose what to eat. When we were ready, my friend waved his hand to call upon one of the boys. "Can I have a bowl of water to wash our hands, please?" he asked. The boy again step back and apologized profusely, "Oh, no…no.., I don't know Sinhala." My friend was quite annoyed at the response. It seemed that a spectacle would follow soon. At this point, I was awakened to speak up. "Aa…Tambi [nickname for Tamil boys], the gentleman spoke in English. You see? No worries, we just want water, OK?" I tried to explain while rubbing my both hands together. "Never again will I eat in a Tamil-owned restaurant with a Sinhalese," I said jokingly to my friend. Nevertheless, the curry was really yummy. It was a nice day after all, except for the waiter and my friend, perhaps.

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